

BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS: A THEME OF SELF VERSUS SOCIETY

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The India-born writer Bharti Mukherjee is one of the most widely known immigrant writers of America. From her childhood she was in touch with the western culture. Though, an Indian, she is brought up in western environment. She is measured as an ethnic artist who looks beyond the immigrant's sense of alienation and dislocation to trace 'psychological transformation' especially among women. Her main theme throughout her writing discusses the condition of Asian immigrants in North America, with particular attention to the changes taking place in South Asian Women in a new world. She occupies an outstanding place among the Indian women novelists writing in English and belongs to the body of writers who, by choice or otherwise, have left their countries of origin and made their homes elsewhere. Identity politics permeate Mukherjee's texts. Her novels, like *Wife*, *Jasmine* and *The Holder of the World* explore the shifting identities of diasporic women, both in present-day United States, Canada, and India, and in the past. The novels of Bharati Mukherjee's are self actualizing. Quest for the definition of self and search for identity are main features of her women who are seen caught in the flux of tradition and modernity

Desirable Daughters is the story of three sisters, Tara, Parvati, and Padma, born and raised in Calcutta in the 1950s, and possess different characteristics and the different paths they travel from this connection. Tara the main protagonist is portrayed in different shades whereas her two sisters also deliberated in the whole story. Padma, Parvati and Tara they are so closed according to the narrator of the story as she begins the novel with the line "Sisters three are we...as like blossom on a tree" (21). Though they are born and brought up in same culture and milieu however they three are different in approach. Therefore she further accepts their dissimilarity with each other and says they are not same "But we are not" (21) because in the whole novel the disclosure of the different characteristics of these sisters is exposed. The description is told from the perspective of Tara, the youngest sister who has moved the furthest away. Now divorced from her parent-selected husband, Tara lives in San Francisco with her adolescent son Rabi and lover Andy, an ex-biker/ hippie Buddhist carpenter. Tara sees herself as an American, but is constantly aware of the India that is always with her. When a young man, Chris Dey, approaches at her home and proclaims that she is his "mashi" and he the illicit child of her older sister Padma, Tara must reconsider. She is forced to look at her the relationships she has with her sisters, and their past: three different people within a specific upbringing and rigid cultural context.

The conventional patriarchal rule in Indian society is explicit through the instances narrator has given. For example she says "Padma, the first, and six years my senior, was forced by our father to turn down movie offer" (22). These sisters belong to an educated family which is considered a modern family in the society yet constraints for women can be found anywhere in the society. Tara wants to study more but her father says which she calls the magical words "There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks" (23). She recounts the utter lack of romanticism in her marriage, Tara, not knowing any other way, submitted: "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). The three women from Calcutta grapple what to

choose: their choices being an oppressive but known Indian tradition and a liberating but unknown feminist way of life. In this context, it is inevitable that some parts of their identity had to be destroyed and new facets to it developed. As these processes of self-destruction and self-construction take place in parallel, Indian American women portrayed by Bharati Mukherjee consistently seem to evolve into modern feminists. What is enticing about living in the past is that it allows the characters to be so filled with their own view of their position in society - the Bhattacharjees are so filled with their sense of Brahminical superiority. In this novel, three strikingly-beautiful sisters from a privileged Bengali Brahmin family in Calcutta feel the tug between tradition and freedom as they try to meet expectations that are often wildly contradictory. The youngest, Tara Chatterjee, seems to have flown farthest from the nest. Not only is she divorced from Bishwapriya (a Silicon Valley multimillionaire hand-picked for her by her father), she's raising a "sensitive" teenaged son on her own. Even worse, she works as a simple teacher, a choice which would be unimaginable in the culture of her birth.

Indian society and its complexities are also highlighted by the author time to time in the novel. Such as when there is an issue of marriage people in India first prefer to search a boy in their community and then caste and family background is equally important. Parvati in one letter mentions to the preference of her aunt who was searching a suitable girl for her son:

Aunty says please look only at Mukherjees or Chatterjees, but the girl is exceptionally pretty and well situated in a pinch (even) Bhattacharjees, Lahiris and Gangulys will do. Remember sometimes Chakravorty is just a title, like Chowdhury, and not a caste name. Do not be fooled, because sometimes people don't even know their own family origins (108).

Cultural differences are brought out by the narrator in this story. For Americans, Indian life, its customs, traditions, culture and ethical values of family are bewildering facts and matter of amusement. She proclaims "I told my Calcutta stories many times, and Americans seem to find them endlessly amusing, and appalling (26). Tara narrates the story from her adopted San Francisco home, where she lives with Andy Karolyi, a strange sort of Hungarian Zen carpenter who earthquake-proofs houses. All this seems to imply a sort of free and easy hippie lifestyle, but nothing could be farther from the truth. All these rebellion-gestures are merely trappings, or reactions against the gagging restrictions of Tara's girlhood. She opens her story in a curious way, 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. This goes on for 20 pages and seems to push the story deeply in the direction of the past. Then, in a kind of dislocating lurch, Tara heads into her own story. Mukherjee follows the diverging paths taken by three extraordinary Calcutta-born sisters as they come of age in a changing world. Moving effortlessly between generations, she weaves together fascinating stories of the sisters' ancestors, childhood memories, and dramatic scenes from India's history. Tara, Padma, and Parvati were born into a wealthy Brahmin family presided over by their doting father and his traditionalist mother. Intelligent and artistic, the girls are nevertheless constrained by a society with little regard for women. Their subsequent rebellion will lead them in different directions, to different continents, and through different circumstances that strain yet ultimately strengthen their relationship.

The novel shows that the past is not something that stays in a neat frame or album, but one that collides with and influences the present, as well as how the present is one that can colour and illuminate the past. Mukherjee has often said in interviews how she has been influenced by the Hindu epics and myths in which animals can transform into gods and monsters and gods can transform into people. She applies this tradition of changing forms to the mythology of America in which people are allowed to think of themselves as American, undergoing their own sort of transformation. As concepts these come through

in the novel. Bengali words and ideas are intermingled with English prose and American norms. This style reflects the fluid and changing nature of the American immigrant. However, in many places it seems that the concepts are more important than the characters that become representatives of an idea rather than incarnate individuals. Andy, Tara's lover is almost a cartoon character, saying things like "Zen's a bummer, babe." His complexity as a character is never allowed for.

Through the lives of Tara Lata and her two sisters, author Bharati Mukherjee competently portrays the themes of changing identity, western feminism versus Indian tradition and self-discovery. In a way these three themes are interrelated. For example, as Tara Lata and her sisters attempt to resolve for themselves their true identities and set out to apply newly adopted values in their lives, they progress as individuals and end up discovering more about themselves. Tara is "a thirty six year old divorced kindergarten teacher" (26), who lives with her son Rabi and her boyfriend Andy "red-bearded, former biker, former bad boy, Hungarian Buddhist contractor/yoga instructor" (25) in San Francisco. Problems of arrange marriage she delineates through the relationship of Bish and her:

When I left Bish (let us be clear on this) after a decade of marriage, it was because of 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? (82)

Now it is clear that Tara had a reason to take divorce from Bish. She was living her marital life being aloof as she throws light upon the facts that her husband had no time for her as well as she was carrying on the relationship just for formality. Bish remained so busy that she says:

In his Atherton years, as he became better known on the American scene-a player, an advisor, a pundit-he also became, at home, more of a traditional Indian. He was spending fifteen hours a day in office, sometimes longer (82).

Her search for identity leads her back to her childhood memories against the conditions of the scene from Indian history which gives a loaded representation of what it means to nurture a female in the society which gives little consideration to her. Tara became restricted with an identity of Bish, where she expresses "My world was Atherton, and the two weeks we spent each winter in Calcutta visiting his parents-with a few side visits to mine-and the arrival-and-departure nights in Bombay with Parvati" (82). In this novel conflicts arising from native and foreign cultures. The main characters in the novel grapple with the challenge of accommodating the American feminist culture into their traditional Indian one. But, as schools of thoughts go, these two concepts are incompatible. The conventional role assigned to women in India is the very antithesis of what American feminists espouse. For example, Tara Lata was first married to a tree in a ceremonious ritual, as a measure to mitigate the malefic aspects of her horoscope. It was earlier predicted by a Hindu astrologer that Tara's married life would be short lived as a result of this malefic aspect. Such conceptions of marriage are mere superstitions from the point of view of feminism. The American feminist movement, which was informed by scientific, sociological and historical knowledge would never approve of such primitive practices in the name of orthodoxy. This is a typical example of the sorts of conflict that Tara Lata and her sisters confront throughout the narrative text.

Her relationship with her two elder sisters is complicated, the flow of affection blocked by a certain formality and adherence to predetermined roles. Middle sister Parvati married a rich man and stayed in India, but by some miracle was able to choose her mate. But this is Parvati's only stab at rebellion. For the most part she toes the line in a way which has diminished her soul. She writes to Tara: "I hope you aren't doing bad things to yourself like taking Prozac and having cosmetic surgery. Please, please don't become that Americanized"(105). Didi, the eldest and most glamorous, married a Mehta and moved to New

Jersey to pursue a career in television. But again, all is not as it seems. Her lifestyle is a thin surface laid over the thick, pressed-down foundation of tradition. Every novel needs a crisis, and in this case it comes in the form of a young man who calls himself Chris Dey. He presents himself to Tara as Didi's illegitimate son, conceived through an affair with a prominent businessman named Ronald Dey. She exposes the harsh realities of Indian society where inter religious marriages are not accepted:

Everyone knew the rules and the rules stated caste and community narrowed the range of intimate contact. The Deys, as their name proclaimed, were not only Christian today, but had sprung from a Hindu caste that was not even Brahmin (32).

The novel also raises the issues of Indian patriarchal system where so called modernism has entered, yet women have no right to select a life partner of their own choice. Not only this to marry with a Christian boy Ronald Dey whom she liked and whole story revolves around the matter:

But Ronald Dey was not possible. Daddy had not yet sanctioned someone Didi to marry. And whenever that time did come, it would not be with Christians, no matter what his social status and brilliant prospects (31-32).

Tara exposes the patriarchal facets of her family by saying "Our father couldn't let either of my sisters out on the street" (29). Not only patriarchal system but to the Hindu society's customs and rigid norms are expressed in the novel:

Therefore, Ron Dey slipped under the most refined radar system in the world: Hindu virgin protection. So many eyes were watching, so many precautions were taken, and so much of value was at stake-the marriageability of Motilal Bhattacharjee's oldest daughter, which, unless properly managed, controlled the prospects of his second and third daughters as well-that any violation of codes, any breath of schandal, was unthinkable (32).

The aforementioned example also brings to light the different ways in which societies are organized in India and in America. In India, the happiness of the individual is subordinate to the collective good of his/her community. More importantly, the role of women is to be supportive to their husbands in all circumstances. The individual needs and aspirations of women were not given due importance in what is essentially a patriarchal society. But the three sisters from Calcutta are no longer strictly bound by this primitive culture, for they find themselves in the midst of liberal America, where the scope of their freedom and expression is at its furthest from realities in India.

Moving effortlessly between generations, Mukherjee weaves together fascinating stories of the sisters' ancestors, their childhood memories, and dramatic scenes from India's history. Mukherjee has cut out the shapes of three Bhattacharjee girls of Ballygunge and placed them at strategic points - Mumbai, where the middle one lives, New York, where the most forward of the girls has settled, and San Francisco, where Tara, the youngest, makes a home.

Tara, who narrates, left Calcutta happily enough as a young woman and has rarely looked back. The youngest of three daughters of a Brahmin engineer and landowner, she grew up among the Bengali elite in an atmosphere that wavered between Hindu traditionalism and secular technocracy. Well-educated, she was married to an Indian computer designer who moved her to California and got rich in Silicon Valley. Tara became Americanized enough to divorce her husband after a few years and move to San Francisco with her son. There, however, she found herself brought sharply back to Calcutta when a young man named Chris Dey showed up at her door one day claiming to be the illegitimate son of her older sister Padma and bearing a letter of introduction from Ron Dey (a childhood friend of Padma's), who claimed to be the boy's father. But Padma, now a New York clothing designer, knows nothing of the boy, while Ron Dey, back in India, admits that the boy is his. The mystery deepens when Tara goes to the

police, who ascertain that the boy isn't really Chris Dey but an imposter using his passport. Meanwhile, Tara finds she's being stalked by a Bengali gangster, and her ex-husband becomes implicated in a cyber terrorism threat by Indian hackers who say they'll unleash a super virus that could disable every hard-drive in the US. Forget not going home again—sometimes you can't get away in the first place, even halfway across the globe.

In *Desirable Daughters*, as in *Jasmine*, the author revisits the 'interracial immigrant romance' from the perspective of the Indian American woman. This novel of Bharathi Mukherjee is a tale of immigrants and the attitude of three sisters and their ways of dealing with situations. "Desirable Daughters" as the title suggests, one kind of daughter, which parents would be proud of and for whom every parent would crave. The three sisters, who are the daughters of Motilal Bhattacharya and the great-grand-daughters of Jai Krishna Gangooli, belong to a traditional Bengali Brahmin family. Padma, Parvathi and Tara are symbolic names of Shakti (Goddess of Hindu) do not flaunt the some ethical values but have the grit to carve a niche for them. They are a blend of traditional and modern outlook. Padma and Parvathi do not regret their choices, the former an immigrant of ethnic origin in New Jersey, and the latter married to a boy of her own choice and settled in the plush locality of Bombay with an encourage of servants to catch her. Tara, the narrator of the novel marries Bishwapriya Chatterjee, goes on arranged marriage. Tara finds that her married life is not fulfilling and she walks out of her traditional life, a typical American divorce settlement follows. Tara works as a volunteer in a pre-school. She enjoys her love life with Andy. Tara sends his son with his father as a divorce settlement. The uncertainty of her identity, testifies not only his own but also the uncertainty of the immigrants. Hence, the whole novel exposes the narrator's search of self and while establishing an individual identity how society generates the restrictions for a woman. Tara's journey starts from America but ends in India Finally Tara returns to her father's house for solace.

Works Cited :

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