

Issues Women of Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters

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Abstract

Diasporic literature deals with the displaced /dislocated / decontextualised people settled in foreign countries like U.S., Canada, Britian, leaving behind their native countries like India, Pakistan etc. Diaspora discusses their ailing and bitter experience of cultural alienation and the agony of being torn between two cultures and foreign culture. Bharathi Mukherjee through her novels explores her experience thereby unearthing her potentials. In her works she pictures the socio politic cultural impact of Canada on the immigrants .Desirable is the sort of novel that tells the Indian readers about the Indian expatriates in America and American readers about weird customs and tradition of India. The characters are exile caught between two cultures. Tara Chatterjee the protagonists in the Desirable Daughters is a woman broken in many ways with the tradition but still remains tied to her native country. The present paper attempts to discuss the sense of identity and the painful process undergone by the female protagonists in the novel Desirable Daughters.

The issues of diaspora, globalisation, consumerism, transnational's, cultural, identity crisis have become the leit-motif of most post colonial literature. The self, dislocated in space and time from its roots has a homing instinct, the desire to discover its "in betweenness" in a transnational and trans-cultural space. Issues and problems of identity figures more prominently in the novetls of V.S.Naipaul, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Desai, and Bharati Mukherjee. These immigrant writers deal with the issues like home, self and identity.

Bharati Mukherjee, an American writer of Indian origin, is a prominent novelist of Indian diaspora. The novel Desirable Daughters by Bharati Mukherjee is multilayered with the life of three sisters of a Brahmin family who wishes to make identity of their own in a complex socio-cultural situation. Mukherjee also hails from a similar background and is also one of three sisters. Tara's sister padma has been an immigrant to America for many years and lives in New Jersey with her husband while Parvati leaves with her husband and children in a

fancy Bombay apartment. Tara the youngest of all lives in San Francisco after the divorce from her husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee and leads a California life style. *Desirable Daughters* appears to complicate the portrayal of the feminine immigrant experience. The novel indicates that the diasporic feminine is far more complex than being simply a saga on unqualified gains and unmitigated loss.

Tara is portrayed as perceiving immigration as an opportunity of self remaking by carving out an Americanized individualistic and independent feminine self, disregarding Indian conventions mass traditions. Yet she is shown as not being able to completely dissociate herself from Indian roots. At the end she is made to feel the need to go to India in search of these roots to define her identity. The feminine identity that is created by this experience is neither purely expatriate nor only American or Indian. It is Indian as well as American

The concept of home and migrant is very much embedded in the narratology that Bharati Mukherjee presents in the *Desirable Daughters*. It is the sense of migration which brings about a change to the identity of Padma who preserves the Bengali tradition in America on the other hand it only remaps and reconstructs her cultural identity. Hence migration plays a crucial role in restructuring individual identities and cultural attitudes and perceptions. Linda Mc Dowell rightly opines: Movement involves the remapping of the cultural identities. (*Gender, Identity and Place*: 210). In order to assert her femininity and reconstruct and to redefine her identity Tara leaves her husband for a life of her own, chooses a school for her son which is “slanted to the Arts”(153) and even takes the bold step of sharing her house with her lover Andy.

Bharati Mukherjee has aptly brought out Tara’s marginality and her estrangement in the following lines:

The moment I step outside the bookstore on to the crowd Haight street, I lose the heady kinship with the world that I feel through my reading . Nobody pays attention to me other than to ask for spare changes or press a handbill into 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.(79)

Thus it is evident that Tara has a feeling of being cut off from her community and life style. Despite feeling totally adjusted to being an American immigrant, Tara frequently asked "Who are you really?" She feels "tired of explaining India to Americans ".I 'm of sick feeling an alien" (87). Tara has to encounter the racist and nationalist ideology segregating her , pushing her away from the centre of America experience . Hence she" stands out " out from the rest. She emerges with a new identity:

I felt as though I were lost inside a Salman Rusdie novel , a once-firm identity smashed by hammer blows, melted down and re-emerging as something wondrous, or grotesque"(195-196) Bish is also an upholder of tradition . Though he is a successful international business man and personifies the American dream, Bish remains firmly rooted in Indian tradition. Unlike Tara he does not seem to be torn between his Indian Hindu heritage and his American professional demands. As Tara observes: Although his life was cited everywhere as perfection itself, he had failed in his fundamental duty. I braced myself for a complicated economic or technological explanation, but Bish's failure was vastly simpler and more fundamental. He had failed in his dharma, the basic duty of a man in the house holder phase of his life, to support and sustain his marriage. He had been brooding over the breakup for longer time and more profoundly than I(265)

Bish 's deep understanding of Tara 's deep shock and grief over the Chris Dey episode, leads to realise that the essential difference in social and cultural outlook can never be bridged. In contrast, Andras karolyi had a completely different reaction , ultimately breaking up with Tara, unable to deal with complications. Tara realizes early on through the reactions of American women to her arranged marriage, "I'll never be a modern woman". Her realization of their cultural bonds rekindles Tara's love for Bish. At this stage, Tara's home is destroyed by a terrorist bomb. The three of them , Bish , Tara, and Rabi miraculously survive, but Bish is badly burned and will require months of surgery and physiotherapy.

Tara is deeply traumatized by the terrorist attack and returns to India so as to reevaluate the Hindu customs that her shaped her and her family .Mukherjees depiction of Tara's quest culminates in Mishtigunj, Bangladesh , at Tara lata's home. As Tara says "I'm like a pilgrim following the course of the Ganges all the way to its source "(289). She realizes that the Tree Bride is central to every story of her female assertiveness in the family. Tara understands the significant facet of her identity.

In Desirable Daughters , Bharati Mukherjee has struck the balance between the past and the present through a deft blending of tradition and modernity. Through Tara's critical reconstruction of the Tree Bride,s history , she is able to arrive at an awareness of her identity .She is searingly conscious of her existential predicament which is mirrored in the epigraph:

No one behind, no one ahead
The path that ancients cleared has closed.

And the other path everyone's path,
Easy and wide goes nowhere.
I'm alone and find my way

Thus, Bharati mukherjee has lead her protagonist to succeed in finding her identity all the way from America to India. Tara reaches the conclusion that a critical renegotiation of her Indian roots and American proclivities is required for her to forge an autonomous subjectivity. Bharati Mukherjee employs the exotic narrative of the Tree Bride as a counter hegemonic strategy to assert that a hybrid, diasporic Indian American identity can only be constructed through a nuanced , critically informed dialectic with both ethnic sensitivities and American cultural imperatives.

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