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Gender Biases and Resistance in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters***Mrs. Purnima Gupta**Asst. Prof. in English
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The contemporary time is the most suitable time for the full fledged development of the marginalized sections of the society such as woman and the scheduled class. Woman has been at the bottom of social hierarchy in Indian patriarchal set up for a long time; She has been considered as a powerless and weak creature. But, now the changing scenario has changed her roles and the emerging class of New Woman has questioned her traditional roles and aspires to go beyond the forbidden territory. The present paper analyses the challenges and future prospects for the New Woman Tara in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*.

Bharati Mukherjee is a Third World Feminist writer whose preoccupation is to deal with the problems and issues related with the South Asian Women particularly India. Like her contemporary feminist writers she upholds the cause of women, but she differs from them because her basic concern is to delineate the problems of cross cultural conflicts faced by Indian immigrants particularly women. Her female characters suffer from double colonization once by patriarchy and second by expatriation. Being herself an immigrant woman she has been pre occupied with women and their problems of adjustment in America and Canada. Her novels and short stories *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Tree Bride* (2004), *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) - are centred on female protagonists who are none but the autobiographical projections of her own self. Born in Indian society, she has been a direct witness to the restrictions and atrocities inflicted upon women in Indian patriarchy. She was well aware of limited future prospect for Indian women as they are governed by Indian mythological values. In such a background, she could realize the problems and dilemma for the emerging class of new woman who is decked with western education and whose conscience is simultaneously formed and nourished by conservative norms and values. Dr N. D. R Chandra writes:

"Like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya (Suraiya), Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Pravar Jhabwalla and Githa Hariharan Mukherjee exposes many facets of feminism, encompassing agitation for equal opportunity, sexual autonomy and right to self determination."¹ We find the same in the novel *Desirable Daughters* where the heroine Tara ventures to widen her horizons in matters of marriage, love and sex; redefines her roles as wife and mother.

The title of the novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) is significant and ironical. It suggests that daughters are the object of family prestige, so their behaviour should be desirable, that is to say, in tune with the norms laid by the society and not deviant. Only such daughters who do not cross the 'Laxman rekha' of etiquettes would be liked and appreciated but in the novel two daughters including the protagonist cross the borders. The three daughters of Bhattacharjee family namely Padma, Parvati and Tara are desirable in their girlhood in the sense that they fulfil the

requirements of daughterhood- beauty, intelligence, politeness ,obedience – and they remain confined within four walls for the sake of family status and respect. “Our father could not let either of my sisters out on the street, our car was equipped with window shades.”(Desirable Daughters,p.29) Tara reports about her early life in Calcutta, “Our bodies changed, but our behaviour never did. Rebellion sounded like a lot of fun....My life was one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage.”(Desirable Daughters.p.27-28)

Mukherjee depicts the atrocities inflicted on ‘gendered subaltern’ ,that is, women in the forms of child marriage, imposed arranged marriage, and limited prospects of career for talented girls like Padma and Tara in the novel. Bharati Mukherjee seems to generalize the pitiable plight of women when she comments about the Tree Bride in the first chapter of the novel: “A Bengali girl’s happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrows of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her.”(Desirable.Daughters.p.4).The image used for marriage indicates the oppressive confined life.

The novelist exposes her disapproval of child marriage and consequent widowhood through intervention of the story of Tree Bride TaraLata. The story of TaraLata who is cursed and disgraced for the death of her would- be husband and ultimately married to a tree symbolically brings out the backwardness of conservative society of India. It is totally inhuman on the part of society to deprive a girl of her inborn right to survive and fulfil her needs. The exploitation of women in the name of religion and social prestige is denounced by the novelist. Mukherjee writes about the girl in these words: “The poor child had no idea that already she had been transferred from envied bride...into the second worst-thing in her society... the most cursed state....”(Desirable Daughters p.12).The Tree Bride is symbol of self- sacrifice. The story serves as antithesis to the life of Tara, the heroine who transgresses the boundaries laid for her.At one place, Tara says that the Tree Bride has become the"model of selfless saintliness" while "My story was different, perhaps an inversion."(Desirable Daughters.p.280).This statement consolidates Padma's address to Tara as American, self-engrossed being. The novelist shows the contrast between the traditional woman and the modern woman; one lives for the society and sacrifices her life while the other lives a selish life. The Tree Bride also serves as a symbol to celebrate the liberation and independence of woman from the male domination and male support because the Tree Bride proves that a woman need not be safeguarded and supported by man; she can live even without man.

Through this novel the novelist depicts the curses of patriarchy and different forms of exploitation upon women. The novelist depicts marriage as the medium of exploitation rather than a desirable heavenly bliss. In Indian patriarchy, marriages are imposed on girls. Girls are not allowed to make love or marry a man of their choice especially of other caste. This issue is raised in case of Padma who establishes liaison with Ronald Dey, but could not marry him. “...any violation of the codes, any breath of scandal, was unthinkable.”(Desirable Daughters p.32) 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 p.26)

According to the feminist Mukherjee, it is unjustified to “surrender...to the whims of fate and the manipulation of the marital marketplace...What do they know of the needs of modern woman?”(Desirable Daughters p.27)Here the novelists advocates for freedom to choose one's life partner and cautions us against the disasters caused by imposed marriages. We perceive irony in the failure of Tara's arranged marriage with Bish and success of love marriage of Parvati with Auro. The issue of imposed marriage upon girls is also raised in Bharati Mukherjee's other novel Wife in which the protagonist Dimple gets neurotic on shattering the dreams and illusions of married life and aborts her baby and kills her husband.

Tara faces the enigma of modern women after her settlement in America. She undergoes transformation from a desirable daughter to an advanced American lady. Like the New Woman she is caught in the struggle between tradition and modernity. As a protean heroine she braves the New World to seek her individual identity. She makes adventure in dress, food and fashion. She began to address her husband as Bishu while in India, she could not utter his name. She also enjoys sexual freedom with Andy. She gives divorce to her husband because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled while she knew that divorce was a stigma for woman in Indian society. She wanted to drive and to work, to be economically independent. Husband in Indian conservative society is treated as god, "sheltering tree"², provider and protector, but Tara breaks this myth and chooses another man who suits her temperament and who satisfies her sexual desires. She rejects to be an object of sacrifice, a showpiece and a silent and subservient creature to her husband. She aspires to be loved and respected and does not want only to be provided and protected by her husband as is desired in the case of other women. So she differs from other women. She is the protagonist of the novel because she has the indomitable courage to transcend the boundaries, to take initiations on an unknown path which may lead her to ruin. While her other sisters Padma and Parvati lead a complacent and passive life, adopt a middle path, remain suspicious about their new identity, do not feel the need to widen their horizons and are less assertive, Tara emerges as a powerful figure to meet every adverse situation; to march ahead with all her limitations to an unknown and unfathomed path of realizing her full potential as an independent human being. Padma lives in America, but she clings to Indian ways, friends, clothes and food. Padma calls Tara "American" meaning self engrossed. She reminds Tara to follow the models of Sita and Savitri "...things are never perfect in marriage, a woman must be prepared to accept less than perfection in this lifetime-and to model herself on Sita, Savitri and Behula, the virtuous wives of Hindu myths."(Desirable Daughters p.134), 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.

In spite of moving towards complete freedom from traditional roles, Tara can not be separated from her roots. She nurtures Indian family norms and feels isolated and incomplete after being divorced. Presence of Bish gives her inner solace which she lacks in Andy's company. She feels emptiness after separation from Bish because in her mind Bish is still her husband, 'the sheltering tree'. The need for a husband in form of Bish shows that it is not easy for an Indian woman to be completely free from 'dependence syndrome'. She can also not avoid her

motherly duties towards Rabi ,her son. Like *Virmati of Difficult Daughters* Tara, too, is unable to realize complete emancipation.

The novel is all about the psychological journey of the protagonist Tara from America to her cultural roots ,that is, India. We visualize America and India from her perspective. The most avoided topic ,that is, sex and Tara's desire for the size of organ and sexual experience with Andy, her lover and Bish have been frankly expressed. The primary issues discussed in the novel are marriage, love, sex, dowery and woman subjugation.

The three Bengali sisters represent the three different aspects of female experiences. Parvati lives a complacent confined domestic life with her husband Auro ,while Tara lives an ultramodern free life as a divorcee where she is provided with every opportunity to enjoy progress and liberty. Both the sisters exist on two extremes whereas Padma seeks a fine balance between the two; she lives an independent life with her husband Harish Mehta and does not altogether discards her cultural values. Through the three female characters the novelist provides the three choices for an Indian woman to follow. Padma and Parvati stick to the safer zones, but Tara moves to risky and challenging role of life, so she is given more importance than other two sisters.

Bharati Mukherjee's heroines are bold and assertive ; they have the strong potentiality for adaptability; they live in the firm ground of reality and accept the bitter truth of their life. Prof Anita Myles opines the same when she writes that Bharati's heroines endure hardships stoically and "emerge stronger providing sustenance and equilibrium to the entire community."³ In *Desirable Daughters*, all the three sisters ,Padma Parvati and Tara, break with the tradition and clichéd roles in one way or the other to live life in their own way. They try to adjust with the changed scenario.

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