

“Women in an Alien Land”- Nuances of Diasporic Identity and Survival in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Desirable Daughters*

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian Born, Canadian/ American novelist has made a deep impression on the literary canvass. The prime premise of her works is the issues encountered by women in the foreign atmosphere. As a diasporic author most of her characters are ‘displaced’ and ‘alienated’ from the land of origin to USA where they are ‘simultaneously invisible’ as an individual and ‘overexposed’ as a racial minority. Focusing on Mukherjee’s *Desirable Daughters*, first of the trilogy including *The Tree Bride* and *Miss New India*, the present paper attempts to analyze the complexities of diasporic identity and the process of re-birth and re-invention of Indian women immigrants to adapt in the new world. A story of three sisters- Padma, Parvati and Tara, the novel showcases the problems of identity of Indian immigrant women in an alien society as they suffer from ‘no greater visibility but great marginality’. The problem with these sisters is not only that are immigrants but what makes their condition worse is their gender as well. Being with the label of ‘second sex’, these women are often confronted by a double quest- quest for identity as a woman first and second as a displaced human being in an alien world. The diasporic situation in fact entangles the sisters into a maze- standing between two worlds-with complex realities of unequal cultural dynamics of the traditional homeland and liberal spaces of host land- they tend to experience conflicting subjectivities of freedom and subjugation, yet they do find a way for self-exploration and deliberation to conceive new identities and move beyond the fixed definitions of diasporic Indian women. So, my paper will be a modest attempt to unravel the nuances of diasporic identity which is always a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ and to highlight the extremely individualistic ways of survival of the three immigrant sisters in an apparently alien culture.

Keywords- Diaspora, Displacement, Gender, Identity, Immigrant.

I. INTRODUCTION

Diasporic theory has affected the literature of every language of the globe with its multiple characteristics. The term ‘Diaspora’ (from the Greek word for ‘scattering’) refers to the dispersion of a people from their homeland. A simple definition of ‘diaspora literature’ then would be works that are written by authors who live outside their native land and it identifies a work’s distinctive geographic origins. Basically defined as a ‘novel of memory and about memory’, diasporic literature deals with the perspectives of nostalgia, loss and longing. While past and rootedness or rootlessness is often the central themes in many diasporic texts, they are not limited to such themes only.

They convey much more, and can even emerge as complementary readings to sociological, cultural, feministic studies of diaspora. From portraying culture shock and spatial shock, to examining minute details of identity politics, to illustrating generation gap to reverse culture shock and globalization, diasporic literature juxtaposes the real and the imagined in a telling manner and tries to give voice to a large group of people who otherwise lead a subaltern existence.

While defining the term ‘diaspora’ Jasbir Jain in *Writing Women Across Cultures* said:

“The ‘diaspora’ is in itself a complex term. The scattering like that of the Jews scattering can also grow roots and also bear fruits..... Expatriate may longingly look back while immigrant relate more positively to the

culture of their adoption and seek a meaningful role in its political and cultural life” (Jain 146).

So, diaspora situation presents a double challenge of not only preserving one’s own indigenous culture but also a perfect assimilation or fusion with the other culture so as to avoid loneliness and identity crisis. Now the quest for identity is a basic to the human world and almost all of diasporic characters are craving for recognition and acceptance in the host society. The condition of women is much worse as Clifford says “diaspora women are caught between patriarchies ambiguous pasts and futures. They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways” (James 302). Being with the label of ‘second sex’ these women are often confronted by a double quest, the quest for identity as a woman first and second as a displaced human being in an alien world.

In an attempt to give voice to all those silent miseries of immigrant women, Bharati Mukherjee, an expatriate Indian author in the United States of America, in most of her novels successfully dealt with the characteristic features of diaspora like the quest for identity, uprooting and re-rooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, sense of guilt etc. Born in an affluent upper-middle class Brahmin family in Kolkata, she has lived the concept of ‘diaspora’ with all its colors during her stay in the European countries as an outsider. So, her fiction from the start till the end is a celebration of her inner emotion- be it as an alien in an outside culture or as a woman in an alienated patriarchal society. The main theme in 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. Even though she has been acknowledged as a ‘voice from expatriate immigrant’s sensibility’ but a close observation of her novels reveals that she has written all the novels from a feministic perspective as well. The problem with her protagonists is not only that they are immigrants but what makes the condition much worse is their simultaneous fight for the rights as a woman first and then as an individual. Therefore, being a representative writer of the silent miseries of immigrant women, she tries to expose the struggles of identity of those who are trapped within the nuances of two binary cultures, i.e. traditional Indian and contemporary American way of life. Here my focus is on her novel, *Desirable Daughters*, where she tries to unveil the quest for the self definition and self identity of modern educated women being caught in-between tradition and modernity.

II. DISCUSSION

“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” (Mukherjee 12) - this is how the novel *Desirable Daughters* begins. The opening lines

form an epigraph, originally a Sanskrit verse adopted by Octavio Paz that provides an insight into the theme of the novel which is an immigrant’s quest for identity and authenticity to oneself. The notion of going nowhere yet somewhere and having to choose among multiple paths contributes to the sense of contradiction that epitomizes the diasporic consciousness.

On the surface level it is a story of three sisters- Padma, Parvati and Tara who grew up in Kolkata but later moved to America. Although they are siblings but have different characteristics as it is revealed in the lines- “sisters three are we..... as like as blossoms on a tree. But we are not” (Mukherjee 21). So, through the entire novel their difference in quality is prevailed as all of them maintain distinctive individuality in their attitude, approach to life and adaptation of new identity in a modern society. They are a blend of traditional and modern outlook. In an alien society while Tara undertakes her root searching mission as an attempt to come to terms with her fragmented and at times confused notion of self; Padma on the other hand handles her life affairs on her own terms, She is an embodiment of hyphenated immigrant while Parvati, the middle sister, with an American education and American trained husband, lives the life of a privileged rich wife in India. She symbolizes the traditional life of an Indian woman with a Western orientation. Hence, drawing thematic parallel with Spivak’s phenomenal article, *Three women’s texts and a Critique of imperialism*, Mukherjee has written three different texts in the novel that unfold and also entangle the politics of diasporic consciousness of three women. Though the three sisters had different opportunities to assimilate America with their Indianness, each sister’s reactions to the confrontation are distinct because “the identity of diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given...as such, all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even though they are implicated in the construction of a common we” (Brah 244).

Apparently, a saga of three sisters, the plot of the novel is related through the character of Tara Chatterjee, the youngest among the three, who is also the namesake of her great- grand mother, Tara Lata, the Tree Bride, an ancestor whose life history becomes a focal point of Tara Chatterjee’s family chronicle and with whom Tara relates her own identity after her divorce. In San Francisco she engrossed herself in a non-familial life as her marriage to a multimillionaire, Silicon valley entrepreneur husband, Bish is ended. Bish’s preoccupation with his software leaves Tara bereft in the new world and after living up to the instilled values of Patriarchal Bengali society which considers husband as God and his goodness as prime, she ultimately breaks all shackles of tradition and walks out of wedlock with her son Rabi, choosing a live in relationship with a Hungarian Buddhist retrofitter, and doing volunteer work in a pre-school in San Francisco- all for self-

fulfillment, for an individual identity. Therefore initially she has chosen a complete assimilation with the host culture as a way of survival in the foreign land. In fact, this is the lifestyle of hundred of immigrants living in the United States. So what is new about Tara? What makes her unique? What makes her identity so complex? However, a close analysis of the plot makes us aware that though Tara creates a new identity of a modern American woman to face every new situation, but still her former identity of a traditional Bengali Indian woman is never erased. As an immigrant she “straddle two cultures... fall between two stools and suffer triple disruption” (Rushdie 15).

Like many Indian immigrant women in their American status Tara has her frantic effort to seek, organize and affirm her identity. She values her traditional upbringing but takes pride in moving forward in her life. But the sudden appearance of a stranger, Chris Dey, bearing a letter of introduction from Ron Dey, claiming himself as the illicit child of her older sister, Padma drags Tara back into the world of nostalgia making her realize- “in such darkness perspective disappears. It is a two dimensional world, impossible to penetrate” (Mukherjee 3). As a diasporic subject she is caught in cross cultural complication and treads on a thin line of isolation and oneness.

Tara is always portrayed by the author as a character vacillating between the culture of homeland and host society. On one hand, she aspires to step into the public realm coming out from the domestic sphere seeking for individual identity like the American women. Her inner self has driven her to recreate ‘home’ in this unknown land as she decides to end her marriage with Bish. Unlike her namesake Tara Lata who became a widow by the foul mechanization of fate, Tara leaves her husband by choice in a self redemptive and assertive role of a woman of the global era. Swerving away from the tradition she ends up becoming a fun loving woman who is ‘ethnically ambiguous’ and finds comforting charm in the arms of a Buddhist retrofitter. To her love is no longer a matter ‘indistinguishable from duty and obedience’. But such Western excesses of untrammelled fun and glitziness of the exotic perturbs her inner self as she realizes- “I wasn’t, perhaps I’ll never be, a modern woman...” (Mukherjee 20). The fervent attempt to be articulated like the American wives in the American environment, opposes her private self where she is the victim of aloofness and isolation being so far away from the homeland where “there was no rebellion, no seeking after individual identity” (Mukherjee 20).

Tara mainly suffered in her homeland because of her gender issues. Her gender identity is suppressed in the Indian society where 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. Tara, being a part of this society tried every possible way to make herself desirable. In order to please her father

she marries a man whom she “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” (Mukherjee 26). So, her marriage is no more than a bargain according to the rules of her father. Even after her marriage to Bish, in America, Tara leads the same life i.e. ‘serving Pakoras and freshening drink’, as she would lead back in India.

Therefore, she is badly entangled within the rules of patriarchy. Being fed up with the Indian tradition where women are treated as objects; Tara challenges the traditional value of Indian family of considering husband as god and his goodness as prime concern of a woman’s life. Her love for Bish was a part of gender identity in India, but now she has to come to terms with her new gender identity in an alien land. In order to assert her identity as an independent woman, Tara decides to resist or transgress the so called Indian marriage institution. Defying the patriarchal system she decides to leave Bish after a decade of marriage- “when I left Bish (let us clear on this) after a decade of marriage, it was because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled” (Mukherjee 82). She is well aware about the fact that people will view her with disgrace as she is a divorcee – “so many eyes were watching, so many precautions were taken, and so much of value was at stake.....any breath of scandal was unthinkable” (Mukherjee 32), but her craving to create an individual identity is such that all these thoughts matter little to her. So, divorce is an example of how she defies the notion of true womanhood. Therefore, Tara’s decision to get a divorce marks her journey to develop an autonomous independent identity away from the bound tradition of India.

It is also visible that in order to find an identity in the social field of America, Tara has escaped the sexual taboos imposed on Indian women, specifically the stereotypical prejudice against marriage and live in relationship as- “Indians widespread belief that sexual freedom was a hallmark of American society placed on guard with Americans, as it did with their own U.S. reared children, particularly their daughters” (Khandelwal 119). So, we can say that her utter frank treatment of sex is part of her deliberate attempt to be molded by the American culture where privacy is exposed to the public. She hankers after freedom like the American wives but in the diasporic public sphere Tara’s estimation as ‘public commodity’ treated by diasporic male folk has made her feel a sense of confinement rather than the sense of liberality. Even after separation from Bish, Tara’s sexual relationship with men like Pramod Sengupta, Mahesh Trivedi and Ranjit Shah have established their power even in controlling Tara’s body: “ your life is already shattered, they said, what more damage can this do?” (Mukherjee 189). Women are subjected to men by nature even in the structure of power politics of sexual relationship. Men exercise

power in multifarious ways of personal life to control women as Kate Millett thinks 'sexual politics' and 'sexual dominion' provides the most fundamental concept of power. Women specially women bodies embody as subject and object to men. Hence, diasporic space restricts her sense of freedom of controlling her body and establishing an independent identity.

While writing about the two invariables of the transnational conditions- exile and homeland, Mukherjee in her novels captures the temporal and spatial dynamics of immigrant sensibility lost in the space between home and location. Tara though she has attained modernity in America, is not free from her community. In fact, she exposes the loss of spiritual values in the materialistic glamour of the west. While concerning about her son-Rabi's education, she favours the typical Bengali tradition as the concept of American education was all illusion to her- "America made children soft in the brain as well as the body; it weakened the moral fiber. They grew up without respect for family and tradition" (Mukherjee 154). In spite of her eagerness to escape the margins of her community and native culture, she remains constrained inside it. The estranging consciousness of relocation is haunted by some sense of loss, an urge to reclaim or to look back at the transgressive precinct of past.

It is believed that diasporic experiences and double identification constitute hybrid forms of identity. Such forms of identity differ from the essential notion of national and ethnic identity. It also explores multiple belongings that enable people to inhabit more than one space at the same time. Under such condition in the absence of a dominant code, culture is belonging an individualistic enterprise, in which people create their own super structure and super culture, becoming in a way their own 'cultural programmers'. Tara is definitely a fictional rendering of such cultural hybridity. Tara's assertion that she is both, being simultaneously an Indian and an American, helps her gaining the same 'third space of enunciation'. As she says-

"The rhetoric of modern San Francisco makes me invisible. I am not 'Asian'..... I am all things..... Yet I am still too timid to feed my Ballygunge Park Road identity in to the kitchen carburetor. That dusty identity is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case... 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 leaning; worse I don't want to belong" (Mukherjee 9).

So, her Americanization remains elusive, despite all her attempts at assimilation. Towards the end of the novel she realizes that there is no simplistic answer to her quest. Tara's predicament as a diasporic subject is problematic as it is difficult to frame her character in Mukherjee's celebratory 'Americanism'. Tara, after multiple fragmentations and displacements seems to decline Mukherjee's fascinating 'Americanism'; instead her character takes the route to

the root, in the shrine of Indianness and Tara Lata's mystical world. Through her critical reconstruction of the Tree-Bride's history, Tara is able to arrive at an awareness of her identity as a construct that is largely shaped by her consciousness. Tara arrives at the realizations 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 descendent must forge her own path towards self-assertion. So, the journey of identity that starts in America ultimately ends in India. Finally there is a journey from acculturation to self-actualization as Tara returns to her father's house for succor.

Apart from Tara, the other two sisters Padma and Parvati are also devoid of accessing cultural space encumbered by the dominant patriarchal codes and alien cultural clash. As a daughter of Conservative Bengali Brahmin family, Padma has been barred to be involved with any kind of theatre or cinematic world by her orthodox father. But later after moving to New York, she has ventilated her voice by entering into the cultural arena of theatre and soap opera in New York and New Jersey. Beyond the geographical territory of India, Padma is able to find an identity in the cultural sphere in foreigner's territory. Padma's potentiality in finding 'space' has made her prominent in the cultural domain. As a 'multiculturalist performance artist' Padma possesses the dominant power over cultural space. The movement of Padma from homeland (Kolkata) assumed to be the domestic sphere to the diasporic public realm (foreign land) has given her an opportunity of gaining freedom and identity in public space of soap opera. She emblemizes potential personality in the socio-cultural-economic space. In fact, in the diasporic public sphere, Padma's social status is not assumed to the diasporic male folk. Her dominance in the cultural space has not made herself subservient to her husband, Harish Mehta. Hence her recreating identity in social space is as secure as in the cultural space. The projection of paradigmatic shift of power is visible between Padma's reconstructions of identity in public spaces of soap opera as well in her marital relationship. While Padma is busy in her professional life, her husband Harish Mehta, a Punjabi businessman is engaged with the household work of private sphere rather than being employed and focused in the public arena. This is the reversal of identity, a peripetic change that dramatizes the private and public sphere of genders. Here power is shifted from male to female section of the society.

However, Padma's quest for creating 'space' in the public domains of culture is pursued by her flexible identity which shows her dual loyalties to the USA and Indian culture simultaneously. The diasporic self fashioning has encouraged her to salvage her Indianness with retribution, adopting the discourse of authenticity to defend her identity. Her career as an Indian American performer also dictates that she foregrounds her

ethnicity, so as to appear more authentic to her audience. Her ways of survival is quite different from her sister's notions of identity. While Tara had become more bohemian in her living in the upper height area of San Francisco, Padma clings on her Indian citizenship tenaciously and tries to remain true to her Indianness. She becomes a type of immigrant who becomes more Indian in abroad. However, Padma leads a fake Indian life in America. On the outside, she maintains the appearance of a perfect Indian life in terms of clothes, home... etc. but in reality she transgresses Indian tradition. For example, she accuses Tara of bringing shame to the family because of her divorce, while she herself does the same thing through her illicit relationships with homosexual men. This makes Padma a hypocrite as she doesn't practice what she preaches. In other words, Padma is the embodiment of a hyphenated identity and her way of survival is 'hyphenation' i.e. existing between two cultures but it is equally true that while 'Sitting at hyphen provides a marvelous view, it provides no direction.... The hyphen only supports, but doesn't connect' (Trivedi & Mukherjee 196).

The middle sister Parvati, with an American education, married an American trained Indian man and lived a life of privileged rich wife in India. She symbolizes the traditional life of an Indian woman with western orientation. She is the lucky one among the three sisters as she got the opportunity of marrying the man of her choice. But this is Parvati's only stab at rebellion. For the most part she toes a 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" (Mukherjee 105). So for her the way of survival is ultimate negation with the host culture.

III. CONCLUSION

So, it is visible that all women in the novel are perennially involved in a quest for identity and survival in all aspects of their live. 'Desirable Daughters' as the title suggests, are one kind of daughter, which parents would be proud of and for whom every parent would

crave. The names of three sisters i.e. Tara, Padma, Parvati are the symbolic names of Shakti (Goddess of Hindu). Although they don't follow the same ethical values but have the grit to carve a niche for them. The diasporic characters with their experience and exposure to the West, are suffering to find out their lost identity, an identity that changes constantly when cultural connections are ambiguous, resulting in creation of multiple selves. The efforts of maintaining both identities- partly Indian, partly American- make the characters hybrid of a new culture that again poses the question of their real identity. Throughout the course of the novel each of the three sisters, experience alienation, cultural inanity and the social displacement but at the end are able to find survival following their own ways. So, all the three are desirable in their own terms.

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