

Search for Identity in A New World: A Diaspora Study of Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters

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Abstract: Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian born American writer. She raises her voice for the rights of migrated Indian women and highlights their sufferings faced in abroad. The main aim of present paper is to depict the effect of displacement on Indian women and how much they feel alienated outside their native country and how they face identity crisis.. The picture that emerges from the study of the *Desirable Daughters* is not only those of women being alienated and depressed due to the circumstances but also those of women coming out as bold character to overcome the challenges those come in their lives. The present paper throws light on social and cultural issues through the mouth of protagonist who gets success in bringing about social and cultural change by presenting her condition in society. Displacement not only leads to separation but it also leads to alienation and rebirth in a new country, new culture, new society and new adjustments in an alien land. The protagonists of the novel look back to her native country with pain and nostalgia but after all these sufferings they are not ready to look back.

Keywords: Migration, Displacement, Alienation, Nostalgia, Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

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.

Bharati Mukherjee has explored many facets of diasporic consciousness and immigrant experience of dislocations, ruptures and relocation of the migrant women in her fictions. She has dealt with the ambivalence of their psychic and spatial identity and the trauma of dislocations at multiple levels.

Migrancy and dislocation, either consensual or conflictual, is a global and trans-cultural necessity. Mukherjee’s protagonists are all sensitive and are differently trained in the new ethnic imagination. They are tossed in an environment of ambivalence regarding their identity, racism, sexism and other social oppression. They negotiate displacement and face

the multicultural reality in the process of cultural differentiation and assimilation. The multiculturalism ethos with which they are confronted leads to the struggle for a new life and a near break with the past. They are shown at an emotional transit point and from their dual and bicultural perception they attempt to measure the disjuncture and persecutory paranoia.

In the USA Mukherjee explores the immigrant sensibility, recognizing its duality and fluid identity and acknowledges its realities. According to Malashri Lal:

“Undoubtedly, Mukherjee focuses upon the immigrants in America, that energetic, volatile community to which this gifted writer lends her voice and consequently appropriates „another“ America. But the immigrants, like her, have a pre-history. Their cultural imperatives, interacting with the unknown focus of the new world, create a drama of co-options and collaborations which the story teller records.”

The Tiger's Daughter (1972) and Wife (1975) relate the dilemma of belongingness as a matter of flux and agony and explore the problems of nationality, location, identity while Jasmine and Desirable Daughters (2002) reflect the “cultural diaspora-isation” what Stuart Hall calls marks the beginning of the desire for the survival in the community of adoption. She rejects the nostalgia of her early books and the myth of the nomad 'adrift', in favour of an affirmation of belonging and the theme of the successful 'conquest' of the New World.

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.

2. ANALYSIS

Desirable Daughters is a tale of immigrants and the attitude of three sisters and their ways of negotiating the multiple *dislocations* in three different perspectives. The three sisters, who are the daughters of Motilal Bhattacharjee and the great-grand daughters of Jaikrishna Gangooly, belong to a traditional Bengali Brahmin family. They part ways taking their own course of voyage towards their destiny. They are a blend of traditional and modern outlook. Padma and Parvati have their own trajectories of choices, the former an immigrant of ethnic origin New Jersey, and the latter married to a boy of her own choice and settled in the posh locality of Bombay with an entourage of servants to cater her.

Tara, the narrator of the novel, takes the readers deep into the intricacies of the New World and seems to float rootless with time. The fluidity of her identity testifies not only her own but also the fluidity of the immigrants. She values her traditional upbringing but takes pride in moving forward in life. Her image of her family values forms a wall of security around her that camouflages the fragile vulnerable self.

“Tuberculosis is everywhere. The air, the water, the soil are septic. Thirty-five years is a long life. Smog obscures the moon and dims the man-made light to faintness deeper than the stars’. In such darkness perspective disappears. It is a two-dimensional world impossible to penetrate.’ (Page. 12)

Tara is very much distressed with her cultural displacement and fragmentation. In spite of her consent to accept and adopt new culture, she is unable to manage with the traditional mould of an Indian woman. However, Tara, the protagonist in the novel is unable to adjust herself within the conventional gender role of a mother and wife. The traditional setting of Tara ensures her to reckon that “she isn't, perhaps never will be, modern women”. Tara feels ripped between the double place and its culture that brings her nothing else than the scattered identity. She reminds the attractive mountain resorts of India in San Francisco. She is acutely aware of her cultural differences. Her home at San Francisco seems as a sad home. She says:

“I am not the only blue jeaned woman with Pashmina shawl around my shoulders and broken down running shoes on my feet. I am 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.” (*Desirable Daughters*, 79)

She terribly suffers for her separation from Bish because the concept of divorce is not acceptable, according to Indian code of matrimony. She left Bish because the promise of life as an American wife had not been fulfilled. When the relationship between Bish and Tara becomes intolerable, she comes to a bitter realization. 'In America, it seemed to us, every woman was expected to create her own scandal, be the centre of her own tangled love nest. (Page, 80)

As in a usual divorce-settlement Tara sends her son with his father, Bish on holidays and weekends to resorts in Australia. Though Tara does not belong to India or to America or to the Silicon Valley Wives Group, yet she is comfortable in all these cultures. She is a claimant of all legacies. She breaks out of the over-determined notions of identity; culture and homeland. There are many instances in the novel in which she deliberately flaunts her Brahmin heritage. 'We are Bengali Brahmins from Calcutta and nothing can touch us,' (page, 35) are Tara's resounding words in honor of her Brahmin heredity. But these facets of her personality do not hinder her strategies of survival in the adopted land. For six long years, she defies the Indian tradition of arranged marriage and lives with a Hungarian refugee. The reconciliation of the broken family also symbolizes the reconciliation of cultures.

Tara is a woman migrant who belongs to cosmopolitan world having wealth, brain and beauty an honoured life as the wife of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur. She emigrates after marrying Bish Chatterjee, and reaches in America submerged in Indian culture presenting the behaviour of the representative Indian wife. Back at home, she was surrounded with Indian tradition, culture and values though directed by the Catholic nuns during her education and she had led a secured life. Thus, Tara reckons the jolt between freedom and tradition as she tries to meet expectations that are often wildly conflicting, when she reaches America. But then she at once tries to embrace American culture taking benefit of the chances it strives and affords to assimilate as best as she can to the new culture. She is constantly aware of being different, yet how much ever she strives to amalgam in with the multicultural population of San Francisco. She finds it impossible to explain to American friends of comparatively classless, mobile society how static and classified Indian identity is:

"The dusty identity is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case, confidently labelled by father's religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), sub-caste (Kulin), mother-tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta), formative region of ancestral origin (Mishtigunj, East Bengal)....." (*Desirable Daughters*, 78)

In the hostile country Tara knows her restrictions – she knows how hard it is to come out of the grips of culture and tradition; she understands how impossible the pull of the past is; she feels the constraints of an uprooted self; she understands the circumstances and anxiety of an isolated self in an unfamiliar nation. She decides to stand up against a community who can never connect themselves to her situation. And, she has to forego that community that can relate but has lost meaning in her life. In search of success and to achieve her objective; she stands alone to oppose it. She fails to explain the height of her distress and the blessing of their individuality. She says;

"When everyone knows your business and every name declares your identity, where no landscape fails to contain a plethora of human figures, even a damaged consciousness, even loneliness, become privileged commodities". (*Desirable Daughters*, 34)

Tara belongs to the Indian Bengali Brahmin culture but she is multicultural. Tara stays on in America; she is an admirer and follower of American culture being an immigrant American. The twofold identity of Tara is always at crisscross junctures creating havoc in her personal life as an admirer and follower of both the cultures, Indian and American. Although Tara is so crucial about the Indian practices and customs such as dowry system, child marriage and the costume of more than one wife at the same time etc., she is also glad to be a part of the huge family, she says "We are Bengali Brahmins from Calcutta, and nothing can touch us." (*Desirable Daughters*, 44).

Tara is also influenced by Hungarian culture because she lives with a Hungarian carpenter. She belongs to more than one nation or culture. She has the experience to live among the people of different countries/cultures such as India, America, Hungary, Argentina and China. Tara marries Bishwapriya Chatterjee, goes on arranged marriage. Tara feels that her life after marriage is not going smoothly and she decides to walk out of her marital life, a representative American divorce settlement follows. It shows that Tara is the admonisher, the extra-modern and the rebel, she believes in adjustment policy of life, therefore she takes Andy in her life after her falling out of marriage with Bishwapriya. Tara works in a pre-school as a volunteer. She enjoys with Andy of her love life. As a divorce settlement, she sends his son with his father. Tara returns to her father's house for comfort, finally. In America, being a Bengali immigrant, she feels the sorrow of her divorce and marriage, she says:

“When I left Bish after a decade of marriage, it was because the the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled. I wanted to drive, but where would I go? I wanted to work, but would people think that Bish Chatterjee couldn’t support his wife?” (*Desirable Daughters*, 82)

Tara says as an immigrant “I’ve lost the Indian radar” (*Desirable Daughters*, 118), “Now, my radar was down” (*Desirable Daughters*, 195). ‘Radar’ here highlights her Hindu virgin protection. During the entire novel she swings between American and Indian culture and identity. Eventually Tara turns back to homeland. It reflects her attachment with her homeland, and search for identity in her homeland which is lost by her migration to America. Tara, the protagonist says. “I finally yielded to that most American of impulses, or compulsions, a “roots search,” (*Desirable Daughters* 17).

The novel discusses the truth that Indian expatriates are always aware of their reputation, ex-status in both cultures. Tara confesses that:

“If we’re unhappy, we’re expected to suck it up for the kids’ sake or our reputation. We worry what our parents will think, even when they’re halfway around the world and we’re middle aged adults.” (*Desirable Daughters*, 162)

Furthermore, Bharati Mukherjee has two sisters and the novel seems to be the autobiography of her. Likewise Tara, the protagonist has also two sisters, Padma and Parvati. Padma is the elder sister of her. She has married a businessman namely Harish Mehta, who is non-Bengali and age difference of twenty years between Harish Mehta and her. He had priory married and had children. Now she is resident of New Jersey (Montclair). She is T.V. hostess of a television program of India, held in Jackson Heights, Queens, run by her Indian lover, Devanand Jagtiani (Danny). She is totally Indian in her dresses, attire, and in her cuisine and occupation who lives in New Jersey. Once she remained with her partner as being married couple, now she lives alone without his support and fame.

Tara’s family and its past reveal to her the counterfeit identity of Chris Dey and she approaches the police to attempt help from. Tara as usual believes in her life that nothing can touch a Bengali Brahmin from Calcutta, but the presence of Chris Dey can create disturbances in her life and ruins her certain assumption. She knows the fact that her sister, Padma loves Ronald Dey, the Christian doctor and Chris’s perceived father, but she was also confident of the stringent Brahmin Bengali criteria. She is fully confident of the fact that in India, particularly within the grasp of a thorough cultural background, it is not just challenging but impossible to allow as well as approve anything that is out of control:

“But Ronald Dey was not possible. Daddy had not yet sanctioned someone for Didi to marry. And whenever that time did come, it would not be with a Christian, no matter what his social status and brilliant prospects. Therefore I must be wrong. Therefore, Ron Dey slipped under the most refined radar system in the world: Hindu Virgin Protection.” (*Desirable Daughters*, 31-32)

Parvati, her another sister is completely Indian in her whole cultural practices as she allows her husband’s relatives to be the house guests for weeks at her sumptuous flat with its breath taking view of the city. But for Tara all her treatment to the relatives, servants, and drivers seems very funny and inconvenient as she presents herself much more modern in her attitude and follows the American way of life style. She believes that her sisters lead very stressful life and make her life uncomfortable for unwanted things. So whatever Parvati does that is because of her Indian bend of her mind and she doesn’t care for American practices while as Tara shows herself as the most modern lady among all her sisters who don’t care these ways of displaying Indian life style and mean to adopt the practices of American culture. She does not like all that her other sisters do because of their Indian attachment.

3. CONCLUSION

Thus, in the novel Bharati Mukherjee highlights the identity crisis of desirable daughters who face both traditional as well as modern worlds and their changing values. Indian migrated Tara’s search for identity in the multicultural land of America is excellently revealed through the spaces of tradition, personal memories, different places and new ways of life style in the altered socio-cultural constrains. Tara not only craves to establish her own identity, but she tries to reconstruct her own identity against the traditions to which she belongs. Yet, while doing so, she also maintains her Indian identity of which she feels proud. The efforts of maintaining both identities – partly Indian, partly American – make her the hybrid of new culture that again poses the question of her real identity. Thus, throughout the novel, Bharati Mukherjee depicts the identity crisis of its protagonists who is longing for her new self.

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