



MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS*

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ABSTRACT

Desirable Daughters is a journey of three sisters Padma, Parvati, and Tara who are brought up in a traditional Brahmin Hindu family in West Bengal. Being brought up in the strict conformity to the customs and the values of a traditional society, all the three girls go for arranged marriages according to the wish of their parents. Tara, the protagonist, marries Bishwapriya Chatterjee and they settle down in Atherton. Padma, the eldest one settles down in New Jersey, while Parvati settles in Bombay with her rich businessman husband. Mukherjee addresses the issues of immigration from the cultural perspective. The fragile and fluid identity of Indian immigrants is the theme of the novel. They try to find a niche in the new cultural landscape. The present paper is an attempt to examine whether or not the characters succeed in assimilating themselves in a multicultural society of America.

INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism connotes an ideal society where several groups can co-exist harmoniously. In the nineteenth century the United States was perceived to be a melting pot where all newcomers were quickly absorbed and assimilated. But in the twenty first century, the scenario is changed as now each immigrant try to retain his or her individual ethnic identity instead of merging into the melting pot. But most people believe that opportunities of high-paying stable jobs can come about only if people from different cultures gradually assimilate the lifestyle of the majority. The term assimilation refers to “the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society. The

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process of assimilating involves taking on the traits of the dominant culture to such a degree that the assimilating group becomes socially indistinguishable from other members of the society” (Assimilation). Bharati Mukherjee is one of such immigrants. She has lived in various cultural milieus and assimilated into the American culture. She views herself as “an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived at the Ellis Island” (Mukherjee, Interview 27).

The theme of multiculturalism echoes throughout the novel. America, as portrayed in this novel is broadly a tolerant society. It is a famous fact that American society is made up of either immigrants or the descendants of immigrants with the exception of native Indians. The culture and tradition of American society is a result of the interaction between cultures and men from different countries. One of the most important aspects of multiculturalism is its openness and tolerance of various cultures. Moreover, a multicultural society implies the appreciation, acceptance or promotion of multiple ethnic cultures. The characters in the novel belong to all parts of world having divergent ethnic, religious, and cultural preoccupations. In this novel Mukherjee draws the portrait of an ethnic area Jackson Heights ... the commercial centre of India. Similarly, Nails Mahal is one place owned by a Hindi-speaking, Delhi born Korean widow which is visited by Indian women of every age.

America has become the nation of immigrants as the new comers are offered the hopes of freer and more prosperous life. People immigrate primarily for economic, political, or religious reasons. The characters of this novel too immigrate for the economic purpose. Tara’s father is lured by the substantial earnings of Bish. But this is not a typical immigrant story of coming to America with nothing in pocket. Although the characters come to America out of professional compulsions, they are not poor and do not starve. These characters belong to wealthy Bengali family and are one of the affluent families of America. Bishwapriya Chatterjee graduates from Stanford and goes on to develop a brilliant bandwidth concept which revolutionizes the computer world. He is worth millions who presides over a huge corporation. Padma Mehta becomes a known label. So an immigrant has to make a choice between his culture and the lure of money. The materialist passion often encourages many profane activities like smuggling and cyber crimes as seen in the character of Christopher Dey, who poses as Tara’s nephew in order to rob her.

Tara, the protagonist, is engaged in an incessant struggle with her process of assimilation in the multicultural milieu of America. As the pampered child of wealthy Calcutta parents, she is sheltered from all the ills of the society. The novel traces her journey as she leaves her conservative, sheltered home, where the three sisters are inundated with culture, tradition, and values. Tara’s marriage with Bish does not work out and she divorces him. Initially, Tara is carried away by the lifestyle of America and realizes her fault only after her divorce with



Bish. She rebels against the traditional dictates of what it means to be a proper Indian wife. Even after strict upbringing and conditioning of Tara and her sisters, she takes the extreme step of divorcing him. But at the same time, she fears that this news should not reach people in India as she knows that divorce is still a stigma there. Nobody in India would forgive her for committing such an unthinkable act. It is under the fascination of western lifestyle that she leaves Bish. She feels that many of her desires are being suppressed by her husband and freedom is denied to her. She wants to explore and live an American life. Tara stays with her live-in lover Andy Karolyi, a Hungarian Buddhist. This seems to imply her acceptance of the new adopted culture and assimilation of American lifestyle. But in reality, she feels a constant tug between tradition and freedom. All her adventurous acts turn out to be rebellious reactions against the gagging restrictions of her childhood and she later admits that those were her mistakes.

An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it. Bish and Tara also try their best to give Rabi an Indian upbringing. In Atherton, they put him in a school like the one they had known in Calcutta as they have little faith in American schools. She is extremely critical of the American upbringing as she believes that American children grow up without respect for family and tradition. Tara, now a divorced mother, tries to find her identity. Now she suffers the stress of an immigrant with a child that belongs wholly to the new country. To her shock, Rabi turns out to be a gay. This is a momentous event for Tara. She accepts the sexual orientation of her son fairly readily. It is an ordeal for Tara to deal with and raise a sensitive teenaged Rabi. As the host country, U.S., and Rabi, pull her in one direction, the nostalgia for the home pulls in another. She has the constant fear that Rabi will never be able to settle in India if they return back. Parvati condemns her and says, “your child isn’t American or Indian and if you stay any longer, you won’t be either” (Mukherjee 66). At times, Tara also criticizes the highly mechanical, progressive, and liberated society of America. The Indian upbringing of Tara, her affinity to Indian culture does not allow her to assimilate the traditional Indian mode of living with the new materialistic values encouraged by American society. She finds it difficult to relate herself to the culture of America. She draws a comparison between the Indian parents and the American parents:

I’ve seen them [American parents] in parking lots and supermarkets. They get furious and make fools of themselves and security guards have to be called and they get in the papers for child abuse and end up in jail. Indian mothers don’t; we don’t have violent feelings except against ourselves, and never against our children, atleast not against our sons. (Mukherjee, Desirable Daughters 40)



All the three sisters take immense pride in being Indians and any outrageous American act is absolutely unacceptable to them. Tara and Padma cannot let go of their habits and tastes picked up in India. Padma still wears a sari and a bun even after twenty five years of living in America. She runs a community channel with a vernacular soap opera for the Bengalis in America, which again is an attempt to keep the Indian culture alive. A fear constantly lurks in Padma's mind regarding her sister becoming an American. According to her being American means being self-engrossed and an Indian woman should model herself on the virtuous wives of Hindu myths. She condemns Tara for performing any American act. She expresses her fear and urges, "Please, please, don't become that Americanised". Padma advises, "Take what America can give, but don't let it tarnish you in any way" (105, 134).

Americans do not recognize the group differences, and treat all Asians as a homogeneous group. Tara feels a sense of alienation, she says:

Nafisa's mother and I don't speak the same dialect. We don't even speak the same language. I am tired of explaining India to Americans. I am sick of feeling an alien. (Mukherjee, Desirable Daughters 87)

This adds to her agony and the mental hardships as she feels difficult to find oneness with the alien environment and feels uneasy and isolated as well. Now she is treated as a pariah by the Atherton wives. Tara, initially misled by the glamour, is now saturated with too much of westernization and laments the loss of moral and spiritual values.

Tara finds herself caught between tradition and pull of modern life. She does many things which are unacceptable in the culture in which she is born. She divorces her husband after ten years of marriage, works as a teacher in a preschool, moves in with her Hungarian Buddhist lover Andy. This gives an impression that she has smoothly assimilated into the American life. But many of her actions seem to be very contradictory. She is appalled at her sister's doubtful adultery, finds herself unable to slap her son being an Indian mother, calls her husband by his name only after divorce, yet she is quite comfortable while mentioning her lovers, and prefers western clothes and food. All these acts show how she feels trapped between the two cultures and does not know where she belongs to. She finds herself a total stranger and a lost soul. She realizes that she is now neither Indian nor truly American. She is unable to embrace the culture of the adopted country due to the confusion arising from straddling the two worlds. The homeland culture has already formed her personality, habits, and identities which are hard to let go of. For instance, Tara's traditional Bengali culture does not let her tolerate the uncouth sight of some girls' lighting up cigarettes from a man in the U.S.. The memory of this scene makes her reminisce, "in Calcutta a man brushing up against a woman in a rush-hour bus or tram might cause a riot" (80). Tara breaks her tradition in



many ways but still remains tied to her native country. Sharma observes that the immigrants experience:

Pain and agony of homelessness, displacement and relocation, the split between the native homeland and the adopted nation, the bicultural pull between the donor and recipient cultures and the emotional fragmentation between two identities, two mindsets. If experience of migrancy and exile is painful and emancipating then its challenges lie in hybridization, acculturation, assimilation despite fragmentation. (127)

Tara may be as comfortable in jeans as in silk sari, but she cannot discard the demands of her deeply ingrained Indian upbringing. Tara's outfits might give the impression of her being Americanised but she is Indian at heart. She replicates in herself the behaviours, attitude, attire but she cannot consolidate the mindset with the surrounding world. After separation from Bish, she never stops Rabi to meet Bish as she believes that marriage is certainly an unbreakable tie. Her roots in Bengali tradition stop her from revealing her divorce to people in India as she knows that it would bring shame and disgrace to her family. Though she lives with Andy now but it does not sever her ties with Bish. All this clearly indicate that she cannot internalize the external changes in her. She longs for her cultural roots once again. While Tara struggles to sacrifice the culture of her homeland, the second generation adopts the culture naturally. Tara feels Rabi's uneasiness to make a kind of emotional bondage with his cousins Bhupesh and Dinesh in Bombay, as Rabi is accustomed to inhabit American environment.

Immigrants in diasporic situations oscillate between two identities and two cultures, one belonging to the nation and the community they are migrating from, and the other the nation and community they are migrating into. Sometimes their relocation is only physical, not socio-cultural or psychological. Tara fails to embrace the culture of her host country and decides to come back to India in search of her cultural roots. This way Tara's attempt to assimilate herself in the U.S. proves to be somewhat a failure when compared with Jyoti, the protagonist of *Jasmine*. Jasmine is an ideal example of assimilation. As a result of her contact with a new culture, she transforms herself from Jyoti to Jasmine and then to Jazzy, Jase, and Jane. She quickly and efficiently changes her identity according to the required circumstances. She uproots herself from India and Indian culture, and re-roots in an alien soil and embraces the new culture. Professor Vadhera and Indian community of the expatriates no longer excite her, rather the new world fascinates her. On the other hand, Tara fails to break her links with her past no matter how exhilarating and exciting her foreign experience may appear to her. Tara's transformation is merely exterior as she simply changes her lifestyle, while Jasmine transforms herself completely without any inhibition. Tara experiences a



longing for India while she grows and matures as a character, and assesses both the worlds in which she has lived. She admits, “I’m like pilgrim following the course of the Ganges all the way to its source” (189). Tara interweaves her story with a legend about her namesake Tara Lata, also known as the Tree Bride, a remarkable figure who became prominent in the fight for Indian freedom. Tara Lata happens to be her ancestor and she is quite fascinated by her. Towards the end of the novel the desire to search for ancestry grows all the more. The re-investigation of story about the 'Tree-Bride, denotes Tara's longing to return to India. Hence Tara's visit to Mishtigunj, her ancestral place, makes her understand the presence of the old home with familiarity in India. In contrast to the spiritual satisfaction and mental peace which she experiences in India, she finds materialistic passion of America to be waste and futile. She finds solace in the pious atmosphere of Rishikesh and the banks of Ganges.

Kallen argues: “it was not only unrealistic but cruel and harmful to force new immigrants to shed their familiar, lifelong cultural attributes as the price of admission to American society” (qtd in Salins 1). Tara sways between the past and present struggling to come to terms with the two worlds, one of the memories of native place and other world the new culture as an immigrant. Her attempt to assimilate the culture of America fails and as she begins to look for her identity which drags her back to the childhood memories in India. In spite of her concerted efforts to assimilate herself into the new world, the past constantly lurks into her present. Edward Said, in his essay *Reflections on Exile*, says, “Exile is an unhealable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and the true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever” (101). And this is precisely what happens to Tara. Various incidents propel her to re-examine her life and reconsider her attempt to establish a new cultural identity. Therefore, her transformation is incomplete and her assimilation is only superficial. She clothes herself in western attire, speaks English, eats American food but cannot thrust aside her culture. Her endeavour to integrate new lifestyle and habits does not have any significant impact on her cultural ethos. Tara does not discard her cultural identity in order to conform to the mainstream culture of America. She discovers that she cannot abandon her roots and retains her identity in the multicultural America. Both Tara and Padma’s migration to the U.S. does not sever their familial and cultural ties with their motherland. They move from their parental home to a new acquired home but with their socio-cultural baggage.

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