

Immigrant Consciousness and Divulgence of Female Protagonists in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters

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Abstract--- *Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters is a typical clarification of Homi K. Babha's concept of 'Third space' and 'Hybridity'. The novel, through its exclusive engagement with the notion of third space both in the Indian subcontinent and outside, subtly brings out the immigrants' immensely heterogeneous and inherently conflicting character. In today's world, as Babha would categorically assert that we all live in a space that is not unified and homogeneous, rather one that is complex, heterogeneous and is filled with many inherently contradictory characters. In the novel, as we can explicitly notice, there are various events occurring in certain spaces in a scenario where these spaces are filled with multiple transnational and cosmopolitan characters despite them being located in specific locales. This article intends to analyze the concept of Third space that is filled with multiple transnational and cosmopolitan significations of the characters in Desirable Daughters. Hence, Mukherjee's 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 this tension within women's texts".*

Keywords--- *Immigrant Issues, Psychological Consciousness, Assimilation, Assertion, Feminism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most prominent writers of Indian diaspora. Being an immigrant, she feels very comfortable in handling the themes of the sufferings of diasporic women and their identities. Most of her protagonists deliberately or violently move to America and live a miserable and unbearable life in their alien land. They make many efforts towards the process of economic, social, and cultural adjustment. The author, an immigrant herself, tries to reveal the darker side of immigration which is not often portrayed by other immigrant writers too. Her fiction depicts the multicultural society and the progressive adaptations by both immigrants and Americans. The themes of most of her novels exemplify themes like: diasporic female identity, immigrant experience, alienation, assimilation, isolation, migration, self-value, female subjection, oppressions and cross-cultural conflicts etc. according to Geoffrey Kain, "Bharati Mukherjee has established herself as a leading figure in what will certainly prove to be a central and enduring sub-genre in the larger scheme of American literary history: the Asian- American immigrant novel" (Kain: 151).

The major theme for which Mukherjee has become famous is the simultaneous feeling of agony and pleasure involved in the "refashioning of the self" (Sant-Wade: 11) and which is fundamental to the experience of Asian characters especially women who have migrated to America in her novels. Mukherjee refers to these characters as

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“new pioneers” (St. Andrews: 57) on the American land. In her novels these characters see the future as an open though often portentous vision, the present as a vicious but possibly redemptive reality, and the past as a world that continues to assert itself in defining their understanding of and response to present and future. As the characters are transformed by the new challenges, they face in new environ their traditional understanding of self also undergo change as she herself says, “All around me I see the face of America changing.... I don’t think we’re on Ellis Island any more” (Mukherjee, 1988: 1).

She gives a new dimension to the immigrant consciousness in her works for instance in the essay “A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman,” she foregrounds her the important role of immigrants in the American society when she says, “[M]y literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show how I (and the hundreds of thousands like me) have transformed America” (Mukherjee: 25). According to Jennifer Drake Mukherjee’s stories of immigrants’ role in American transformations create an unsettled,

Time of writing that links the event of the everyday and the advent of the epochal so as to rethink American narratives of immigration. In her tales, people and nations scatter and gather. Assimilation is cultural looting, cultural exchange, or a willful and sometimes costly negotiation: an eye for an eye, a self for a self. People mix with gods and goddesses, or become gods and goddesses, reincarnating, translating narratives of coherence. Translated men and women make nations metaphorical, imagining homes in the cracks between nostalgia and frontier dreams. (Drake: 60)

Bharati Mukherjee’s *Desirable Daughters* (2002) depicts the atrocities inflicted on the ‘gendered subaltern’, that is, women in the forms of child marriage, imposed arranged marriage, and limited prospects of career for talented girls like Padma, Parvathi and Tara in the novel. Mukherjee seems to generalize the pitiable plight of women when she comments: “A Bengali Girl’s happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrows of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her” (Mukherjee, 2002: 4). 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. She gives space to immigrant consciousness with focus on divulgence of female protagonists that provides a new pattern to her fiction as Victoria Carchidi says about this particular aspect of her stories “when multiple worlds meet, the result can be a glorious freeing leaves of the kaleidoscope, that complexly intermix and produce new pattern” (Carchidi: 98). While discussing the immigrant consciousness Mukherjee to a great extent relies on compromises and assimilation on the part of immigrants and Susan Koshy foregrounds, “Mukherjee’s celebration of assimilation is an insufficient confrontation of the historical circumstances of ethnicity and race in the United States and of the complexities of diasporic subject-formation” (Koshy: 69). However, her fictional world is not a simple tale of immigrant’s assimilation American cultural values and unproblematic promotion of American multiculturalism rather along with these elements she confronts the historical conditions of ethnicity and race in the United States and foregrounds the complexities of diasporic subject-formation and simultaneously through the inversion of colonizer-colonized dichotomy she fabulizes America, Hinduizes assimilation, and represents the real pleasures and violence of cultural exchange. According to David Mura her fictional world or rather project based of factionalizing reality involves “a

discovery and a creation, as well as a retrieval, of a new set of myths, heroes, and gods, and a history that has been occluded or ignored” (Mura: 204).

The writer as well as her fictional characters give up the India that they were born into, and (re)create to anchor their own New World. The author’s personal experiences and requirements in a new environ compel her to “invent a more exciting- perhaps a more psychologically accurate-a more precisely metaphoric more Indias” (Mukherjee and Blaise: 297). While inventing a new India she also requires to invent a more precisely metaphoric America while doing so, in her own words, she makes use of “Hindu imagination; everything is a causeless, endless middle” (Mukherjee and Blaise: 175). Therefore, the Hindu vision of the world, which in turn is actually created by the European orientalist and which is imbibed by Hindus as their inherent nature and projected as Indianness becomes “a metaphor, a particular way of partially comprehending the world” (Mukherjee, 1985: xv).

This struggle between two newly invented metaphors and the two realities is evident from the character of Tara who faces the enigma of modern women after her settlement in America. She undergoes transformation from a desirable daughter to an advanced American lady. Like the New Woman she is caught in the struggle between tradition and modernity. As a protean heroine she braves the New World to seek her individual identity. She makes adventure in dress, food and fashion. She began to address her husband as Bishu, while in India; she could not utter his name.

This is the story of an extremely traditional girl’s transformation. The traditional aspect of her upbringing is evident from the fact that 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.

Her personality undergoes a drastic change under the influence of American culture and the faithful Indian wife takes on licentious life as evident from her sexual relationship with Andy. She divorces her husband because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled while she knew that divorce was a stigma for woman in Indian society. She wanted to drive and to work, to be economically independent. Husband in Indian conservative society is treated as god, “sheltering tree”, provider and protector, but Tara breaks this myth and chooses another man who suits her temperament and who satisfies her sexual desires. Therefore, she aspires to be loved and respected and does not want to be provided and protected by her husband as is desired in the case of other women. She differs from other women. She is the protagonist of the novel because she has the indomitable courage to transcend the boundaries, to take initiation on an unknown path which may lead her to ruin.

While her sisters Padma and Parvati lead a complacent and passive life, adopt a middle path, remain suspicious about their new identity, do not feel the need to widen their horizons and are less assertive, Tara emerges as a powerful figure to meet every adverse situation; to march ahead with all her limitations to an unknown and unfathomed path of realizing her full potential as an independent human being. Padma lives in America, but she

clings to Indian ways, friends, clothes and food. Padma calls Tara:

American meaning self-engrossed. She reminds Tara to follow the models of Sita and Savitri, things are never perfecting marriage; a woman must be prepared to accept less than perfection in this lifetime-and to model herself on Sita, Savitri and Behula, the virtuous wives of Hindu myths. (Mukherjee, 2002: 134)

But Tara chooses her own way. The instruction of Padma represents the perspective of male chauvinism and by defying it Tara establishes the feminist perspective over phallocentrism. The revelation of her son's different sexual orientation leaves her shell shocked for a moment, but the maturity and readiness with which she accepts the above relation speaks of her modern consciousness and sensibility. Despite moving towards complete freedom from traditional roles, Tara cannot be separated from her roots. She nurtures Indian family norms and feels isolated and incomplete after being divorced. Presence of Bish gives her inner solace which she lacks in Andy's company. She feels emptiness after separation from Bish because in her mind Bish is still her Husband 'the sheltering tree'. The need for a husband in form of Bish shows that it is not easy for an Indian woman to be completely free from 'dependence syndrome'. She could also not avoid motherly duties towards Rabi, her son. Like *Virmati of Difficult Daughters*, Tara, too, is unable to realize complete emancipation.

In *Desirable Daughters*: Mukherjee shows a protagonist who withdraws from the stereotyped life, gives up her home country and expresses desires for a third space, oscillates between the double identity, whether to assimilate into an American culture or to live an Americanized life. The novel is all about the psychological journey of the protagonist Tara from America to her cultural roots, that is, India. One can visualize America and India from her perspective. The most avoided topic, that is, sex and Tara's desire for the size of organ and sexual experience with Andy, her lover and Bish have been frankly expressed. The primary issues discussed in the novel are marriage, love, sex, and dowry and woman subjugation.

The three Bengali sisters represent the three different aspects of female experiences. Parvati lives a complacent confined domestic life with her husband Auro, while Tara lives a free life as a divorcee where she is provided with every opportunity to enjoy progress and liberty. Both the sisters exist on two extremes whereas Padma seeks a fine balance between the two; she lives an independent life with her husband Harish Mehta and does not altogether discard her cultural values. Through the three female characters the novelist provides the three choices for an Indian woman to follow. Padma and Parvati stick to the safer zones, but Tara moves to risky and challenging role of life, so she is given more importance than other two. She is bold and assertive. The two sisters they have the strong potentiality for adaptability; they live on the firm ground of reality and accept the bitter truth of their life. In *Desirable Daughters*, all the three sisters, Padma, Parvati and Tara, break with the tradition and clichéd roles in one way or the other to live life in their own way. They try to adjust with the changed scenario.

Mukherjee's novel *Desirable Daughters* is a tale of immigrants and the attitude of three sisters and their ways of dealing with situations. *Desirable Daughters* as the title suggests, are daughters, whose parents would be proud of and for whom every parent would crave. The three sisters, who are the daughters of Motilal Bhattacharya and the great-grand-daughters of Jai Krishna Gangooli, belong to a traditional Bengali Brahmin family. Padma, Parvathi and Tara are symbolic names of Shakti (Goddess of Hindu Mythology) do not flaunt the ethical values but have the grit

to carve a niche for themselves. They are a blend of traditional and modern outlooks. Padma and Parvathi do not regret their choices; the former an immigrant of ethnic origin in New Jersey, and the latter married to a boy of her own choice and settled in the plush locality of Bombay. Tara, the narrator of the novel marries Bishwapriya Chatterjee, goes on arranged marriage. Tara finds that her married life is not fulfilling and she walks out of her traditional life, a typical American divorce settlement follows. Tara works as a volunteer in a pre-school. She enjoys her love life with Andy. Tara sends his son with his father as a divorce settlement. The fluidity of her identity, testifies not only his own but also the fluidity of the immigrants. Finally, Tara returns to her father's house for solace.

The main character leaves one's own native country and relocates in a foreign land which symbolically is a kind of liberating oneself from the clutches of a convention-bound society. Later Mukherjee recognizes that she is not a complete American, and so she comes back in search of her past. Mukherjee explores alternative ways to belong to a new country. The Indian women in America whether they are expatriates or immigrants cannot sever their link from their mother culture. They must reconnect and reclaim their cultural roots with their past to experience true fulfillment in life. Mukherjee must come to terms with her own identity since she was caught in diverse cultures. Perhaps, echoing her own life, her novel has autobiographical elements in it.

In *Desirable Daughters*, identity emerges as continuous process, forever transforming and never truly complete. Mukherjee being the first-generation immigrant has represented the journey from India to America as symbolic of the rite of passage from the constructing space of patriarchal traditions to the process of presenting her of self-assertion. Her protagonists are also shown to engage in the process of presenting a new independent self by transcending determined patriarchal parameters. Padma, Paravi and Tara are created as typical of Mukherjee's characters that break traditional values and who want to lead their own lives. But one way or the other they find themselves bound with the Indian culture. Tara represents the cultural hybridist. Being both an Indian and American she has gained the third space of enunciation. Tara's position is different from Padma who is a hyphenated immigrant. Each one traverses her own path of immigrant life quite happily.

Tara, Padma and Parvati were born into a wealthy orthodox Brahmin Bengal family. All three daughters were intelligent and adjustable. They never felt irksome of the patriarchal society which has little preference for women in the society. Each character has her own way of leading a link and to past which Tara has begun to forget. Mukherjee apart from dallying with the theme of a search of identity has also brought into focus, the sense of belongingness, which is constantly reinvented and relocated. Tara has proper English education in a private, elite catholic school in Calcutta and marries at the age of nineteen to Bishwapriya Chatterjee. After her marriage she goes to America for Bish's graduation. In the beginning she also behaves like typical Indian married women, as "she puts it, serving pakoras and freshening drinks" (Mukherjee, 2002: 24).

Bish was not much concerned about Tara's desires. He a conservative Indian at home and when she expressed her wish to work Bish could not approve of it. He never wanted other people to think that he could not support his wife.

She has turned her back to all stereotypical images of how married women of India ought to be- obedient,

submissive, self-sacrificing, and chaste and so on. Tara is denied to be an individual and develop an independent self-hood in the new world because of her husband's conventional attitude. Bish views her role only as a wife and mother. This running her life, she therefore leaves Bish and this decision leads her to a new awareness, a new world in which tradition no longer oppressed Tara.

Though Padma is as accomplished as other daughters, her life in Calcutta is of a sheltered and well protected kind. Despite this, she had a great passion for Ron Dey, a passion that is alien to Bhattacharjee family. Tara says, "Passion like Didi's is foreign to our family; recklessness unknown. She is our true American, our improviser, although I am the only one to hold the passport" (Mukherjee, 2002: 31). One knows when the liaison between Ron and Didi began. However, Marriage between a Hindu and Christian was unthinkable in those days and their relation came to an end. Padma's life in London and at New York is miserable. She falls in love with a Parsi boy named Sohrab and is eager to marry him. Sohrab gets a job in New York and takes Padma along with him. Soon Padma realizes that Sohrab is gay and has a relationship with Darshan so she leaves him. Later she meets and marries Harish and settles in Upper Montclair. Padma and Harish socialize exclusively with Indians. In the twenty years that Padma had been in the United States, she has become more Indian than when she left Calcutta.

Parvati, the second sister lives in Bombay, her husband Aurobindo Banerji works for a multi-national corporation. Their sons Bhupesh and Dinesh are in boarding school in Dehra Dun. Parvati and Auro meet in Boston and fall in love. Their love marriage is considered a bit adventurous. Auro a Bangali Brahmin hails from a good Tollygunge family, his caste and regional origins are considered a "matter of coincidence than calculation" (Mukherjee, 2002: 50). In fact, Parvati jumped the marriage queue by getting married before her elder sister Padma. Tara begins to reckon her ancestral roots. She goes in search of her ancestral link with Tara-Lata, the tree bride. Much to her dismay, things in India have changed. India which as in her memory, is replaced by a new India:

We have to stop living in place that's changed on us while we've been away. I don't want to be a perfect preserved bug trapped in amber, Didi. I can't deal with modern India, it's changed too much and too fast, and I don't want to live in a half-Indian kept on life support. (Mukherjee, 2002: 184).

With all exposure to the west, Parvati settles for a traditional, domesticated role of an Indian woman. Taking care of parent's her husband and children, doing domestic chores are the virtues of her way of life. The rebellious streak in her character was her love marriage to Auro. Did Padma represent the way of life of hundreds of immigrants in the United States? Using nostalgia of Indian settlers in the U.S. she gave them relics of India and made them re-live India. This is her cultural mission and her survival strategy. From Parvati, Tara learns confidence and clarity. From her parents she learns the care and concern that are the hallmarks of the family tradition in India. Tara hails from such an elite section of the society, that she does not feel marginalized in any way.

Later she realizes that for thirty-three years India has been her world only in memories, and America has been the real world for her that has changed her completely. In the beginning she was dependent and later she learns to do things on her own. She finally decides that she will stay six months in America and another six months in India. The identity whether it is racial, ethnic or immigrant will continue as long as the world is fragmented into countries, races, religions, languages and so on.

Mukherjee suggests live in relationship as a remedy. But later in the last part of the novel, she makes everyone realize that it will not bring any desirable change in the society. Tara wants to be different from her sisters. She has become completely American in her way of thinking and has divorced her husband. She lives a love life with Andy without marrying him. She feels that love is indistinguishable from status and honours'. "Love" she observes, "is having fun with that person than with anyone else, over a longer haul." (Mukherjee, 2002: 3). But when she gets involved in Chris problem and goes to the Police, Andy does not encourage this and leaves her saying good bye. She pleads to him that she needs him but he makes an exit paying little attention to her.

As these processes of self-destruction and self-construction take place in parallel, Indian American women portrayed by Mukherjee invariably seem to evolve into modern feminists. However, she also gives the other side of the story by revealing that in popular and dominant narrative in India Western-minded family has been severely vituperated by the conventional and typical men of Indian mindset for instance at one place she puts "You fancy city men, you have no respect for Hindu tradition" again someone says "You westernized types think you are stronger than our deities" (Mukherjee, 2002: 12).

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