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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Cultural Demarcations and Its Nexus to the Exploration of Roots in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

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Article History: Submitted-08/01/2018, Revised-13/02/2018, Accepted-16/02/2018, Published-28/02/2018.

Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee, a reputed third world feminist writer focuses her plot based on the conflicts and problems related to South Asian women, particularly, Indian. Bharati herself is torn between two contrast cultures – Indian and American. Her niche lies in depicting the theme of cultural confrontation of women in a foreign land. Born an Indian, she has encountered several restrictions and atrocities inflicted upon women in Indian patriarchy. Bharati describes about her narratives in the *Introduction to Darkness* as “stories of broken identities and discarded languages” (3). Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2002) focuses on the search of her roots by the protagonist. The plot involves the story of three daughters of Motilal Bhattacharjee and their multiple dislocations. The title ‘*Desirable Daughters*’ has to be gauged in an ironical sense, as in Indian culture daughters are considered to be a burden than blessing. *Desirable Daughters*, like Bharati’s other works, deals with the issues of immigration and identity crisis.

Keywords: feminist, conflicts, atrocities, identities, irony, immigration.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2002) focuses on the search of her roots by the protagonist. The plot involves the story of three daughters of Motilal Bhattacharjee and their multiple dislocations. The title ‘*Desirable Daughters*’ has to be deemed in an ironical sense, as in Indian culture, daughters are considered to be a burden than blessing. *Desirable Daughters*, like Bharati’s other works, deals with the issues of immigration and identity crisis. In *Desirable Daughters*, the writer has illustrated her own cultural evolution and its repercussions. In an interview with Alison, she comments:

We (immigrants) have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived when we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, [...] Our lives are remarkable, often heroic [...] although they (fictional immigrant characters) are often hurt or depressed by setbacks in their new lives and occupations, they do not give up. They take risk they wouldn't have taken in their old, comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are re-born. (Carb 654)

The desirable daughters – Padma, Parvati and Tara – demarcates the family ethics and they efface the 'Lakshman Rekha', that is, the boundary line of the Indian culture with their own ways. The novel begins with an alluring phrase: 'Sisters three are we [. . .] as like as blossoms on a tree. But we are not' (21). This phrase acts as a stimulant to convey the message that the three sisters are contradictory in their ideas of living. They present a combination of traditional and modern prospect. The narration encompasses several themes of class, history, and identity changes through reminiscences and direct descriptions. All the three daughters pursue education in elite catholic, Loreto School in Calcutta. The craze for convent education is beautifully illustrated by the writer :

For Hindu girls, entry to an exclusive catholic convent school depended upon exhibiting flair without flash, class without pretension, a society name without notoriety. In return, convent education guaranteed poise, English proficiency, high-level contracts, French language skills and confident survival in whatever future the gods or the communists might dole out .(28)

Tara, the narrator of the novel, takes the readers deep into the intricacies of the New World by emphasizing the theme of rootlessness. The fluidity of her identity testifies not only her own, but also the fluidity of the immigrants. The real quest of identity in Tara's life begins after her marriage with Bishwapriya Chatterjee, a wealthy Indian settled in America. The meaning of his name takes different context in India and America. In India 'Bishwapriya', means a person who is liked by everyone in the world, whereas in America 'Bish' resembles poison. It is interesting to note that Bishwapriya is completely acknowledged by Tara's father to be the "best husband on the market" (26). She values her traditional upbringing, but takes pride towards moving forward in life. Her image of her family values forms a wall of security around her that camouflages the fragile vulnerable self. To quote Maya Manju Sharma: "In her fiction Mukherjee handles western themes and settings as well as characters who are westernized or bicultural. Yet she is forced to admit that the very structure of her imagination is essentially Hindu and essentially moral". (3)

Bish works as an electrical engineer in California. Bish is generous and safeguarding, to whom "love is the residue of providing for parents and family, contributing to good causes and community charities earning professional respect and being recognized for hard work and honesty, love is indistinguishable from status and honors"(27). Tara craves to work, but Bish never allows her. Bish represents the ideal of a traditional Indian husband. His office and his public functions make Tara alienated. She finds her world limited only to her husband and son Rabindra, and beyond that, she ponders that she has no identity in American society. Her marriage with Bish does not affect any trauma until she craves to be an independent American woman. Tara visualizes the transparency of American culture in the magazines and public places:

The magazines encouraged women to talk over their problems, to share their disappointments, to experiment with hair colour, sexual positions, and pointedly meaningless one night strands. We read them with the guilty pleasure as we'd

read movie magazines, in our bedrooms, under the fans, back in India. In America, it seemed to us, every woman was expected to create her own scandal, be the center of her own tangled love nest. (83)

After a while, Tara marches ahead with her divorce and sends Rabi to Bish on holidays and weekends to Amsterdam. The reformation in Tara's identity takes place in Cole valley, San Francisco, where she lives with her son Rabi. She develops live-in relations with Andy, a balding, red-bearded, former biker, former bad-boy. He is a Hungarian Buddhist contractor, Zen retrofitter, Yoga instructor, and a carpenter. The motto of Andy's love attracts her. The writer has subtly given the explanation of love according to the character's demeanor. Tara prefers Andy's definition than Bish's professional definition.

I can't imagine my carpenter, Andy, bringing anything more complicated to it than say 'fun'. Love is having fun with someone, more fun with that person than with anyone else, over a longer haul [. . .] he says, love in my childhood and adolescence was indistinguishable from duty and obedience. Our bodies changed, but our behavior never did. (28)

Tara however enjoys her love-life with Andy because she feels that there, in her quest to find her roots, Tara comes across her ancestry. Tara enjoys her love-life with Andy because she feels that there is something exotic, something that defies the set norms and structures. Tara keeps away from Indian tradition and physically involves with Andy. After her divorce, she acts a claimant of all her legacies, living with her lover, Andy, a Zen master and son, Rabi. She breaks the over-determined notions of identity; culture and homeland. But these facets of her personality do not hinder her strategies of survival in the adopted land. Cultural conflict arises between Indian and Zen philosophies as the writer beautifully displays her flair for Hindu culture in these lines:

For Hindus, the world is constructed of calamities. The stories are wondrous, lurid and beautiful, full of shape-changing, gender bending, grand scale slaughter, polymorphous sexuality. Miss a ritual and a snake will invade your wedding. The gods destroy and remake the world every four billion years. (148)

The contrast is the stories related to Buddhism and Zen philosophies, which are plain and monotonous. "Traveler Po came across the road. [. . .] Farmer Jiang had three beautiful daughters. [. . .] pears from farmer Wu's fields." (149). The writer puts forth that the stories of Chinese and Japanese fail to contemplate the colours of India, but rather it presents cool and alluring drawings and paintings. Hindu stories always rely on the concept of *karma* (goodness without expectation). For Buddhists, "suffering is not the echo of greater terror, but continuation of something no different"(150).

Tara's positioning is different from Padma in the sense, Padma is a hyphenated immigrant. Padma, six years senior to Tara is exquisitely noted for her beauty and talent. Bharati has sketched the upbringing of daughters in Indian context in a lively manner in these lines :

Our father couldn't let either of my sisters out on the street. Our car was equipped with window shades. We had a driver and the driver had a guard. The world

didn't know it yet, but the sight of fifteen year old girl like Padma Bhattacharjee could have destroyed the audience for any Blondie –Blondie bombshell like Brigitte Bardot.(29)

There exists a nexus between Padma and Ronald Dey, brother of her close friend Poppy Dey. Their love effaces after a short while due to the constraints of Hindu society. Padma is fully confident that her love has least probabilities to succeed :

But Ronald Dey was not possible. Daddy had not yet sanctioned someone for Didi to marry. And whenever that time did come, it would not be with a Christian, no matter what his social status and brilliant prospects. Therefore, I must be wrong. Therefore, Ron Dey slipped under the most refined radar system in the world: Hindu Virgin Protection. (32)

When the novel proceeds, Padma marries Harish Mehta and lives in New Jersey. Identity transformation is witnessed in Padma, when she breaks her past romantic life with Ron Dey and leads a traditional Bengali life. Harish is portrayed as a husband who lives in his wife's shadow. Padma, a member of New Jersey cultural elite, emerges as a renowned personality. Her beauty and radiance makes Harish wipe out her past.

Parvati, the second daughter lives in Mumbai with her two sons, Bhupesh and Dinesh. She lives on the fifteenth floor of a luxurious apartment surrounded by skyscrapers. The way of her life is beautifully pictured by Mukherjee:

The rent is twenty-five thousand U.S dollars a month paid into a Dubai account, and a million under the table for key money, plus half a million a year for lease-continuance. Aurobindo's company pays the bill. They consider themselves lucky to have found such a reasonable place before the prices shot up. (50)

Parvati meets Aurobindo in Boston during her course of study and love blooms between them. Bharati in this episode highlights the concepts of religion and caste, which are immersed in Indian society. The writer brings about the complications of love marriage in Indian families. Fortunately, Parvati receives a green signal owing to the fact, that Auro emerges from a Bengali Brahmin roots and from a reason Tollygunge family. Parvati is visualized as a complete Indian in her practices. She serves her husband's relatives as guests for weeks, even months, in her luxurious apartment. In Tara's viewpoint, Parvati's treatment of her relatives and servants seems very funny and inconvenient as she presents herself as modern in her attitude and follows the American way of lifestyle. Her characterization is packed with emotions and even a little deed hurts her a lot. Tara, the protagonist is much associated in terms with Parvati than Padma.

When days pass by, her retrospection leads her to the life of her great-great grandfather, Jai Krishna Gangooly and his three daughters, the youngest daughter Tara Lata, the tree bride and lifetime virgin. Tara Lata, the victim of tradition, transforms herself to freedom fighter from the state of widows. She is a good example of a woman who creates her own identity by following tradition. Tara feels connected to Tara Lata and wishes to know more about her. Tara feels proud of her origin – Bhattacharjee family, an inclusion in Bengali Brahmin. But she also criticizes Indian practices of polygamy, child marriage, dowry system, and virginity. The

main plot connects with the subplot of Tara Lata, the tree bride, which constitutes the beginning pages of the novel. Eccentricities and mysteries hoards in the first few pages bringing forth the marriage of Tara Lata, who is officially engaged with the groom, Satindranath Lahiri, son of Surendranath Lahiri. Bharati like her novel *Jasmine* (1989) spotlights the belief in horoscope and astrology. It is predicted that Tara Lata's life is destined to live shortly due to the malefic effects in her horoscope. At the juncture of marriage, the groom is bitten by a snake and he dies. The writer's cognizance in Hindu mythology and the belief of the people is showcased in these lines:

"The goddess must not have been sufficiently appeased. Someone accused, 'you westernized think you are stronger than our Hindu deities! Admonition swelled into vengeful judgment'" (13).

A special reference is rendered to Manasha, Goddess of snakes, worshipped in Bengal and other parts of North and North-Eastern India, chiefly for the prevention of snake bites and also for fertility and prosperity. The writer also mentions another prominent goddess in Hindu mythology, Shitala, an incarnation of goddess Durga, who is believed to cure poxes, sores and other diseases. Jai Krishna Gangooly, after the groom's death decides to marry his daughter to a tree so that she can overcome the curse of widowhood. Tara Lata, the tree-Bride becomes a family legend. Identity change is evident, when traditional Tara Lata transforms to a tough rebel fighting for Indian independence.

The story in parallel connects with Tara in San Francisco. Tara Lata acts as a guiding light for her independence. Tara, in contrast to the tree bride, suffers from self opposition by demarcating the golden thread of Indian culture. The device of personification is used by Bharati in representing the magnanimous tree as "God of shoondar bon"(16). Identity change is evident, when traditional Tara Lata transforms to a tough rebel fighting for Indian independence. The story in parallel means connects with Tara in San Francisco. Tara Lata acts as a guiding light for her independence. Tara in contrast to the tree bride suffers from self opposition by demarcating the golden thread of Indian culture. Self destruction is seen, when she changes her identity to American by divorcing Bish and living with other men. She discovers life is not utterly framed by destiny, but rather life should be as she lives. Tara Lata holds the tradition whereas Tara breaches the tradition. The epigraph to the novel, a Sanskrit verse adopted by Octavio Paz and translated by Eliot Weinberger, provides an insight on immigrant's quest for identity.

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. (DD 2)

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.

Migration enables Bharati's women to cross the traditional limitations of female identity. The identity of the protagonist is highly fluid, who can adopt and balance Indian traditional life

and westernized American life. Tara faces the enigma of modern women after her settlement in America. She undergoes transformation from a desirable daughter to an independent American woman. Like the New Woman she is caught in the struggle between tradition and modernity. 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.

Tara aspires to construct the life of her ancestor, Tara Lata, and at the same time to reconstruct her own identity. Finally Tara and her son, Rabi, travels to Mistigunj to learn about the identity of Tara Lata, the tree bride. The years of second world war and freedom struggle fills the aura as the slogans of Bandematharam and Bharat Mata ki jai is heard all over. The atrocities of British on Indians are depicted as a visual imagery. Holistically speaking, Bharati has created 'new immigrant literature' in this novel. Her Indianness and Americanization makes her to portray her characters in a quintessential manner. Another kind of interpretation is that, Tara's eldest sister, Padma, is represented in American colour, on the other hand, Parvati is portrayed totally in Indian colour. But the protagonist, Tara always swings between two different cultures, that is, Indian and American. The novel portrays Tara's evolution from a simple wife to divorcee who struggles for her identity in America, as well as tries to trace some link with her Indian roots. *Desirable Daughters* sends out a message that in the adopted land, one's ethnic origin, that very often helps in transcending the traumas and the sense of rejection experienced while navigating the alien world.

Bharati encourages her women to take their own decisions and makes them strong by accepting as well fighting with their destiny. The writer prefers her central characters to live in America rather than India as American shows them a new path and unwraps the concealed identity. Tara in this aspect, whole heartedly like Bharati accepts her Americanized way of living. Fear, constant anxiety, the obsession of not belonging, the panic of the New World, consciousness of Indian spiritualism and assimilative fusionism are some of the themes associated with the novels of Bharati and *Desirable Daughters* too follow the beaten track of her other works.

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