



**A STUDY OF DESIRABLE
DAUGHTERS MULTICULTURALISM AND IDENTITY IN
BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S AN APPRAISAL**

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ABSTRACT

The issues of identification can be on many levels: psychological, sociological, linguistic, cultural and emotional and the extent to which identification has been achieved on all these fronts will qualify how complete one's assimilation has been to the new surroundings. In the post-modern climate the notion of America as a melting pot of different cultures, ethnic identities and proletarian claims, presents migrants as economic refugees in their social displacements where their cultural and national identities struggle in cultural hybridity. The host society to immigrants from many lands is a melting pot of cultures, where the expatriates become immigrants truly breaking the umbilical cord with their homeland.

Keywords *Desirable Daughters, psychological, sociological, linguistic, Cultural and Emotional*

INTRODUCTION

P. M. Vagi "The theme of identity in Bharathi Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters is her Indo-American duality and personal dilemma which is neurotic, schizophrenic, am bivalent and suspended between two worlds and rooted in neither. Governed by an expatriate sensibility, her women protagonists think of India while they live abroad: in the emotional transit between India and the multicultural society in which they live there are nostalgic longings

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and they tend to carry core beliefs in the interior of the self against which all new experiences are measured." (Lal 150).

In *Desirable Daughters* the women characters are the victims of double civilization in their fight against the atrocities that arise from a predominantly male ethos. The story of Tara Chatterjee, a trajectory from India to San Francisco and back to Mishtigunj, the mythical site, plays a major role in her family history and individual identity. The three sisters, Padma, Parvati, and Tara, are born exactly three years apart from each other and share the same birthday. Their mother names them after goddesses, hoping they will survive and prosper, which they do. "We are sisters three/as alike as three blossoms on one flowering tree. (But we are not)," says Tara, the protagonist, quoting a poem.

Padma lives in New Jersey but is completely Indian in her attire, her cuisine, and her profession as the television anchor of an Indian television program set Jackson Heights, Queens. The Television is run by her Indian lover, while she stays married to a man who was once successful, but is now merely living off her fate Parvati is totally Indian to the point of allowing her husband's relatives to be house guests for weeks at their luxurious apartment in Mumbai with its breathtaking view of the city. And her easy life with servants, drivers, and other amenities at her disposal is funnily described by Tara, as she relates her sister's very stressed out life.

Tara is the most un-Indian' of the three. She lives in San Francisco and is divorced from an Indian Silicon Valley dotcom millionaire Bishwapriya Chatterjee, who is an ideal to all Indian immigrants, a sort of 'ethnic' Bill Gates, for his contribution to creating a network of communication via the Internet. He and his friend Chester Yee invent a computer-routing system that makes them rich. Tara Bhattacharjee the protagonist and narrator of the novel with an ethnically ambiguous identity is in a live-in relationship with a retrofitter Hungarian Buddhist Andy leaving her affluent, technically-driven and fifteen-hours working husband Bish Andy and Tara do not have a perfect relationship - there is a gap between them that can be attributed to difference in ethnic backgrounds. Andy is of the opinion that she has deceived and deserted her husband and may do the same to him. He thinks that she is drifting towards Sergeant Jack Sidhu to whom she had gone to file report. He is unable to read the troubled and frightened mind of Tara generated by the gate-crashing charlatan Chris.

Padma the older sister of Tara falls in love with a Christian Ronald Dey. Though outwardly modern, Tara's mindset is traditional and she does not allow her to marry. "Friendship yes; marriage never" is the watchword, when the young man in question does not belong to the same community and caste. The reason is that Indian tradition forbade inter-caste, inter-language, inter-ethnic marriage. Bengali tradition discouraged even emigration; to remove



oneself from Bengal was to "pollute" "true culture". (Mukherjee, "Beyond Multiculturalism" 30).

Life in India is webbed with lots of duties - social, political, economic, religious and personal. Man is nothing but a puppet, manipulated in various relationships. The personal world is lost in the fathomless realm of custom. Tara expresses the complexity of her situation in these words:

When I speak of this birthplace. Desh and homel to my American friends-the iron-clad identifiers of region, language, caste, and subcaste- they call me 'over determined and of course they are right. Then I tell them they should be thankful for their identity crises and feelings of alienation. (Mukherjee, Desirable Daughters 33).

Discovering his connection to her family, the stranger becomes both Tara's catharsis and nemesis. By complaining to the police (here she draws a hilarious sketch of an 'ethnic' policeman -a Sikh nephew's bluff. He retaliates by bombing her house, where her ex-husband and son are Jasbir Jack Sidhu), she calls off the so-called at the time.

Tara looks back at her family's past and their future and comes to terms with her history and legacy, from which she is almost separated. And yet it is a part of her psyche. As she grows and matures as a character, we are drawn to her humor, her honesty, and her blunt assessment of the two worlds between which she travels, back and forth. between being American and Indian: these travels are on both planes, the psychological and the physical.

Multiculturalism is a theme that echoes throughout the book. Of her life in San Francisco, Tara says, "All the neighbourhood services, except the laundries and the Japanese restaurant, are owned and staffed by crack-of-dawn rising, late-night closing Palestinians, whose shifting roster of uncles and cousins seems uniformly gifted in providing our needs and anticipating our desires. "(160). Continuing this theme, Mukherjee draws a portrait of an ethnic area Jackson Heights, to which all Indian immigrants must make their pilgrimage:

Jackson Heights is not a Chinatown or even a Japantown on the San Francisco model... Indian people shop collectively, but they don't live together in tight little communities...they travel from distant suburbs...or from neighbouring states. We're a billion people, but divided into so many thousands or millions of classifications that we have trouble behaving as monolith. "(199)

In the context of Desirable Daughters Jopi Nyman comments that Bharati Mukherjee's fictions "rewrite the traditional immigrant story, imagining new paces and forms of identity as a result of travel and dislocation." (Nyman 53)



One of the chief criticisms made against Mukherjee, especially by US-based India-born critics, is that her optimistic narration of the American saga of immigrant incarnations elides a consideration of the material realities impinging immigration, namely the role of race, class and gender in the workings of identity politics in America. on Third World

Tara travels to the New World, but, even as she absorbs the energy and vitality of this world, her traditional worldview remains intact. Mukherjee's narrative is woven within a set parameter where Indian mysticism and fatalism stand challenged by American optimism and materialism. Mukherjee recounts the Americanization of an Indian first generation female protagonist and reveals how the path to Americanization for a non-Anglo is a difficult one. On the one hand she faces restrictions, though indirect, imposed by the ethnic group, as a result of which her divorce remains an open secret-something that cannot and should not be discussed publicly. Her sister apparently has some secrets for the same 'social' reasons; on the other hand, the disillusionment is brought about by the social decay.

In the novel, Mukherjee dramatizes the immediate cultural negotiations that are demanded from immigrants who come to America for economic reasons. Tara's traditional background compels her to admit that she isn't, perhaps never will be, "a modern woman." (27) Although apparently she seems to have rejected her old cultural values, she is anguished and uncertain as she keeps visiting her past which is like a refrain in the narrative, not only to compare things but often also to offer judgments. Her home in San Francisco "reminds her not unhappily, of mountain resorts in India. "(24), although it is also a symbol of autonomy and selfhood for her. Torn between the dual pulls of her identity she is intensely aware of her difference. She says, "I am not the only blue jeaned woman with a Pashmina shawl around my shoulders and broken down running shoes on my feet. I'm not the only Indian on the block. All the same, I stand out, I am convinced I don't belong here, despite my political leanings; worse, I don't want to belong."(79)

Mukherjee has remarked that she writes "in the tradition of immigrant experience rather than nostalgia and expatriation." However, Tara in *Desirable Daughters* is unable to completely restructure conventional gender roles. Nyman terms Tara's struggle as a desire of constructing heredity and forming new forms of identity and culture in space. (56).

Through her female protagonist Mukherjee expresses her concern regarding assimilation of traditionality and spiritualism of the east with the materialism of the west.

Commenting on this aspect in her novels Pushpa N. Parekh writes, "Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony, humour as well as pathos underline her observations she discovers for herself the undefined median between the preservation of the old world and a simulation into the new one." (Parekh 197). Mukherjee's affinity to the Indian soil and culture



is rooted in her fiction. Hence, whatever claim she makes about her real identity being American, her approach to life and its problems is moored in her Indian upbringing. Nevertheless, through her characters she explores the ways in which many heritages are combined into a new singular bowl in this age of globalisation. In the process of immersing themselves in the present and looking forward to the future, her characters have to discover for themselves the social, religious, historical and political forces that have shaped them.

It is indeed an ironical matter of gender and racial discrimination that a woman could attain nirvana only through worship of a husband. Tara Bhattacharjee is the character who tries to define herself on several grounds but finds herself lacking at every point whether she is in India or in the USA. She perpetually fails to understand herself and in her quest for happiness she adjoins herself to a Buddhist but this joy too does not last long. She then returns and reconciles with Bish after the bombing at her residence. But feeling ashamed of herself, she takes off for India with her son leaving her bed-ridden saviour unattended.

An anecdote titled "Jassem is now Johnny" is all about race, ethnicity and immigrant identity and the tug-of-war between two cultures that leads to physical and mental harassment of an innocent child. One more thing is evident - America, a country of immigrants, wants to guide and modify the immigrants in accordance with her own ways. The anecdote states

Jassem, an Arab child, entered his classroom on the first day of school in Ohio. "What is your name?", asked the teacher. "Jassem" answered the kid. "You are in America now. From now on your name will be Johnny" replied the teacher. In the evening, Jassem returned home. "How was your day, Jassem?" asked his mother. "My name is not Jassem. I'm in America and now my name is Johnny." "Ah, are you ashamed of your name, are you trying to dishonor your parents, your heritage? Shame on you!" and she beat him. Then she called his father and he too beat him. The next day Jassem returned to school. When the teacher saw him with all the bruises she asked, "What happened to you little Johnny?" "Well ma'am, four hours after I becoming an American, I was attacked by two Arabs at home."

The boy feels a sort of oscillation between two cultures, religions, races worlds that definitely will pave the way for his identity crisis as is the case with a Krishna. The problem with the immigrant is that if he strictly follows his native culture, he will be scoffed at by the host countrymen and appreciated by the only rigid compatriot and if he pursues immigrant culture he becomes a despicable creature in the of austere fellow countrymen. eyes

Chris, the intruder into the iron-gated home of Tara, claims to be her long lost nephew. Tara's Brahmnical rage finds judgement on her tongue-"how dare you call us your mashi, your maternal aunts, how dare you go to my sister or come to me, how dare you an imposter in laughable clothes demand anything of us, how dare you invade our homes with your sinister



lies about being a part of our family." (Mukherjee, Desirable 35). Rabi, the son of Tara could not help saying "Don't be a Brahmin, Ma." This short and sententious sentence shatters her caste-bewared, conventional Indian attitude and later her "blind vanity" and amour propre of belonging to a Brahmin family gets a lethal blow when she comes to know that Chris is really a manifestation of the love affair between Padma and Ronald Dey.

Modus operandi and modus vivendi always find alteration in accordance with time, space and atmosphere. It differs from one race/ethnicity to another. To identify whether Chris is genuine or a charlatan Tara makes her judgement on the basis of behavior. Commenting on his cigarette smoking she says, "No middle-class Bengali man would smoke in front of his elders.

Even Parvati's husband in his chain-smoking days didn't dare light up in front of our parents." (Mukherjee, Desirable 38).

It has been rightly observed that in the new world "people become so enamoured of what they see that they lose their souls. It is no exaggeration to say they barter even their souls for whatever trinkets Western society dangles in front of them.... They forget their country, their manners, their family, their obligation; they don't want to return home, because they don't feel good at home." (Markandaya, Bombay Tiger 5). But the reason is they have to keep pace with the society in which they are physically present and have to get acclimatized to unfamiliar surroundings. Since the cultures and societies are disparate, they do not want to be a laughing stock by going through their left behind cultures. Inwardly they vacillate between the two worlds. At home they are recognized as white rats, whereas abroad they are considered narrow-minded and Eastern, even if their minds spark modern and global attitudes.

According to Bharati Mukherjee, "Multiculturalism emphasises the differences between racial heritages. This emphasis on the differences has too often led to the dehumanization of the different. And dehumanization leads to discrimination. And discrimination can ultimately lead to genocide." ("Beyond Multiculturalism" 33). To state it without mincing words, 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. Unless and until integrity prevails and the existing fragmentations are effaced and as previously mentioned there is an establishment of one world, one country, one religion, one language, one law, one colour and especially one mind, the people will continue to be haunted by every kind of identity crisis. And the ultimate truth is that such a Utopian integrity is alien to the Earth and possibly be in the future as well.



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