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Desirable Daughters: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Dr. S. N. Pandey

Dept. of English,
R. G. Govt. P. G. College, Ambikapur,
Sarguja, Chhattisgarh, India.

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Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee is a versatile genius and one of the greatest expatriate novelists from Indian origin. Though she has willingly migrated to America and considers herself as naturalized American but her creative writings revolve around the characters who almost belong to Indian origin, especially from Calcutta, her native home town, comparatively a liberal Indian cultural state, upright in the perspective of liberalization and modernization, fascinated and drawn to westernization earliest than any other Indian states, for being the first to be visited by colonial masters and so to overpower the state culturally in return, who look towards it with great fascination. The assimilation of Bharati Mukherjee in European culture, especially in Canada is full of travails and trammels on account of strong bigotry against Indian immigrants but she finally succeeds on account of her education and liberal modern attitudes of her family and above all her own fascination for American culture. Being an Indian expatriate considers herself as main stream of American and does not like to be compared with V S Naipaul whom she discovers engaged in locating his root un to the last. But a close and an unimpassioned analysis of her novels beginning with *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, *Holder of the World* and finally *Desirable Daughters* unfolds the startling fact that almost none of her characters viz Tara, Dimple, Hannah Easton, Jasmine or Tara don't appear as part and parcel of American culture, completely absorbed in American culture for very long ,for almost all her novels conclude with her central characters being torn into inherited and acquired culture, reflected in their attitudes, behavior, mental exposure and verbal expression. Definitely her effort is plausible in emancipation of Indian women through enlarging their cultural dimension, laying down the foundational stone of 'new women' as champion feminist but her character are not transformed

the way she has aspired for uprooted from one and rooted into another of their dream; almost alien as result keep on fluctuating to and fro at the reckonings of been and being , past and present , seeking precarious balance between the two apparent in their interaction and well reflected in their mental condition. A person cannot be synthetically transformed from one cultural set up to another, almost contrary to one another, mechanically; rather it would require a long process in acclimatization, sometimes it extends to generations, which is acclaimed in a very short span of life, surprisingly in the life of projected characters itself. *Desirable Daughters* present three possible attitudes to life with the help three characters, Parvati, Padma and Tara, where Parvati and Tara present two extremes whereas Padma presents the '*cultural appropriation*', maintaining the valuable and the best aspects of both the cultures, without being maniac either to her dream or to her inheritance, seeking and attaining the apotheosis of the two. But contrary to her almost all of her characters are reflective of being caught into the labyrinth of cross-cultural situations, tortured, battered and bruised, well exemplified in Jasmine's painful confessions, 'I could not imagine a non-genetic child. A child that was not my own or my husbands, struck me as a monstrous idea. Adoption was a foreign to me as the idea of widow marriage' (*Jasmine*, pp. 170-171) Here the statement of Jasmine is not only reflective of her predicament as the most dependable and highly professed character, rather is reflective of the predicament of almost all the character Mukherjee relies most for the justification of her thesis. The present paper is in intended to explore the cross- cultural situations, into which her character wriggles, which comparatively more is harrowing than trans- cultural situations, which at least has some scope and apace of time in adaptation.

Keywords: un-housement and re-housement, up-rooting and re-rooting, cultural inferiority, gender equality, natural cultural adaptation, assimilation, ghetto, acculturation, cross-culture, transculture.

Bharatti Mukherjee should not only be considered as a feminist, for the reason that she is many steps ahead to uphold the issues not only related to identity crisis, rather projects the concern of total emancipation of Indian women cramped into the cross- cultural situations, who hail from Indian state which is upright in so many ways i.e. education, modernity, gender issues and impact of westernization, as everything western visited this state first with the arrival of western colonial masters. She always considers herself pole apart from other expatriate of Indian

origin, especially V S Naipaul whom she considered not as immigrated, rather transported and herself as naturalized American for she has willingly migrated to America and considers that 'her forefathers belong to Ellis island', symbolic of her American root. It is also true that she has been subject to series of migration on account of her father's pharmaceutical business and received her basic education from European countries, so succeeds in hurling down the national barriers to attain the transnational identity, irrespective to identity of any particular nation, but situations and interactions discloses the fact that she has been fluctuating at least between the two, American and Indian, and so been designated as Indo- American writer, neither completely Indian nor American and this enigma continues throughout and struggles hard in being acculturated in American culture, and across her creative writing her preoccupation is witnessed in one form or the other. The central characters in almost all of her leading novels like *Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Holder of the World*, *Jasmine*, and *Desirable Daughters* are female characters and attempt to enlarge the horizon of social dimension, and in doing so attempt to leap countries where women are appear relishing the equal status as do their male counterparts, completely unmindful of the reality, social as well as psychological, but none of her characters up to *Jasmine* are naturally Americanized culturally as well as emotionally on the one hand and on the other are better placed psychologically, on account of their hallucinatory perception, as result appear to be caught up into the mess of conflicting identities, causing emotional and psychological imbalances, almost shunning down the normal course of life, completely subjected to artificiality and abnormalcy from outside but from inside depicted as re-housed. Even Bharati Mukherjee herself has been subject to emotional perturbation on account of strong 'bigotry' against immigrants, especially from Indian origin and she has been compelled to renounce her husband's native country in search of better opportunity in America. The present study concentrates to emotional and psychological imbalances emerging on account of identity clash, Indian and American, emanating time to time in '*Desirable Daughters*'

Desirable Daughters unfolds the characters and situations which are almost similar to that with the life of the creator, Bharati Mukherjee herself. This novel bears some sharp similarity with the life of the novelist partially but should not be considered as autobiographical novel, yet appears pertinent to be referred for justification of her thesis of assimilation. Like Bharati Mukherjee there are three sisters who belong to upper class, upright Brahmin family who sensitively think about the predicament of Indian women, especially from the cities and towns

around Calcutta and think about their emancipation and equal status as do western women are subject to in the European countries. These women are clearly against the arranged marriage handpicked by their parents but unlike the novelist they did not have the option either marriage picked by parents or education to their free will, on account of moderate education and family background. These women, equipped with the moderate education, are against Indian cultural ethos of treating husband as '*a sheltering tree*' (That Long Silence, p.32) and are intent to think about marriage in liberal ways, as choice and selection of their own that unfortunately they could not relish like the novelist but they do not compromise with their dream and exert to fulfill after their marriage, especially in the case of Padma and Tara. The plot of the novel revolves around the three daughters of Mr. Motilal Bhattacharya who belongs to traditional Brahmin family of the West Bengal. There are certain parameters for daughters in every traditional Indian family for daughters specially; as they are considered as honor and respect of the family which might be tainted with their outward human contacts, '*our father couldn't let either of my sisters out on the street, our car was equipped with window shades*' (Desirable Daughters, p. 29). And this mode of cultural set up is applicable to entire country which has little been liberal in the West Bengal comparatively, for being the hot spot of the day break of the European culture and modernity at that point of the time. These three daughters of the staunch Bengali Brahmin family are named after the three great and powerful Indian Goddess i.e. Padma, Parvati and Tara as traditional aspirations to flourish and relish the bliss of these Goddess in their life is now contrary and put against the western culture and modernity which might result in corrosion, seepage and finally in the perpetual clash. Out of these three sisters' novel primarily moves around the lifelong tussle between tradition and modernity in the life of Tara who willingly runs away from her 'ghetto' temperate and culturally moderate social set up in America. Parvati sticking to Indian morality and cultural ethos decides to live in India but is a step ahead in breaking away from the cultural rigidity while seeking love marriage and settling down in Bombay, metaphorically suggestive of defying claustrophobic cultural atmosphere, though moderately and Padma also maintains the precarious balance between East and West, between Indian inheritance and American dream with her husband Harish Mehta in New Jersey, America, reflecting almost a new attitude to life but is ahead to her sister Parvati in the perspective female emancipation on the one hand and on the other adjusting in such a way that we don't discover the mania for westernization unlike Tara whose entire life is reflective of being caught into the labyrinth of inheritance and to be adapted

with, a state of cultural ambivalence, of expectations and remorse, possessions and humiliations, achievements and failures, and of dream and reality. Though Padma is depicted well placed but is partially Americanized attaining sexual freedom, just one of the several prospects of the new culture, one of the primary concerns of almost all the female characters in new set up, she also keeps up illegal son Chrisday with illegal relation with Ronald Dey, renouncing her husband's 'sheltering' patronage but feels happy on account of maintaining dichotomy judiciously. Padma is a step ahead to Parvati but is pole apart to Tara whom she considers 'American' for she boldly explores different dimensions to be 're- housed'. The three sister sisters in the novel present the three approaches to life, Parvati clings to her ancestral morality, whereas Padma being altered to modern European culture, immigrates to America, observes both Indo- American approach to life, laying down the emphasis on Indian philosophy of 'middle passage' so depicted more being Indian for not being fully transformed, though has adapted to some aspects of American culture, especially the freedom a woman enjoys in intimate inter- personal relationship. Tara is pole apart from rest of the two who is depicted completely swayed away by European modernity and socio-cultural fabric where women apparently appear better placed, in respect of socio-moral texture and inter-personal relationship, especially on account of their education; which might lead to other kinds of social ills so far inter-personal relationship is concerned.

Though Bharati Mukherjee has not been victim to arranged marriage system of traditional India, yet as a conscious feminist regarding dreams and aspirations and predicament of Indian women in patriarchal society is very sincerely depicted in almost all her novels, seeking precarious balance at psychic and mental levels; being torn into two conflicting pulls in alien soil; has received very sensitive depiction in different shades of color, gaiety and mirth; penance and exasperation, pride and shame, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, '*I am not the only blue jeaned women with pashmina shawl around my shoulders and broken down running shoes on my feet. I am not the only Indian on the block. All identically tantamount, I stand out, I am convinced. I don't belong here, despite my political leanings; worse, I don't want to belong*' (*Desirable Daughters*, p.79) Tara in San Francisco amongst the classless immigrants, struggles between dream and reality, is delineated seeking precarious balance between two poles, allurements and inheritance, between dream and reality, feel interfered in her slight deviation from inherited cultural morality, though she born and brought up into a bit liberal Bengali family, where predicament of women at that time was different from rest of the country, Tara is

culturally outraged in multi-cultural society of San Francisco, where everything non- native is object of attraction and allurements like 'mirage', the more she tries to imbibe and cherish more she is repulsed. Her unhappy gesture against traditional Bengali marriage syndrome, is reflective of the beginning of metamorphosis that she has long been nourishing living in a traditional society where identity is subject to traditional taboos fine deep rooted in social set up , *'The dusty identity is as- tuned as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case, confidently labeled by father's religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), sub caste (Kulin) mother- tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta), formative region of ancestral inception (Mishtigunj), East Bengal...'* (*Desirable Daughters*, p. 78)

Unlike Padma and Parvati Tara is blown away into the whirlwind of Euro mania against her typical and inherited traditional background cramped into typical social codes accompanied with genetic connections that has so lasting bonding and binding over her that she keep on wriggling emotionally and psychologically as she does not succeed in evolving the appropriate coordination between the available options or to cling any one, reflecting perpetual restlessness being cut off from the nourishing root. In such traditional social set up Tara also has to accept the available option of arranged marriage offered by her father, *'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) It was completely unusual and unbelievable but dauntless and courageous on the part of a girl laying down the seed of emergence of new woman, laying more and more emphasis on individual and practical approach to life against established belief and her journey in the pursuit of dream is not smooth as the creator might have thought of, for her cultural background, rearing and bearings weigh very heavy on her consciousness as she hails from a society rooted in Indian cultural ethos par excellence. It is one of the rarest of the rare instance that a girl from such a typical conventional social set up does not only think of the liberal cultural and social set up but dares to struggle hard to be assimilated which would not be easy and smooth to shrug off her cultural inheritance as it is not metamorphosis related to attire, it enforces cultural metamorphosis, that keeps on drawing and pricking, though she is struggling hard in being Americanized. Bharati Mukherjee is here intent of creating a society as it ought to be, an ideal society which is liberal and free from all the conventional cultural constraints in pursuit of her thesis of natural assimilation, one is here reminded of Jhumpa Lahiri in this regard, *'I feel Indian*

not because of the time I've spent in India or because my genetic composition but rather because of my parent's steadfast presence in my life'. (My Two Lives, p.44)

A Bengali girl, almost disappointed on account of her arranged marriage, a marriage which was handpicked by parents, a cultural practice almost crippling to feminine choice, for it's not a reel life, rather a lasting bond according to inherited cultural ethos, Tara begins her marathonic struggle between inheritance and hankerings, rigidity and modernity, inner and outer existence, almost a dubious situations which usually restricts normal life aspired, is almost marred on account of discordant pulls. Now after unmatched marriage, for Tara is not happy with the groom who is not perfect on her choice, on account of certain qualities she might have been dreaming in her would be groom, for she is neither part of ancient cultural inheritance where women had the established right to choose and discard on their sweet will nor of expected cultural emergence where bride will choose on her own, as it is still to emerge in India like western countries, is placed in transitional phase which presents dubious situation. Now endowed with dubious situations Tara, according to *Buddhism* 'mother of liberation', an emblematic Indian *Shakti*, representing the virtue of success and achievement and also the one who enables the 'living beings to cross the ocean of distress and sufferings', now herself embarks upon to seek her own liberation from petty conventionalism. She leaps to America with her husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee to seek and locate the society which is socially liberal, especially in the perspective of man –woman relationship, a society which is free from sexual distinction, especially with a partner who will always remind her sexual distinction reminding cultural Indian identity. For Americanization she would require to give up her conventional identity i.e. Bishwapriya, her husband, and to look for complete emancipation, adapting to liberal social and cultural set up, completely breaking away from rigidity and humiliation, though she also aware of the pull of past as well, just like other heroines of Bharati Mukherjee. Tara immigrates with whole set Of Indian culture, conventions, rituals, religion, i.e. with whole traditional cultural set up and against it she has to explore the American, probably contradictory in almost all the perspective, that might stand against to inbuilt naturally and by default, 'We are Bengali Brahmins from Calcutta, and nothing can physically contact us' (*Desirable Daughters*, p.44)

In America Tara is influenced by marginal, almost away and declassed either as American or for that sake European in general, who does not belong to main stream of their

cultural and social set up, might be on account of different reasons, looking to be anchored emotionally as well as psychologically by someone like themselves who are also far away from their cultural constellation, but clutching it rigorously to the core of their heart, a conglomeration of social and cultural uprooted who share so many aspects in common amongst themselves. Tara is influenced by Hungarian culture of his native who is carpenter by profession. Here she feels to be lost and torn into on account of conglomeration of so many nations and cultures, living with people of diverse nations and cultures such as India, China, Argentina, Hungary, America and so many others. Now here in a state of cultural hybridization, living with her husband Bishwapriya, thinks over that her married life is not going on smoothly, only on account of her preoccupation with arranged marriage, and feels drawn towards American divorce settlement law , an opportunity for female emancipation and almost a step ahead to Americanization, intent to explore the viable option for individual satisfaction in human relationship, another hallmark new culture and decides to move to Andy breaking away from her married life, together with her baby, symptomatic of liberalization and modernization which is definitely good so far as individual life is concerned, that a feminist like Bharati Mukherjee has tried to project, but if we consider from the perspective of holy institution of marriage and sanctity of married life and predicaments of the offspring, it is definitely awe- inspiring, un accommodating and retrogressive, the due share of children, at the core of relationship is left to the mercy of fate, almost a threat to sanctimonious status of motherhood but is definitely emblematic of American emancipation, where Tara emotionally and psychologically feels torn into two paradoxical cultural dimensions, between India and America :

When I left Bish after a decade of espousement, it was because the promise of life as an American wife was not being consummated. I wanted to drive, but where would I go? I wanted to work, but would people celebrate that Bish Chattejee could not support his wife. (*Desirable Daughters*, p.82)

Now it is demand as liberalized American to explore the smart American options where as her genetic and living relationship with India and native culture, hinders her path, for she is the first generation Indian American whose native culture might dilute with the passage of time, but to her the consideration of Indian radar, even at slight deviation to Americanization, is potent enough to refer the dilemma that she is undergoing, '*Now, my radar was down*' (*Desirable*

Daughters, p.195). Actually her Indian radar was not down; it has been eclipsed by consumerist American culture that captivates for gender based liberty, even relinquishing married relation, she attempts to grab under the intoxicating effect of Americanization, where as in reality feels torn between the two, neither completely American nor Indian, though tries to seek the sexual and gendered liberty, a privilege of American culture, she has been frantically looking for.

The novel reveals the fact that it is not easy to be un- housed from one's cultural root and to be re-housed in alien cultural set up, despite how much one is intent to, for it is not possible to negate and annihilate one's cultural past which chases far and long way and stands against anything paradoxical and contrary to it. Though Tara is delineated as liberal and modern character intent to go rigorously, undeterred by inheritance and possessions, as if she is parasite and will succeed in surviving sucking and clutching to alien soil and milieu, an instance almost hallucinatory and over possessive, hankering for natural assimilation. The dream of novelist in creating a modern character like Tara does not appear true to her aspirations, especially at time when she reflect the inclination for native culture and environment, reflective of 'positive nostalgia', subjugate as satellite to Indian cultural constellation; rather being absorbed into alien American culture, an explicit sign of fluid identity, one step ahead and two reverse, and she feels impulsive and nostalgic to her cultural inheritance, shrugging off fabricated assimilation :

If we're unhappy, we're expected to suck it up for the kid's sake or our reputation. We worry what our parents will think, even when they're halfway around the world and we're middle aged adults. (*Desirable Daughters*, p.162)

In America confiding with the expectations of assimilation , trying hard to cope with the American culture, the projected dream to her level best She keeps on feeling 'other' in multi-racial and multi-cultural conglomeration of Sanfrancisco but is always conscious of inherited Indian as well as fluid identity available in America, and is depicted even at the slight deviation from the inherited cultural parameters, even in selecting Andy to relish the sexual freedom offered by American culture; stands in contrast to what she has been critical of in India; about child marriage, dowry and polygamy. Definitely her inherited Bengali identity has to be corroded to adapt with the long nourished that offers sexual indiscrimination and degendered society, freely and frankly switching over from one sexual identity to another, from Bish to Andy, which in turn can be deduced from Indian to American, a state of perpetual exile, being caught up into

the labyrinth of sexual identities, been disapproved and considered obnoxious living in India. Not only is that she very sympathetic to new arrivals from India in their marathonic search for identity in America is reflective of her innate connection with Indian cultural ethos, that she nourishes and keeps very close to her heart. Despite living in America, she clutches the Indian cultural ethos and feels very often drawn to her past, her childhood days, and nexus with family members, especially her grandfather and elder sisters. Her attitude is reflective of expatriate's enigmatic predicament, especially in being drawn to their native cultural ethos and moral values; *'The past is nice, this place is nice. It's nice to visit the past every now and then. Just don't live there'* (*Desirable Daughters*, p.76) and so we discover the innate love for family and culture, despite modernity and sexual liberalism, competently reflect dualistic state of mind:

I love my family and culture but had walked away from the struggle to preserve them. (*Desirable Daughters*, p.181)

The novelist has put into all the possible alternatives to depict Tara as assimilated into American culture, apparently breaking away from traditional Indian to modern American identity, adapting to food culture, dress, outlook, attitude and several other parameter of Americanization, contrarily the more she tries to be dissociated of her cultural past more she is drawn towards, feeling torn into the two not just one. She feels transformed only so far as the obscene and consumerist attitude of American culture is concerned, and as Americanized she does not feel inhibitions of talking openly about sex and sexual organs, especially referring to her relation with Andy, that she might have never thought of in India. Even a third-generation Indian expatriate V S Naipaul did never feel comfortable writing about sex, referring and reflecting his cultural connection with India, that Tara convincingly bypasses in a very short span of time. It's worth referring V S Naipaul at this juncture:

I cannot write sex. I would be embarrassed even at the moment of writing. My friends would laugh. My mother would be shocked and with reason. (*Times Literary Supplement*, p.37)

Even Tara also after her so much modernization could not restrain and remain away from her husband when their house was firebombed, leaving her husband disabled, that she could not as Indian woman, and so flouting all the nuances of Americanization; returns back to her

husband, justifying a person cannot be transformed synthetically, rather whole cultural process and prospects requires to be appropriated sincerely, yet cultural inheritance and family bearings cannot be obliterated and bypassed, ‘ *I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring I felt the new intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in, approved of an either side of the hyphen*’ (*Interpreter of maladies: A commonplace for cultures*, p. 19). Further after her house being firebombed and exploring the subject for her novel, she does not look towards modern life as her subject of writing, rather she feels possessive of her pat and is drawn to Mistigunj and attempts to explore her ancestral history and deals with her great grand aunt Tara Lata, a moment of trauma and exhilarations in her life. Definitely Bharati Mukherjee upholds the status as champion feminist, she strives hard to improve the status of Indian women, cramped into patriarchal society but does not offer the solutions and viable options in India, rather deals with exploring it outside the continent, especially in European countries, a dream land for people of third world countries, who aspire to copy and follow their colonial masters. Her obsession with natural assimilation is self-motivational, that she derives from her own battering but dauntless spirit in being assimilate in one after another country, and it’s her own struggle that kept occupied for long and it does not set her free from the labyrinth, and it is for her own sake and consolation that she projects almost the similar situations and characters from claustrophobic atmosphere at home, but most of her characters does not belong to her socio-economic set up, that’s why the predicaments of her characters are to some extent different from her own, that is why most of her characters finally end up battered and bruised emotionally and psychologically. If we take into consideration Dimple from *Wife* , Tara from *Tiger’s Daughter*, Hannah Easton or for that reason her daughter with Indian Hindu king; Black Pearl, from *Holder of the World*, Jasmine from *Jasmine* and Tara from *Desirable Daughters* are all depicted adapting naturally to American and in the case of Hannah and Black Pearl Indian culture apparently but they all suffer differently at psychological level being caught into opposite pulls, equally powerful, but feel outraged on so many occasions at their native cultural ethos and practices being bypassed, the most pathetic and harrowing situations at their helplessness in clutching to either, rather feel like ‘*Trishanku*’, reflecting neither completely this or that. Dimple and Tara end up neurotic being torn into two opposite direction, almost unable to cope and manipulate situations in their favor, Hannah Easton sticks to her fascination for Indian royalty in 17th century India, and tries to retain her status as Salem Bibi but her daughter but her with

Indian Hindu king ; Black Pearl finally decides to return back to her cultural ‘ *Nest* ’ i.e. ‘ *White Nest* ’ where she might feel better and at ease than otherwise and so we see that Jasmine, though succeeds in fulfilling almost all the projected aspirations, but she also doesn’t relishes the peace of mind with new worn American identity and bursts out over the question of being Americanized :

I am caught between the promise of America and America and old-world dutifulness (*Jasmine*, p.240)

On the basis of above examination it can be concluded that in spite of all the efforts none of the characters created by the author feel at ease and naturally assimilated and Tara in this regard is no exception and almost all her characters appear caught up wriggling in cross- cultural situations and end up almost battered and bruised in their frantic search of assimilation and emancipation. But Bharati Mukherjee should be applauded and credited for raising the voice of so far considered ‘others’ and ‘marginals’ vociferously and registering the powerful presence of south East Asian in general and Indian expatriate in particular perspective at global level, upholding the mirror to colonial masters with pride that look now I have mastered over your language and literary genre as my own, a perfect instance of ‘appropriation’ on the one hand and on the other should be extolled for opening the new dimension and opportunities to Indian women who have been tightly tied to Indian patriarchal social set up and almost reduced to nothing beyond their male counterpart but this opportunity is like balancing on cross-cutting edge, that will never enable with natural absorption but lead to perpetual exile, ever torn between the two.

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