

Reconstruction of Identity through Retrieval of Cultural Roots :A Study of *Desirable Daughters*

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Abstract: Bharati Mukherjee, an American writer of Indian origin, is different from other diasporic writers in her conception of the term 'immigration'. In her novel, *Desirable Daughters*, she highlights her view that immigration sets platform for the immigrants to redefine their identities and also insists on the need to accept the new cultural milieu. Tara, the narrator and central protagonist of the novel, happily immigrates to America, assimilates superficially into the alien society and becomes a self-assertive individual. A crisis in her life necessitates finding her true identity. To reconstruct her identity, she visits India, her homeland where she retrieves her past and thereby emerges with a new identity.

Keywords: Cultural roots, ethnic past, acculturation, feminine identity, nostalgia.

As a writer, my literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show that I (and the hundreds of thousands of recent immigrants like me) are, minute- by-minute, transforming America. The transformation is a two-way process; it affects both the individual and the national – cultural identity. The end result of immigration, then, is this two-way transformation: that's my heartfelt message. (32) Bharati Mukherjee

Bharati Mukherjee, who views immigration as “a process of self-integration” and an opportunity to recreate feminine identity, does not fail to speak of the innate desire of the immigrants to retain the treasured traditional values inherited from their homeland. Immigrants find it difficult to sever their attachment with their original culture and thus take a journey in search of their ethnic past. Tara, the female protagonist of *Desirable Daughters*, willingly migrates to America, where she tries to create an identity of her own. She assimilates, though not wholly, in to the alien society. She, like Bharati Mukherjee, speaks of the “exuberance of immigration”. Born and brought up in a wealthy Bengali Brahmin family, she considers immigration as an opportunity to escape from the strict traditional rules imposed on her by the patriarchal society of her community. In America, though Tara tries to discard her Indian way of thinking and living, and amalgamates into the American society, she fails to dissociate herself from her original roots. At the end of the novel, she

goes to India with her son Rabi, in search of her ethnic past. By retrieving her cultural roots and ethnic past, she believes that she could find her true identity. The novel begins with a Sanskrit verse that clearly states Bharati Mukherjee's standpoint:

No one behind, no one ahead. / The path the ancients cleared has closed. / And the other path, everyone's path. / Easy and wide, goes nowhere. / I am alone and find my way. (1)

This epigraph can be taken as the novelist's own perceptions and observations gained from her immigrant experience. Unlike other diasporic writers, who focus on expatriation, nostalgia, cultural loss and identity crisis, Bharati Mukherjee advocates amalgamation into the alien society and its culture. She also insists on the need to create one's own identity to survive in the host land. She believes that neither the traditional values cherished by the ancestors nor the new ones formulated by the modern man can lead one to a happy, secured life. It's one's own way of scheming the way of life and thinking that will enable him/her to create an identity of his/her own wherever he/she is. The novel traces the life of the three stunningly- beautiful Bengali, Brahmin sisters from Calcutta – Tara, Padma and Parvati. The title of the novel, *Desirable Daughters* can be understood in an ironical sense. In Indian context, mothers giving birth to girl children successively will be looked down upon because 'daughters' are not always considered lucky, fortune bringers and the inheritors of the family's name, fame and property. Hence, daughters are not 'desired' in many families. Born in a privileged orthodox family, the sisters are not allowed to create an identity of their own as their lives are conditioned by the traditional socio-cultural factors. Padma and Parvati are named after Hindu goddesses whereas Tara is named after a goddess in Tibetan Buddhism. Their mother named them so, for she hopes that the names would bring them happiness and prosperity in their life. The sisters are born exactly three years apart from each other and thus share the same birthday. Tara, the narrator, says, "*Sisters three are we...as like as blossoms on a tree. But we are not*" (21). Despite the fact that the sisters shared the same birthday and were equally intelligent and beautiful, they differed in their ability to adapt themselves to the changing environment and also in their desire to create individual identities.

Bharati Mukherjee, in this novel, also depicts the norms of the Indian patriarchal society through the early lives of the three sisters in India. All the sisters get married to the grooms of their father's choice. They are not allowed to voice their grievances. Bent upon breaking traditions, the sisters desire to live their lives without the intervention of the patriarchal society. Padma, the elder sister, loves her friend's brother, Ronald Dey, who belongs to a different caste and religion. Well aware of the fact that inter-caste marriage is something unimaginable in Indian culture, she conceals her love affair to her family. Unable to voice her desire, she gets married to Harish Mehta, a previously married man with children. She

settles in New Jersey and assumes a hyphenated identity. Though she lives in an alien land, she leads a traditional Bengali life. Parvati, the second sister, leads a contented life with her husband, in a luxurious apartment, in Bombay. She is totally Indian in her outlook and mindset. Tara, the youngest of the three, intelligent and rebellious in spirit, at nineteen, enters an arranged marriage with an Indian computer designer, Bishwapriya Chatterjee who later becomes a Silicon Valley Billionaire. Commenting on the nature of her arranged marriage, she says: "I married a man I had never met, whose picture and biography and bloodlines I approved of, because my father told me it was time to get married and this was the best husband on the market" (26). She leaves Calcutta happily as a young woman trying to explore a new world where she could have her own identity and could be free from the society which has little regard for women. But to her dismay, her dreams get shattered by the pressures created by her husband in her life and an innate desire to be born again as another individual, oblige her to divorce him. She gives the reason for divorcing Bish: "it was because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled" (82). She searches for a "life apart from [her] husband's identity" (200). At San Francisco, she starts living with her teenage son Rabi and her lover Andy, a Hungarian Buddhist. Tara shuttles between two identities. She drifts between the identities gained from her country as the former wife of an Indian and in America, as a divorced woman trying to acquire a new self. She belongs to both tradition and modernity. She accommodates herself to the newly adopted American values, but at the same time, she retains her traditional values in memory. She defines the multiple layers of identity, acquired by an Indian woman in India. She reminisces about the Indian culture which insists on considering one's father's birthplace as his or her home. In the novel, the sisters' identities are predetermined by the place of their origin:

That dusty identity is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case, confidently labeled by father's religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), subcaste (Kulin), mother-tongue (Bengali), place of Birth (Calcutta), former region of ancestral origin (Mishtigunj, East Bengal), education (post graduate and professional), and social attitudes (conservative). (78)

Tara, being "a single mom, raising a boy and halfway teaching school" (27), though modern in her outlook and seems Americanized does not fail to reveal her traumatic experience of being an alien. She writes that she is "sick of feeling an alien" (87). She also claims that she is not "a modern woman" (27). Her efforts to transform physically and psychologically, so as to equip herself to suit the needs of the new culture are often criticized and rejected by her sisters. She tries to impose her identity as a self-propelled woman by exercising her own will to decide important matters in her life. It is at this juncture, a conflict arises in the life of Tara, when a young man named Christopher Dey visits her San Francisco house and claims to be an illegitimate son born of the secret alliance between her sister Padma and her boy friend, Ronald Dey. This incident brings in a psychological stress and violence in Tara. She could

not accept the fact that her sister had an illegitimate child. She seeks the help of a detective, "Sgt. Jasbir "Jack" Singh Sidhu, a tall Sikh with a trimmed beard and a thoroughly American manner and accent" (139). Andy deserts her for seeking the help of the detective. Parvati fails to help her solve the mystery. Padma complicates Tara's quest for the truth by refusing to share the secret about Christopher Dey. Later, Christopher Dey is found to be a criminal who was a member of an influential Indian mob. Christopher Dey retaliates by bombing her house. In the bomb blast, she saves her ex-husband Bish and her son, Rabi. This incident provides a platform for Tara and Bish to develop a better understanding about each other. They apologize for having ruined each other's lives. She consoles him saying, "Bish, *please*, it was *my* fault, *my* head was turned" (265). Tara's desire to know about Christopher Dey and the hidden secret of her family, urges her to undertake a journey of self-discovery. Retrieval of cultural roots and ethnic past forms the central heart of the novel. The crisis compels her to ponder upon questions as: who she was? and where she belonged to? Her search for roots and thereby to reconstruct her identity, takes her back to her childhood memories. The bitter experiences she had in America makes her understand the need to sustain familial bonds. She goes to India with her son and visits Mishtigunj. Eliza Joseph in her article entitled "Perspectives on the 'Mestiza' Consciousness: Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters" comments on Tara's attempt to trace her origin as:

Desirable Daughters is at her best an exploration of Tara's quest for identity as her traditional Brahmin roots and the American interlude coincide. When she lives in San Francisco, she intermittently reminisces spells of her Bengali Brahmin childhood, thereby portraying the contrasting cultures and the emergent migrant dilemmas. Tara's dilemma of straddling the two divergent cultures is symbolically represented by her links with Bish, her ex-husband and her live-in lover, Andy. The novel sends out the message that in the adopted land, one must not entirely reject the traditional well-springs of one's family and one's ethnic origins, that very often help in transcending the traumas and the sense of rejection experienced while navigating the alien world. (97-98)

Her efforts to search her root – heritage – personal past end up in tracing her ancestry and she is fascinated by the story of her ancestor Tara Lata. The story of Christopher Dey acts as a device to transport the readers to speculate the world of Tara Lata. The first and last chapters of the novel are devoted to the portrayal of Tara Lata and nineteenth century India. It also focuses on colonial rule and the superstitious practices of the age. Jai Krishna Gangooly, a renowned lawyer, a traditionalist, compels his five-year old girl, Tara Lata to get married to a boy, Surendranath Lahiri. The groom, on the wedding day dies of snakebite. The bride is blamed and named unlucky. The groom's father says: "your happiness-wrecking daughter is responsible." (11) and demands for more dowry. Enraged Jai Krishna Gangooly, takes his daughter to a deep forest and marries her to a tree. Tara Lata thus becomes the legendary Tree-bride. When Tara, the narrator, reminisces her past history, she is infuriated with the

practices, superstitious beliefs that prevailed in the nineteenth century India. She pities Tara Lata who becomes a victim to the antiquated custom of child marriage:

...the youngest dressed in her bridal sari, her little hands painted with red lac dye, her hair oiled and set. Her arms are heavy with dowry gold; bangles ring tiny arms from wrist to shoulder. Childish voices chant a song, hands clap, gold bracelets tinkle. I cannot imagine the loneliness of this child. A Bengali girl's happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrow of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her. Even constructing it from the merest scraps of family memory fills me with rage and bitterness. (4)

Tara Lata, spends rest of her life in her father's house. Her personal inability to impede misfortunes and superstitious beliefs, reshapes her from docile, submissive, meek girl to a courageous, generous woman who takes part in freedom struggle: "Tara Lata the virgin, the untouched, who opened the house to beggars, then to the sick, then to the young soldiers fighting the Raj" (17). Anita Balakrishnan in "Tracing Tara-Lata's Footsteps: Negotiating Authenticity and Alienation in Desirable Daughters" observes:

Tara arrives at the realization that if Tara-Lata, aged virgin and a Tree-Bride, could attain the status of a saint and freedom fighter in a society where it was unthinkable for a woman to be without a man, it was essential that she, Tara-Lata's descendant must forge her own path towards self-assertion. Like the Tree-Bride, Tara could not follow any existing model; she had to create a path of her own. It is Tara-Lata's story that brings her to the conclusion that her identity cannot be achieved by severing her Indian filiations and affiliations. (268)

Though Bharati Mukherjee celebrates immigration as an opportunity to recreate feminine identity by shedding off the predetermined identity created by one's socio – cultural factors, she records in her writings, the trauma of loneliness, racism, cultural crisis, and search for roots. Tara, the mouthpiece of the novelist, feels proud of her rich Indian heritage, despite of its superstitious beliefs. At the same time, she rejoices over the opportunities provided in the alien land. In a conversation with Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, included in "Routes of Identity", Bharati Mukherjee comments on Tara's quest of self-discovery and in that way, her attempt to reconstruct her identity:

This is the family memory, memoir, that Tara is constructing for herself...She has to discover and reassess her family history, she has to try to understand her national history. And it is in doing so that she understands her ex-husband Bish, understands why they are very different. Tara needs to immerse herself in that lushness to rediscover within herself all the sensory details that she had rejected, all that she had not wanted to know, as a young woman. (137)

Towards the end of the novel, Tara, the narrator, who gets her name from her ancestor Tara Lata, re-examines her life, understands the value of

familial relationships, and unravels the secrecy surrounding her past life. Her pondering over the questions – the world she inhabits, the world she came from, urges her to take “a roots search” (17) and “a mission of discovery” (17) and ends up in finding her true identity.

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