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Ethnic Transformation: Tara's Forever Revolving Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

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Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* is the celebration of a forever-evolving identity, one that is constantly moving as quickly as cultural connections are lost and found in the diasporic experience, resulting in the creation of selves that are endless in their possibilities and uncertain in their futures. The push and pull of two opposing cultures among diasporic South Asian women allows for the possibility of possessing modified aspects of both cultures at same time. Identity is not so much the act of choosing between two cultures, but rather it is having the power to redefine the terms of cultural practices and customs to fit one's own experience.

The novel *Desirable Daughters* presents cultural clashes between east and west, specifically Calcutta and San Francisco. The narrator, Tara Bhattacharjee, the youngest of three "desirable daughters", was born into an upper-caste Hindu Bengali family. She had a proper "English" education in a private Catholic school in Calcutta and was married, by arrangement, at the age of 19 to Bish Chatterjee, "the poster boy of Indian entrepreneurship." The couple immigrated to the U.S. where Bish graduated from Stanford and went on to develop a brilliant bandwidth concept which revolutionized the computer world. He is worth millions, currently presiding over a huge Microsoft-like corporation.

Tara, who had embraced the freedom of American life, begins to feel a lack of independence due to her Hindu husband's notions that a woman should not work, etc. The couple divorce, but stay in touch. Tara has moved to San Francisco with her fully acculturated teenaged son and the two live in a funky house in the heart of the city. She is living a complacent life until one day a sinister boy appears in her home as a guest of her son. He says he is Chris Dey and he is looking for Tara's eldest sister, Padma, who he claims is his mother.

Tara is positively outraged. It is unthinkable that her sister could have become pregnant and had a child. She suspects the boy of trying to set up a scam of some sort and is immediately on the alert. Both her son and her current lover sensibly ask why she doesn't simply call her sister and discuss the accusation. This is something, however, that women of their background would never do. Unpleasant business, especially family business, is swept under the rug and considered a forbidden topic of conversation. Still, as Chris becomes more insistent, and as Tara thinks more about it, she feels obliged to report the matter to the police and do some investigating of her own. The Indian officer assigned to her informs Tara that there is a rash of gangs in the States from India who prey on Indians with money. She is a very wealthy woman, her son has a huge trust fund, and her husband is the richest Indian in the States. The officer feels her family is a target, perhaps for a kidnapping. Like the earthquake tremors of San Francisco, the evil gangs of India - another part of its culture, like the destroyer side of Shiva - will forever pose a threat. As Mukherjee points out, an American can always feel some sense of security, but everything can be pulled out from under the immigrant - in this case by their own culture, which created caste and class systems: something they, the elite, benefited from while growing up, but which has now come back to haunt them.

As the situation becomes more ominous, Tara is finally forced to call her eldest sister, Padma, who lives in New Jersey and is also very wealthy. Padma is "more Indian" now than she was in Calcutta, wearing saris, socializing with the Indian elite of the area, etc. Tara bluntly states - in American fashion - why she is calling. Padma, of course, is also evasive. Tara then flies to New Jersey to make a personal visit. Padma continues to refuse to acknowledge anything, although she does concede to an "incident" in her past, *but why talk about it?* This interlude is a particularly entertaining one. Padma whisks Tara off for a shopping spree in Jackson Heights, New York's Indian district for the elite. She insists Tara buy some fashionable saris, get her hair done, buy some gold jewellery etc. A big Indian house party follows, in which Tara, dressed in her Indian finery, becomes flirtatious with the men, enjoying her role. While on the east coast, however, she receives some highly disturbing news from the San Francisco detective and the tension mounts, building to a fiery climax.

This is a rich and rewarding novel that speaks volumes of the cultural differences between the Indian and American way of life. Mukherjee gives us a vivid picture of the India of her childhood - a world that no longer exists - and probes the effect of this upbringing on the three sisters. The structure on which the Indian social world is built appears (and is) hypocritical, which may tend to make the two older sisters seem superficial, although they are both fairly complex characters. What it does to Tara is reveal huge contradictions in her outlook (she agrees with her son, for example, that she should call her sisters about Chris Dey, but her Calcutta upbringing renders that approach impossible - at least at first). She's not a jolly character; she's carrying around a huge weight, being pulled in two different directions, although there is some self-knowledge gained at the end. Mukherjee's characters are complicated and a bit darker, but all the more human for that. The novel is a marvelous exploration of first generation Indian-American culture-clash identity, with an intriguing conspiracy theme.

Mukherjee opens the text with a Sanskrit epigraph adapted by Octavio Paz, its symbolism indicative of the ambiguity of the diasporic experience. *"No one behind, no one ahead. The path the ancients cleared has closed. And the other path, easy and wide, goes nowhere. I am alone and find my way."* Mukherjee is setting the novel in the familiar interstitial space of immigration, where time and space lose their linear and geographic meanings. The epigraph suggests a space of liminality, with *"no one behind"* and *"no one ahead,"* and it also portrays identity as a continuous journey rather than a fixed construction. 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.

Tara is the narrator of the story: she is writing the history of her family and herself as it unfolds and in that process, she gains insight into the creation of her own consciousness as it is influenced by the culturally defined consciousnesses of others. *"I have had the time, the motivation, and even the passion to undertake this history. When my friends, my child, or my sisters ask me why, I say I am exploring the making of a consciousness."* In documenting her family's history, Tara is recording the creation of her identity, the influence that past events and culture have on the present construction of consciousness. Rather than leaving her past behind, Tara must delve into it and understand its intricacies in order to understand her.

The structure of Tara's story moves from past to present with such fluidity that it is difficult to distinguish between what has happened and what is happening, 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.

When Tara first arrives in America, she is steeped in Indian culture and exhibits the behavior of the paradigmatic Indian wife, including having had an arranged marriage. She is subservient to her husband and well-versed in domestic duties; such as "serving pakoras and freshening drinks" while Bish and his friends watch "a Sunday football game..." Bish takes great pride in showing his parents "...how well-trained this upper-class.. .girl had become, what a good cook, what an attentive wife and daughter-in-law. What a bright and obedient boy she was raising." 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 to supporting Bish and raising their family, for the importance of fulfilling the domestic responsibilities has been ingrained in her since birth.

Yet as Tara assimilates herself to life in California, she begins to dispense with certain age-old traditions and finds adapting to a Western environment an increasingly easier process. "The 'boy' (they are always 'boys' when fathers choose them for their daughters) who was selected to jumpstart my life, to be worshipped as a god according to scripture was (and is) "Bishwapriya Chattetjee...His American friends call him Bish.. .I, of course, as a good Hindu wife-to-be, could not utter any of his names to his face. But were progressive people; after crossing the dark waters to California I called him Bishu, then Bish..." The crossing of the "dark waters" refers to the *kalipani*, and for Tara it represents the beginning of the transition into her new identity, a more "progressive" and liberated self.

Tara comes to California expecting to fulfill the role of the traditional Indian wife, but instead realizes that she does not desire to play the typical part in the Indian family drama.

"When I left Bish (let us be clear on this) after a decade of marriage, it was because 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? In his Atherton years, as he became better known on the American scene...he also became, at home, more of a traditional Indian." (120)

Tara's frustration at her assimilation and Bish's lack thereof leads her to make the most drastic of personal moves in Indian culture: divorce. Tara's decision to divorce Bish represents a definitive step toward a new consciousness in which the traditions of Indian culture no longer dominate Tara's actions and where the opinions and judgments of others do not pose a constant threat. As Tara becomes more familiar with American culture, she moves from seeing herself as a "good Hindu wife-to-be" to an independent, progressive Californian, and one of the most clear manifestations of this transformation of identity is the manner in which Tara's perception of her sexuality changes over the years. During her first few years of marriage with Bish, Tara and her friends often perused American magazines, intrigued by how different the media's expectations of sexuality were from their own.

Tara views American culture as something distant from her own personal experience; it is an entity that she has been "warned against" for its "selfishness and self- involvement," Thus, American conceptions of sexuality are also distant for Tara, for she simply cannot understand this culture's portrayal of sexuality when she does not believe that she in fact belongs to the culture. Tara is viewing sexuality through the lens of traditional Indian culture, and while female "sexual freedom [is] a hallmark of American society," it nevertheless remains a symbol of disgrace in Indian society.

When Tara leaves Bish, however, she soon learns that her sexuality is an aspect of her identity that she can possess and embrace, but without succumbing to the Indian stereotype of sexually liberal women as shameful. As she is propositioned by many of Bish's old friends, Tara begins to see that Indian males living in America do not have to hide their sexuality, in fact they appear to flaunt it. The unfair distinction between male and female sexuality in Indian culture prompts Tara to leave Atherton to completely escape the patriarchal cultural restraints placed upon her. Tara's view of both Indian culture and American culture is slowly changing, thereby influencing her perception of her sexuality and her coming to view herself as a more sexually liberated woman.

Yet as Tara moves toward this new sexual consciousness, she does not completely escape from the sexual expectations of women in Indian culture, for this culture surrounds her, its views on female sexuality manifesting them through the manner in which women are perceived by those around them. Specifically, Tara is still subject to the traditional cultural perceptions that other men have of her sexuality. One evening at a party amongst many upper class South Asians, an Indian man approaches Tara and attempts to seduce her by characterizing, in his opinion, the sexuality of divorced women. *"You divorced ladies have not yet lost your charm. You have only grown more desirable. Divorced ladies must be oversexed, isn't it? For some ladies, one man is not enough. Always looking for adventure isn't it..." The divorced Indian lady combines every fantasy about the liberated, wicked Western woman with the safety net of basic submissive familiarity.* While Tara is slowly becoming more comfortable and open with her own sexuality, she realizes that she is still vulnerable to assumptions of both exoticism and domesticity in the sexual realm. While she is at this party, surrounded by upper-class male-dominated Indian culture, Tara sees her sexuality as it is perceived by those around her- as the Indian male's "ideal" amalgamation of the stereotypical conceptions of the subservient Eastern woman and the sexually free Western woman.

Tara's perception of her sexuality again changes when she meets and begins to date Andy, whom she describes as her *"balding, red-bearded, former biker, former bad-boy, Hungarian Buddhist contractor/yoga instructor"* live-in boyfriend. With Andy, Tara's sexuality is completely altered, and begins to resemble the sexuality that was portrayed in the American magazines she used to read with her friend Meena.

"When intimacy first struck me as inevitable between Andy and me (long before it occurred to him, he said), I was intrigued...This would be a selfish act, no hundreds of generations looking on in approval. We were exotics to each other, no familiar moves or rituals to fall back on." While Tara used to believe that American expectations of a woman's sexuality were all *"selfishness and self-involvement,"* she herself is now embracing the "selfish act" of beginning an intimate relationship with Andy.

The fear instilled in her by a culture of shame in sexual matters has dissipated as Tara has assimilated to American culture, and since there are *"no hundreds of generations looking on in approval,"* she is now free to behave as she pleases. As she describes this transformation, *"Yesterday, practiced daughter of Calcutta that I was, comfortable within a filtered gaze...One door had closed, another opened."* Tara no longer perceives her sexuality as the blending of Eastern and Western stereotypes as she did before, but rather she and Andy are now simply "exotics to each other," with no cultural expectations or restraints upon them. In describing this new sexual consciousness, Tara clearly delineates the separation between it and the sexual consciousness of Indian culture: *"It's one of those San Francisco things I can't*

begin to explain in India, just like I can't explain my Indian life to the women I know in California." Tara has moved to another stage in the creation of her sexual identity, in which her various self-perceptions do not conflict with one another but rather are replaced by new and different perceptions. Tara has now taken on a new sexual identity, and while she cannot explain the other sexual identities that she has had to others, she nevertheless retains a sense of these cultural identities of her past, but does not voice them, as they are culturally untranslatable.

As Tara continues to assimilate to American culture, her perceptions of her race and ethnicity begin to change as well. Raised in an upper class Bengali Brahmin family, Tara's conception of race was limited to the hierarchical class system of Indian familial lineage, in which she was at the top. *"Any community whose roots were not in Bengal, preferably in the eastern half of Bengal; anything like the Marwari, Parsi or Sindhi community, was seen as alien and money-grubbing, worthy of our disrespect, if not outright contempt."* Tara perceives race as she was brought up to see it -in a manner that makes racial distinctions based on a cultural class system.

Tara's "native conception of race" distinguishes between subcultures of India; it recognizes race as differentiations in class and caste. Thus when Tara comes to America with this specific notion of race, she is shocked to see such distinctions disappear and Indian culture categorized as a singular entity rather than a multiplicity of groups. *"We're a billion people, but divided into so many thousands or millions of classifications that we have trouble behaving as a monolith. Yet each Indian is so densely packed with family that he or she seems to contain hundreds of competing personalities."* Tara's friends do not appear to understand the reasons for the cultural subdivisions, for they only serve to further isolate a minority community that needs unification in order to survive culturally in America. Slowly, Tara comes to understand that the distinctions between Indians she was raised with do not hold the same significance in America as they did in India, and she begins to reject the hierarchical scheme through which she once perceived race. *"When I speak of this to my friends- the iron-clad identifiers of region, language, caste, and subcaste- they call me 'over determined' and of course they are right."* As Tara increasingly incorporates American culture into her life, she recognizes that the characteristics that she was brought up to consider as permanent markers of identity, "region, language, caste, and subcaste," are neither as eternal nor as important as she once believed them to be.

Tara also comes to appreciate the anonymity that comes with the loss of specific sub-ethnic group distinctions. No one can recognize Tara as the wealthy Brahmin girl from good family, but rather she can be apparently whatever she desires to be. *"The rhetoric of modern San Francisco makes me invisible. I am not 'Asian,' which is reserved for what in outdated textbooks used to be called 'Oriental.' I am all things...I thrive on this invisibility. It frees me to make myself over, by the hour..."* Tara finds freedom in the possibility of blending in with her surroundings, of living in a society in which identity is not constructed solely on the basis of last names or skin color. The power to create her own racial consciousness and to be "ethnically ambiguous," appeals to the part of Tara that has constantly struggled with a culture in which categorizations are of utmost social importance. *"When everyone knows your business and every name declares your identity, where no landscape fails to contain a plethora of human figures, even damaged consciousnesses, even loneliness, become privileged commodities."* The freedom to exist outside of a culture in which everything is public knowledge, in which identity is a fixed entity, is appealing to Tara. Such freedom presents the opportunity to feel a certain angst that comes with searching for identity rather

than having that identity already established from birth, it offers Tara the chance to fully explore the "makings of a consciousness" instead of simply accepting her consciousness as given.

Critics of Mukherjee's writing often assert that her characters are simply too "Americanized," that they choose one identity over another as the only solution to the battle of living in between cultures. Rangaswamy is one such critic, claiming, *"The only way for many of Mukherjee's heroines is to discard the past, totally and irrevocably, and embrace total Americanization."* Tara could easily fit into this controversial categorization of Mukherjee's heroine, for she appears to distance herself from all that is Indian, including her past. Also, Mukherjee provides a stark comparison of methods of assimilation through the contrasting character of Didi, who makes Tara seem all the more "Americanized." Didi has essentially transplanted India to America, living as though her Calcutta days never ended when she immigrated. *"In the nearly twenty-five years that [Didi] has been in the United States, she has become more Indian than when she left Calcutta."* Tara does not approve of her sister's lifestyle, and her feelings of condemnation only increase when her sister Parvati accuses her of becoming too American.

In her attempt to preserve her culture, her sister has rejected all that is American, associating only with people of Indian descent, working for an Indian television channel and living in an area highly populated by other South Asians. But for Tara, her sister's behavior is not a symbol of her desire to retain Indian traditions, but rather a craven response to the difficulties of cultural transition. *"[Didi's] clinging to a version of India and to Indian ways and to Indian friends, Indian clothes and food and a 'charming' accent had seemed to me a cowardly way of coping with a new country. Change is corruption; she seemed to be saying, Take what America can give, but don't let it tarnish you in any way."* In juxtaposing Tara and Didi, Mukherjee presents the essential crisis of the assimilation process.

Tara admits that she has somewhat distanced herself from Indian culture: *"...I loved my family and culture but had walked away from the struggle to preserve them. In San Francisco, I barely knew any Indians."* Yet this dissociation does not necessarily imply her rejection of all that is Indian, nor preclude her from claiming Indian identity. Tara still possesses the memories of her family and culture, so much so that they often times overwhelm her. *"As far as I've drifted from the path of piety, or even of family, their names suddenly swell by dozens, the hundreds, filling my heart, brain, memory, soul. ..."* Tara's distance from other Indians and the culture stems not from her denial of her "Indianness" but rather from her desire to not feel alien as well as her fear of living in the past.

The first decade of Tara's marriage was spent adjusting to American culture, for Tara was "sick of feeling alien" in this new environment, tired "of not-belonging, in the midst of such welcoming comfort..." Instead of trying to preserve the India of her past, Tara moved forward toward what she believed was the possibility of change and progression. While her sister recreates the India of her childhood, Tara works to create a world in which she does not have to live in the past. *"I don't want to be a perfectly preserved bug trapped in amber, Didi.. and I don't want to live in a half- India kept on life-support. You think I'm ridiculous, or somehow a disgrace to Indian womankind, a divorcee walking around in my American clothes?"* To live in a world of "Indianness" is to live a life locked in the past, which Tara believes is the downfall of many South Asian diasporic women. When Tara is preparing to begin investigating the secrets of her familial history, Andy cautions her: *"The past is nice, this place is nice. It's nice to visit the past every now and then. Just don't live there."* Tara

takes this advice quite seriously, for she recognizes that living in the past, whether temporally, spatially or both, is dangerous to the development of one's identity.

Yet Tara does not completely discard her former Indian identity, for it remains a part of her consciousness and it always will. She says, *"Yet I'm still too timid to feed my Ballygunge Park Road identity into the kitchen Garburetor. That dusty identity is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case..."* (147) Though Tara's identity is constantly changing and evolving, she does not want to lose the identities she has possessed nor her connection to Indian culture. When Didi brings Tara to Jackson Heights (an area in Queens, New York with a high number of South Asian residents and businesses) to shop for saris and jewelry for a party one evening, Tara is attracted to the "Indianness" of the area, for it appeals to her through its familiarity. *"The attraction of Jackson Heights, for me, has always been people pleasures; a sidewalk full of Indians, every face is Indian, every shop and storefront features Indian jewelry, Indian clothing, Indian travel, Indian food and spices, Indian sweets and restaurants. The smells and the noises are familiar.. it's intoxicating."* The pull that Tara feels toward all that is Indian in Jackson Heights suggests that she has not abandoned her Indian identity, but rather still views it as a part of her.

Tara possesses many identities at one time, yet she seems comfortable with her multiplicity, which allows her the freedom to assimilate while at the same time retaining the aspects of Indian culture that she wishes to preserve. While some critics may view this multiplicity as "Americanization," it is more aptly described as the new form of assimilation for this generation of South Asian diasporic immigrants. Rather than transplanting Indian culture or disposing of it altogether, the current pattern appears to be reinventing the very notion of one's culture as it bears on one's identity. "Amidst this new American scene, Indian women became aware of their own traditions in new ways." American and Indian cultures are both appreciated in different ways in Tara's life, but nevertheless they each hold equal importance for her, as evidenced by her frequent thought, "Maybe I really [am] between two lives." As she develops her identity, Tara describes the sensation as a sort of recreation of the self: *"I felt as though I were lost in a Salman Rushdie novel, a one-firm identity smashed by hammer blows, melted down and reemerging as something wondrous, or grotesque."* Identity is no longer an established set of characteristics given away by family name, ethnicity and gender roles, but rather it can be "smashed," "melted down" and rebuilt, It is fluid and ever changing, subject to the experiences that will forever be molding it into something new.

As Tara delves into the scandalous and secretive history of her family, she also explores the making of her own consciousness, for in the narrative that emerges from her search is also the consciousness that she has created over the years. In essence, Tara's uncovering of her memories and familial history parallels the revelation of her own identity; as she chronicles the story of her family from Ballygunge Road to the streets of Upper Height, she also records the development of her very self from Indian immigrant to assimilated American. Tara began her story with the singular and set identity of the devoted Indian wife and (later) mother, but soon discovered that these roles and a life of such expected order were not the only aspects of her identity. Thus, she moves toward embracing the multiple aspects that comprise who she is, accepting and even celebrating the chaos of multiplicity. Tara muses to herself, *"Out of order, I created chaos. Out of chaos, one... will create something resembling a new American consciousness."* The uncertainty of time, space, culture and identity are representative of Tara's chaotic experience in formulating her identity, but they are also the harbingers of what will become the "new American consciousness," a consciousness comprised of many and with many more to come.

At the end of the novel, Tara finds that the past that she has uncovered is very much a part of her present, a situation that she has always feared. Yet, in keeping with Tara's unorthodox identity, the past that is with her is different from that of her sister Didi. Instead, Tara finds that through her story and her consciousnesses, she has created an inversion of history for she is living her present life through the structure of an older story from the past: "...I'd been writing at night on a rented typewriter, and the story that had begun to emerge was of the Tree-Bride and of the class of Calcutta girls born a century later, both of them witness to dying traditions. Tara Lata Gangooly had turned the tragedy of her husband's death and a lifetime's virginity into a model of selfless saintliness. My story was different, perhaps even an inversion." Tara epitomizes the diasporic immigrant's relationship to culture, for she retains aspects of her tradition but changes them, inverts them to fit into the current cultural climate in which she lives. As Rangaswamy writes, "While struggle, pain, and compromise are an integral part of the immigrant experience, many [South Asian] women do not necessarily see total Americanization or rejection of India as the path to wholeness. They may have accepted America as their home, but their yearning for India and sense of loss is also accepted as an inevitable corollary of immigration. Most of all, these women see that the world of their children is very different from their own. They anticipate challenges they will face or are already facing... [forcing] them to make new choices." The experience of the South Asian diasporic woman is one in which the psyche is always "in between" worlds, where time and space have created a sense of psychological uncertainty. While this state of uncertainty often disorients the individual, making one subject to an indeterminate identity, it also allows her to exist as many, expressing the voices of the multitudes that lie within her, and promising to sound the voices of those selves that have yet to be discovered.

Mukherjee's fictional and non-fictional writing demonstrate a development from an abiding preoccupation with the problems of immigration and the accompanying loss of identity in her earlier work, to an exuberant vision of the possibilities of ethnic transformation and re-incarnation. She oversimplifies and romanticizes the narrative of becoming American, buying into our national myths of self-fashioning, limitless possibility, and rugged individualism. In Alam's words:

She has been able to bring to her first hand experience of exile, expatriation and immigration her considerable narrative skills and a lively imagination to produce memorable and colourful tales of excitement as well as traumas of adjusting to a new world. (147)

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