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# Research maGma

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### **SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The present paper attempts to explore identity crisis depicted in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*. The novel unfolds the story of three sisters, who settled in different countries, and are suffering to find out their own identities as they come to realize their marginal position as well as substitute role in family and society. The quest of its protagonist Tara for a separate identity in the traditional bound society leads her place to place, but wherever she moves, she finds the spaces of tradition and a fixed sense of identity as an Indian immigrant.

This novel deals with the cross-culture reviews of the protagonist. Mukherjee has depicted the protagonist from India, her immigrant experiences and the demanding situations she faces in America, the adopted place of origin. It also deals with exile, displacement, identity, experiences of belonging, isolation and cross-culture conflicts of the protagonist which stand up due to the meeting of the East and West.

#### **KEYWORDS:**

Phallocentrism, Immigrant, Migration

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Bharati Mukherjee is an activist of civil rights, educator, an author of highly praised novels, two collections of short stories and non-fiction works. She utilizes her own personal experiences in crossing the cultural boundaries. She is a well-known writer of Indian diaspora in USA, though she expects to be seen as (North) American Writer and rejects her hyphenated identity as Asian-American or Indo-American (Mukherjee, "American Dreamer"). Her works can certainly be read in the national context of Indian writing in English and in the international context of the literature of the Indian diaspora. She

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wants to transform herself as an artist from expatriate writer into a confident redefined artist in the immigrant tradition which sets her in the tradition of American main-stream writers.

As a diasporic writer she has focused on the several identities of her immigrant characters. The hypothesis for the present chapter would be: Mukherjee's heroines pass through the phases of expatriate uncertainty, immigrant confidence and finally acquire the transnational hybrid identity of the world citizen. This process of shifting identities poses dilemma of identity on different levels. Her novel, *Desirable Daughters* which narrates the return of an immigrant, Tara Banerjee, to India in the hope of recovering her roots and the sensibility of her cultural identity as an Indian. But the wistful, passionate sensitivity of an immigrant for her mother country is dashed to pieces when it comes into direct blows with reality.

*Desirable Daughters* is the autobiographical novel of Bharati Mukherjee, with its protagonist, Tara Lata Banerjee constantly renegotiating her sense of self and her relationship with her family in India and the United States. Mukherjee's writings, both autobiographical and fictional demonstrate the complexity of identity inherent in diasporic writing. It is a novel with complex ideas revolving round the life of three sisters: Padma, Parvati and Tara. All of them maintain distinctive individuality in their attitude and approach to life. Bharati Mukherjee not only highlights the longing of immigrants for Indian cultural heritage, but also expresses her dislike at the changing situations within India itself. This loneliness brings a greater isolation in the life of Tara and she feels herself alienated in the American society. In India, the details of religion, caste, sub-caste, mother tongue and place of birth are all integral part of man's personality and one cannot risk going beyond them. Tara confesses:

"Nobody pays attention to me other than to ask for spare change or press a handbill into my closed fist. I am not the only blue-jeaned woman with a Pashmina shawl around my shoulders and broken – down running shoes.... I don't belong here, despite my political leanings; worse, I don't want to belong." (79).

*Desirable Daughters* belongs to Mukherjee's third phase of writing in which she is described as having accepted being "an immigrant, living in a continent of immigrants" (Mukherjee qtd in Alam: 9). Mukherjee has explored in it, as she says, the ways in which the immigrants, exposed to many cultures because they live in the age of globalisation and information technology, combine many heritages into a new and singular whole. In the process of immersing themselves in the present and looking forward to the future, Mukherjee's characters have to discover for themselves the social, religious, historical and political forces that have shaped them over decades. In it, she has portrayed in a lucid manner, the process of transformation gone through by her immigrant protagonist Tara. It is clear that her protagonist who faces cultural shock and crisis of identity due to dichotomy of existence, changes her mind set. Tara, in a struggle to find herself, explores numerous enigmas about her family and about her ancestral village's betrayal by administrators of the British Raj. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Mukherjee's heroine evolves over time when she divulges deep into the history of one of her ancestor, almost her namesake, endeavors for self-realization and finally takes control of her life.

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.

Migration and dislocation, either consensual or conflictual, is a global and trans-cultural

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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. This novel discusses the depiction of the development of personal identity of Indian migrant women in the U.S. and their confusion, the dilemma of adjusting between two different cultures.

Bharati Mukherjee in her novel *Desirable Daughters* uses first person narrative as the protagonist has to retell the family history. The psychological disturbance that Tara passes through can be convincingly explained when narrated by the victim herself. Her novel *Desirable Daughters* marks a departure from her previous fiction as in her interview with Powell she says; "The authentic strategy for this book was also using the width of the field of history, geography, Diaspora gender, ethnicity, language rather than the old fashioned, long clean throw"(Powell). In her previous novel *Jasmine* she seems to suggest that migration to America means new opening and freeing the self from the conventional bound society, whereas in *Desirable Daughters*, she considers various patterns of belonging in the Global perspective. The tie with homeland and linkage with the past are presented as essential in creating the interstitial place in the host country.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* focuses on the search of an immigrant for his roots, place of origin, family and culture. The origin of an individual establishes his identity in the homeland society, but raises a crisis in the adopted country – the host land. In fact, Mukherjee herself confesses in one of her interviews that Tara, the protagonist of her novel *Desirable Daughters*, speaks about the American quest to discover who is she? Where does she come from? Tara's search for roots takes her to India, and the land of her origins, Mishtigunj, the impacts of which are mostly on her identity in the migrated country. It helps her to form transnational identity, yet she is caught into another predicament and raises the question whether she is Indian Bengali Brahmin or immigrant American or somebody else.

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 camouflage the fragile vulnerable self.

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.

Tara is narrating the history of her family and in recording this history she is projecting the

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creation of her identity. The past here plays an important role in constructing the present. In order to understand herself and recreate a new identity for her, she must delve into the past and unfold the intricacies of it. She begins the narration with the story of her ancestral namesake, Tara Lata, the Tree Bride of Mishtigunj. In this introductory chapter of the novel, she retells the story set in India over 85 years ago. This introduction takes the reader into the past and also serves the purpose of exploring some traditional aspects of Indian culture. The second chapter takes the reader into the present life of Tara in California along with her past memories of Calcutta. The story moves with the ease from past to present, from India to America and from Calcutta to California, that it seems that the boundaries between these two different geographical world do not exist. The reader moves with Tara from past to present and it often becomes difficult to distinguish between them. Mukherjee's mastery is in handling the story of the past and present simultaneously and making what has happened and what is happening equally interesting by infusing the new concept of time and space.

The structure of Tara's story moves from past to present with such fluidity that all the changes in her personality are visible that is from a docile wife to an assertive American, while the boundaries between India and America and California and New York disappear. It is within this chaotic world that Tara writes both her history and herself into being, uncovering her multiple consciousnesses as she unearths the secrets of her past.

Tara wanted to study at the community college, but instead stays at home to take care of her son, just like all of the other young Indian wives in Atherton, California. Believing in the liberating promise of marriage, Tara devotes her entire life in supporting Bish and raising their family, for the importance of fulfilling the domestic responsibilities has been ingrained in her since birth.

Tara's unsuccessful marriage is outcome of imposed marriage. She married a man she had never met. She married Bish because her father told her to get married. 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. (Desirable Daughters 26)

Tara is very much distress 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

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to create her own scandal, be the centre of her own tangled love nest. (Page, 80)

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)

Mukherjee uses the device of parallel and contrast to highlight the multiple identity of the protagonist. By linking her story with the ancestral namesake Tara Lata, Mukherjee draws a parallel between the lives of Tara Chatterjee and Tara Lata. Tara Chatterjee's revolt against the traditional concepts of Indian wife and Tara Lata's surrender to spend her entire life as a Tree bride are juxtaposed. Tara was married to Bish Chatterjee at the age of nineteen and moved to America with him. Her husband was selected by her father and she gives the reason for it: "He had that eagerness, and a confident smile that promised substantial earnings. It lured my father into marriage negotiations, and it earned my not unenthusiastic acceptance of him as husband. A very predictable, very successful marriage negotiation" (DD 7).

The main focus is the pull of two cultures. Tara and her teenage son exemplify the Indian trying to mix with American culture. Her sister holds onto traditional culture in the face of pressures to assimilate. Padma and Tara undergo absolutely opposite kinds of experiences of cultural confrontation. Padma resists to absorb in the alien culture, so Padma's approach is that of an expatriate. Tara's approach, like her creator, is that of an immigrant. Tara shows her willingness to merge with the adopted culture.

In the New World, Tara lives for herself. She resists the pull of the patriarchal oppressions. She overcomes the feeling of lack of belonging. She relocates herself in a new home. Having closely scrutinized the oppositional diasporic experiences of Padma and Tara, we can say that culturally displaced, Padma, considers it her duty to preserve and propagate her ethnic values even in an alien land. Whereas, Tara, the victim of gender-based marginalization, wants to break out of the patriarchal bounds and step into a new identity free of the traditional limits.

But Tara chooses her own way. The instruction of Padma represents the perspective of male chauvinism and by defying it Tara establishes the feminist perspective over phallocentrism. The revelation of her son's different sexual orientation leaves her shell shocked for a moment, but the maturity and readiness with which she accepts the above relation speaks of her modern consciousness and sensibility.

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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