

Race, Multiculturalism and Immigrant Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

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Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*

The cerebral tourism of *Desirable Daughters* conducts us frequently from India to the USA and vice-versa to connect the cultural, social, economical and religious life of remote nations. Every community has its own distinctive features. Nothing is equal. Discrepancy is everywhere. Life is full of opposites, knottinesses and thralldom. Freud remarks “the communities suffer the narcissism of small differences.” (Mukherjee, *Desirable* 6). In India the major racial identities are reflected in the Hindus and the Muslims. India is a country of racial conflict, rigid caste-system and superstition.

The story of *Desirable Daughters* commences with the marriage ceremony of tree bride Tara Lata in the year 1879. It is the time of British colonization and Bengal as the seat of British power and Kolkata is capital that is stout both culturally and economically. The city is equipped with Britishers' loving and luxurious facilities. About Bengalis the novel exposes that—

The Hindu Bengalis were the first Indians to master the English language and to learn their master's ways, the first to flatter him by emulation and the first to earn his distrust by unbidden demonstrations of wit and industry. (Mukherjee, *Desirable* 6).

In *Desirable Daughters* Jai Krishna Gangooly, a man with fully Hindu consciousness, the father of Tree Bride Tara Lata, is by *metier* an advocate. He in quest of “an uncorrupted, un-British, un-Muslim” (Mukherjee, *Desirable* 9) place moves from cosmopolitan Dacca (now Dhaka) to a small village Mishtigunj. He does so to purge his life. He regrets “the lack of a rigorous Brahminical upbringing.” (Mukherjee, *Desirable* 9). During the day he plays a role of an English advocate and in the night chants the Sanskrit *shlokas*. Jai Krishna, the defender of the ancient Hindu practices, the caste consciousness; astrology; rituals and giving dowry, does not follow the ideas of beef-eaters, gin drinkers and fully westernized men of the Bengali society Sir Keshub Mitter and Dr. Ashim Lal Roy. He considers them the defiler of the community. He ties his two unripe daughters with the wedlock noose at the innocent age of barely seven and nine and now going to push his favourite daughter Tara Lata in the same. Despite being a lawyer and knowing that child-marriage is the symbol of illiteracy, mindlessness and inhumanity. A bite inflicted by a venomous snake to groom closes the doors of ignorance and superstition for Jai Krishna. And seeing the growing greed of the dead groom's family at the very moment of severest affliction, he moves towards the progressive ideas of his friends and colleagues—Keshub Mitter and Dr Ashim Lal Roy. Jai Krishna apologises for having gone transiently to sentimentalize Hinduism enthusiastically and decides to remain adhere to the law against the child-marriage.

It is indeed an ironical matter of gender and racial discrimination that “a woman could attain *nirvana* only through worship of a husband” and “a Brahmin was permitted as many

wives as he could support.” And it was proclaimed as their ‘noblesse oblige’. In the fourth chapter and *Skloka* number thirteen of *Bhagavad Gita* Lord Krishna preaches Arjuna that “the four divisions of society (the wise– Brahmin, the soldier–Kshatriya, the merchant–Vaishya and the labourer– Shudra) are created by Me according to natural distribution of qualities and instincts.” (Vyas, *Gita* 42). But in India the concept has been interpreted in the wrong way and betrays most of the people. Those who are born in Brahmin family are considered as the uppermost in the social strata even if they are simpleton, illiterate and have no attribute to belong the claimed category. They form rules and restrictions that allow them to fly and cease others to be pedestrian. They confine others (Khatryia, Vaishya and Shudra) psychologically in the name of God and religion.

In *Desirable Daughters* Western-minded family has been severely vituperated by the conventional and typical Indian mindset men. One of them condemns “You fancy city men, you have no respect for Hindu tradition” again someone says “You westernized types think you are stronger than our deities.” (Mukherjee, *Desirable* 12-13). The marriage party people heap reproaches blaming daughter side that they have omitted some rite and goddesses have not been sufficiently appeased especially the goddess *Manasha*– the cobra deity of East Bengal– who causes a snakebite to the groom.

Tara Bhattacharjee the protagonist and narrator of the novel with ethnically ambiguous identity leads a live-in relationship with a retrofitter Hungarian Buddhist Andy leaving her affluent, technically-driven and fifteen-hours working husband Bish. The ditching of Andy to Tara is nothing but a misunderstanding due to an ethnic gap. He is of opinion that she has deceived and deserted her husband and may do him. He thinks that she is drifting towards Sergeant Jack Sidhu whom she had gone to file a report to. He is unable to read the troubled and frightened mind of Tara generated by the gate-crashing charlatan Chris.

Padma the big sister of Tara falls in love with a Christian Ronald Dey. Physically modern but mentally, up to considerable extent, traditional family of Padma does not allow her to marry. “Friendship yes; marriage never” is the motto if the groom does not belong to the same community and caste. The reason is “Indian tradition forbade inter-caste, inter-language, inter-ethnic marriage. Bengali tradition discouraged even emigration; to remove oneself from Bengal was to “pollute” true culture.” (Mukherjee, “Beyond Multiculturalism” 30).

Life in India is webbed with lots of duties– social, political, economical, religious and personal. Man is nothing but a puppet in the hands of relationships. The personal world is lost in the fathomless realm of customary world. The glimpse of complex life reflects in Tara’s words: “When I speak of this [birthplace. *desh* and home] to my American friends– the iron-clad identifiers of region, language, caste, and subcaste– they call me “overdetermined” and of course they are right. When I tell them they should be thankful for their identity crises and feelings of alienation.” (Mukherjee, *Desirable* 33).

C. L. Chua in his distinguished article on V. S Naipaul and Bharati Mukherjee writes—

Mukherjee evinces a somewhat more positive view than Naipaul of immigrant life in the United States, glimpsing occasionally the redeeming possibilities of love and the self-affirming opportunities for the pursuit of happiness—though neither love nor happiness is ever obtained without pain or without a price. More often, however, the American Dream is found to be meretricious, easily becoming a nightmare of violence, prejudice, and

exploitation; sometimes the dreamer discovers that in dreams begin responsibilities of self-defining of which he or she is incapable. (60).

Tara Bhattacharjee is the character who tries to define herself on several grounds but finds lacking at every point whether she is in India or in the USA. She perpetually fails to understand herself and in quest of happiness she adjoins herself with a Buddhist but this joy too does not last long. She then returns on the way of reconciliation with Bish after bombing at her residence. But feeling herself ashamed, she takes off for India with her son leaving her bed-ridden saviour unattended.

I cannot help discussing a seminal and relevant anecdote entitled “Jassem is now Johnny” that I got through email and can also be accessed at the family forum www.hulchul.net. It is all about race, ethnicity and immigrant identity and tug-of-war between two cultures that leads a physical and mental harassment of an innocent child. One more thing is considerable that America, the country of immigrants, wants to guide and modify the immigrants in accordance with her own way. Now go through the anecdote —

Jassem, an Arab child, entered his classroom on the first day of school in Ohio.

“What is your name?” – asked the teacher.

“Jassem”. – answered the kid.

“You are in America now. From now on your name will be Johnny,” –replied the teacher.

In the evening, Jassem returned home. "How was your day, Jassem?" – asked his mother.

“My name is not Jassem. I’m in America and now my name is Johnny.”

“Ah, are you ashamed of your name, are you trying to dishonor your parents, your heritage? Shame on you!” – and she beat him.

Then she called his father and he too beat him.

The next day Jassem returned to school.

When the teacher saw him with all the bruises she asked, “What happened to you little Johnny?”

“Well ma'am, four hours after I becoming an American, I was attacked by two Arabs at home.”

The boy feels a sort of oscillation between two cultures, religions, races and worlds that definitely will pave the way for his identity crisis as is the case with Jai Krishna. The problem with immigrant is if he strictly follows his native culture, he will be scoffed by the host countrymen and appreciated by the only rigid compatriot and if pursues immigrant culture he becomes a despicable creature in the eyes of austere fellow countrymen.

Chris, the intruder of iron-gated home of Tara, claims to be her long lost nephew. Tara’s Brahmnical rage finds lodgement on her tongue—“how dare you call us your *mashi*, your maternal aunts, how dare you go to my sister or come to me, how dare you an imposter in laughable clothes demand anything of us how dare you invade our homes with your sinister lies about being a part of our family.” (Mukherjee, *Desirable* 35). Rabi, the son of Tara could not help saying “*Don’t be a Brahmin, Ma.*” This sort and sententious sentence shatters her caste-bewared, conventional Indian attitude and later her “blind vanity” and *amour propre* of belonging to a Brahmin family get a lethal blow when she comes to know that Chris is really a manifestation of love affair between her di Padma and Ronald Dey.

Modus operandi and *modus vivendi* always find alteration in accordance with time, space and atmosphere. It differs from one race and ethnic to others. To identify Chris whether he is genuine or charlatan Tara calculates his behaviour of cigarette smoking through ethnic

measurement “No middle-class Bengali man would smoke in front of his elders. Even Parvati’s husband in his chain-smoking days didn’t dare light up in front of our parents.” (Mukherjee, *Desirable* 38).

It is rightly complained that in newly stepped world “people become so enamoured of what they see that they lose their souls. It is no exaggeration to say they barter even their souls for whatever trinkets Western society dangles in front of them.... They forget their country, their manners, their family, their obligation; they don’t want to return home, because they don’t feel good at home.” (Markandaya, *Bombay Tiger* 5). But the reason is they have to keep pace with the society in which they are physically present and have to acclimate themselves unfamiliar surroundings. Since the cultures and societies have discrepancy, so they do not want to be a laughing stock by going through the behind left cultures. Inwardly they oscillate between the two worlds. At home they are recognised as white rat whereas in abroad they are considered narrow-minded Eastern even if their minds spark postmodern and global attitudes.

The greatest contend in life is the connection between our interior world and the society in which we are born. Violence is viewed as the basis of our existence at two degrees; the violence in the stamped down instinct and the violence which our culture practices against one another.

According to Bharati Mukherjee –“Multiculturalism emphasises the differences between racial heritages. This emphasis on the differences has too often led to the dehumanization of the different. And dehumanization leads to discrimination. And discrimination can ultimately lead to genocide.” (“Beyond Multiculturalism” 33)

To be blunt, the identity whether it is racial, ethnic or immigrant will continue as long as the world is fragmented into countries, races, religions, languages and so on. Unless and until the integrity prevails effacing the existing fragmentations as previously mentioned and establishes one world, one country, one religion, one language, one law, one colour and especially one mind, the people will continuous be the prey of such sorts of identity crises. And the ultimate truth is that such a Utopian integrity is alien to the Earth and possibly be in the future too.

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