



PROJECTION OF SELFHOOD AND RECONSTRUCTION THROUGH CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

*This paper is a humble attempt to get a bird's eye view on Bharati Mukherjee's **Desirable Daughters** by examining exclusively and obsessively the problems faced by the south Asian Immigrant women, especially Indian women immigrants as dealt with by her with an emphasis on Diasporas experiences and double identifications that do constitute hybrid forms of identity and to show how such forms of identity differ from the essential notion of national and ethnic identity. It beautifully reveals how she represents in her novels the women's struggle to attain a selfhood especially in cross-cultural crisis by portraying a protagonist who not only craves to establish her own identity against the tradition. This paper also makes the readers understand to know how in **Desirable Daughters**, Mukherjee considers different pattern of belonging in the global perspectives from in-between temporality to assimilative permanence and further, hyphenated an unmixed nationness.*

Key Words: Cultural Hybridity, Selfhood, Reconstruction, Diasporic Experiences, Assimilation, Self Identity.

Literature is not solely concerned with objective reality, individual psychology, or with subjective emotion. All forms of literature interpret life for us, console us and sustain us. But, Literature is all about other human activities, necessarily reflects current social and economic conditions. Literature in all its forms can be seen as written records, whether the literature itself be factual or fictional. Literature tends to concern itself more and more with the interior meanings of lives with problems of human personality and human relationships. Many novels are fictional, psychological biographies which tell the conflict between self-realization and the flow of events and the demands of other people. In earlier cultures the artist, thought of him as part of the society and shared its values and attitudes. People were able to study literature to improve on ideas, knowledge, and also in academic purpose, the same way as the literature that we study today continue to be updated to evolve and learn more and more. The historical development of writing is an attempt to provide entertainment, enlightenment, or instruction to the reader as well as the development of the literary techniques.

Indian Writing in English is in its Himalayan heights these days. Our writers have set milestones in the field of poetry, fiction and drama. Now Indian authors in English are no longer dependent on their British counterparts, rather they are flourishing by leaps and bounds by dint of their own caliber and competency. Critical Writing offers new perspectives to enter into left none of the issues unexplored. May it be either political, social, economic, psychological matters or be the issues based on secularism, or gender politics; Indian English Writers have excelled in raising questions and introducing solutions through their literary works. Indian Writing is found to be mushrooming with new ideas, ideologies, visions, observations and many more new terminologies. In spite of a very recent historical and literary upheaval, Indian Writing in English is said to have successfully recaptured and reflected the multicultural and multi-lingual society in all respects. Those who have left a great and commendable impact on different forms of literature, especially Indian English Fiction, are such notable writers as Pandita Ramabai Saraswathi, Sri Aurobindo, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K Narayan, Raja Rao who all joined hands in popularizing the genre 'novel' through shared traditions and cultural experiences.

Falling in line with the thinking of male writers, the Indian women writers have tried their best and done their utmost to dwell upon the theme of social realism especially the cause of women, their constant search for identity, gender discrimination and some other unexplored aspects of social realism and feminine sensibility. Honestly speaking, Indian Fiction in English lays focus on such notable themes as struggle for freedom, plight of women, East-west encounter, selfhood and womanhood, Cultural Hybridity, human values and experiences, that too in the Indian context.



The observation of Meenakshi Mukherjee is worth mentioning here:

“Whatever be the language in which it is written, a novel by an Indian writer demands direct involvement in values and experiences which are valid in the Indian Context”. (P 5)

Bharati Mukherjee is not only the most commercially successful among women writers of the Indian Diaspora but also the most controversial narrator of Indian Cultural identity in a multi-cultural context. No Indian woman expatriate novelist in the foreign soil is as remarkable as Bharati Mukherjee in the form of fiction.

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian-American immigrant writer, wrote about her experiences in India as well as in America and Canada. Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940 to wealthy parents. In 1947, her family moved to Britain and lived there for three and half years. At the age of ten, Mukherjee wanted to become a writer and wrote a number of short stories. Mukherjee mainly concentrated on migration, the status of new immigrants and a feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates. She wrote about Indian women and their struggles. Mukherjee herself has the first-hand experience as an immigrant. Her own immigrant experiences and struggle for identity in Canada or in America led her to write about the issues of immigrants. She admits: “The experience of cutting me off from a biological homeland and settling in an adopted homeland that is not always welcoming to its dark complexioned citizens has tested me as a person, and made me the writer I am today”(P 21). This is identical to Mukherjee’s own venture back to India with her husband Clark Blaise in 1973 when she had bad experiences of poverty and mistreatment of women under the name of tradition. Her husband was awful to see the myth and the culture that had surrounded every part of Bengal.

She has to her credit publication of such notable novels as **The Tiger’s Daughter** (1972), **Wife** (1975), **The Sorrow and the Terror** (1987), **Jasmine** (1989), **The Holder of the World** (1993), **Leave it to Me** (1997), **Days and Nights in Calcutta** (1997) which is in collaboration with Clark Blaise, **Desirable Daughters** (2002), and **The Tree Bride** (2004) **Miss New India** (2011). These works express Mukherjee’s own experiences of racism in Canada, where she gets ill-treated inspite of being a professor. A short story entitled **Isolated Incidents** explores the biased Canadian view towards the immigrants she encountered. Another short story **The Tenant** reflects her views on immigrant Indian women studying in America and her experiences of racism. **The Middle Man and Other Stories** (1988) is a collection of short stories that brought her the National Book Critics Circle Award for Best Fiction. These stories explore the meeting of East and West through immigrant experiences in America and Canada.

The self is the idea of the unified being of consciousness. The state of having a distinct identity is narrowly termed as ‘Selfhood’. Experiences constitute Selfhood. The term ‘Self’ is identified with self-concept, self-esteem, identity, subjectivity, personality and consciousness. The concept of self is always in the process of human life for ‘Self’ emerges from social, historical and societal process that transcends any individual and society dichotomy or separation. Self-Perception serves or acts integral to human identity formation. In perceiving oneself, there is an inherent duality, for one is able to distinguish between oneself and one’s duplicated reflection.

Hybridity is an every-day reality that we encounter in an increasingly multi-ethnic and pluralistic society. As theorized by postcolonial critic Homi K Bhabha, Hybridity is a creation of new cultural forms and realities resulting from colonial encounter. In colonial societies, Hybridity may be in the form of retrieval or the revival of the pre-colonial past. This can be in either reviving folk or tribal cultural forms or conventions or adapting contemporary artistic and social productions to suit the present-day conditions of globalization, multiculturalism and transnationalism. Cultural influences such as social strata, education and religious belief, and historic moment plays a vital role in shaping an individual’s personality which ultimately reflects in his work of art. Diaspora is displacement of a community or culture into another geographical and cultural region. Migrations always take place due to historical, political and economic reasons which had led to cross-cultural encounters. The diasporic writing is thus ‘both an individual story and explicitly a cultural narrative’. Diaspora writers are more concerned with spaces, landscapes and journeys.



Cultural influences such as social strata, education and religious belief shape an individual's personality. But diasporic writers' cultural identity is debatable. Diaspora has been in existence since time immemorial. Displacement or migration takes place due to historical, political and economic reasons. History of Indian diaspora has coursed through three phases. Indian diasporic literature deals with themes of nostalgia, memory, sense of alienation, globalization and hybridity. In the recent years 'diaspora' refers not only to a group of people, but also to some aspects of their culture. It implies any group that has been dispersed outside its traditional homeland, especially involuntarily. Diasporic literature is a vast concept, it encompasses all literary works written by authors, who have settled outside their native country but are related to native culture and background. In this context, all those writers can be considered as diasporic writers, who have settled abroad but remained attached to the homeland. 'Expatriate' means someone living in a foreign land. An immigrant is a person who comes to a country with an intention to settle there permanently. The main difference between expatriate and immigrant is that, 'immigrant' implies the sense of permanence, but 'expatriate' does not have the connotation of a permanent move. Expatriate writing refers to the literary works of the expatriates, who are distanced from their homeland. An expatriate writer concentrates on the ethnic identity when he undergoes the trauma of rejection in an alien culture, while, diasporic or historical backgrounds, and socio-political life of the people of his homeland. Migration is particularly the concept that emerged in the second half of the 20th century. There are various reasons for migration may be social, economical, political, or it may be educational or something else. However, displacement or dislocation often leads to a sense of nowhere and identity crisis.

Desirable Daughters is a brilliantly woven thoughtful novel about three India born upper class sisters-Padma, Parvati and Tara who live as Indian immigrants in USA. The novel basically explores the diasporic experiences of Tara, the protagonist, who is more removed from her native Indian culture than her two sisters. It registers her sense of alienation, lack of belongingness, memory and fragmented identity; nevertheless it does not describe her nostalgia, urge to return to her homeland. The protagonist undertakes the journey from expatriation to immigration; from strangeness to familiarity and from alienation to adoption and assimilation. Tara, the narrator of the novel, takes the readers deep into the intricacies of the New World and seems to float rootless with time. The fluidity of her identity testifies not only her own but also the fluidity of the immigrants. She values her traditional upbringing but takes pride in moving forward in life. Her image of her family values forms a wall of security around her that camouflage the fragile vulnerable self:

Tuberculosis is everywhere. The air, the water, the soil are septic. Thirty-five years is a long life. Smog obscures the moon and dims the man-made light to faintness deeper than the stars. In such darkness perspective disappears. It is a two-dimensional world impossible to penetrate. (P 12)

Tara is very much distressed with her cultural displacement and fragmentation. In spite of her consent to accept and adopt new culture, she is unable to manage with the traditional mould of an Indian woman. However, Tara was unable to adjust herself within the conventional gender role of a mother and wife. Tara feels ripped between the double place and its culture that brings her nothing else than the scattered identity. She is acutely aware of her cultural differences. Her home at San Francisco seems as a sad home. She says:

I am not the only blue jeaned woman with Pashmina shawl around my shoulders and broken down running shoes on my feet. I am not the only Indian on the block. All the same, I stand out, I am convinced. I don't belong here, despite my political leanings; worse, I don't want to belong. (Desirable Daughters 79)

She terribly suffers for her separation from Bish because the concept of divorce is not acceptable, according to Indian code of matrimony. When the relationship between Bish and Tara becomes intolerable, she comes to a bitter realization. As in a usual divorce-settlement Tara sends her son with his father. She breaks out of 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. The reconciliation of the broken family also symbolizes the reconciliation of cultures. She emigrates after marrying Bish Chatterjee, and reaches in America submerged in Indian culture presenting the behaviour of the representative Indian wife.



Tara reckons the jolt between freedom and tradition as she tries to meet expectations that are often wildly conflicting, when she reaches America. But then she at once tries to embrace American culture taking benefit of the chances it strives and affords to assimilate as best as she can to the new culture. In the hostile country, Tara knows her restrictions, she knows how hard it is to come out of the grips of culture and tradition; she understands how impossible the pull of the past, she feels the constraints of an uprooted self; she understands the circumstances and anxiety of an isolated self in an unfamiliar nation. In search of success and to achieve her objective; she stands alone to oppose it. She fails to explain the height of her distress and the blessing of their individuality. Tara belongs to the Indian Bengali Brahmin culture but she is multicultural. The two fold identity of Tara is always at crisscross junctures creating havoc in her personal life as an admirer and follower of both the cultures, Indian and American. Although Tara is so crucial about the Indian practices and customs such as dowry system, child marriage and the custom of more than one wife at the same time etc. Tara is also influenced by Hungarian culture because she lives with a Hungarian carpenter. She belongs to more than one nation or culture. She has the experience to live among the people of different countries/cultures such as India, America, Hungary, Argentina and China. It shows that Tara is the admonisher, the extra-modern and the rebel, she believes in adjustment policy of life, therefore she takes Andy in her life after her falling out of marriage with Bishwapriya. Tara works in a pre-school as a volunteer. She enjoys with Andy of her love life.

Eventually Tara turns back to homeland. It reflects her attachment with her homeland, and search for identity in her homeland which is lost by her migration to America. The novel discusses the truth that Indian expatriates are always aware of their reputation, ex-status in both cultures. But for Tara all her treatment to the relatives, servants, and drivers seems very funny and inconvenient as more modern in her attitude and follows the American way of life style. She believes that her sisters lead very stressful life and make her life uncomfortable for unwanted things. So whatever Parvati does that is because of her Indian bend of her mind and she doesn't care for American practices while as Tara shows herself as the most modern lady among all her sisters who don't care these ways of displaying Indian life style and mean to adopt the practices of American culture. She does not like all that her other sisters do because of their Indian attachment.

In the novel Bharati Mukherjee highlights the identity crisis of desirable daughters who face both traditional as well as modern worlds and their changing values. Indian migrated Tara's search for identity in the multicultural land of America is excellently revealed through the spaces of tradition, personal memories, different places and new ways of life style in the altered socio-cultural constrains. Tara not only craves to establish her own identity, but she tries to reconstruct her own identity against the traditions to which she belongs. Yet, while doing so, she also maintains her Indian identity of which she feels proud. The efforts of maintaining both identities partly Indian and partly American make her the hybrid of new culture that again poses the question of her real identity. Sunita B. Nimavat observes rather aptly thus:

“In **Desirable Daughters**, Mukherjee marks a departure from her earlier novels. Tara wants to find her identity in the USA without obliterating her former identity. She tries to combine her Indian past and the present American life. It is no doubt a tough process but she faces it with equilibrium and poise”. (P 13)

Through Tara, Bharati Mukherjee voices her belief in the individual's liberty and freedom to mould herself, to reconstruct and reshape her identity. Tara, on the other hand, was trying to reconstruct her identity through her diasporic experience. She was attempting to redefine the importance of her culture through space and time. Tara's reconstruction of identity is rooted in her nostalgic and romantic recollection of her past. It is based on the flux of her thoughts about the past coming to her mind in the present but in fragments, and not whole. It is a spatiotemporal reconstruction of her identity. Tara wants to redefine herself, to reconstruct her feminine self in tune with her novel experiences in an alien soil.

The Indian women novelists do not only talk about glorious cultural past, traditions and customs; but they have dealt with changing domestic and social problems of women with changing scenario of society. They have written



about the complex issues like sensuality, servility and society. Through the writings of these women writers, one can view a different world. Women writers have preferred to write about women's oppression, issues of power, deprivation of their rights, the injustice done to them and their marginalization. The emotional world of woman is explored with the help of keen insight and frank expression. With their first-hand knowledge and fine understanding of status of woman in India, Indian women writers have projected the dilemma which modern Indian women face in their everyday life.

The self is the distinct and characteristic individuality of a person. The human self is a self-organizing, interactive system of thoughts, feelings and motives that characterizes an individual. The construction of self and society are interconnected and this link is a kind of web. In this modern era, the self finds it difficult to come to terms with the social environment because the inner values nurtured by the self and the outer social demands are incompatible.

Bharati Mukherjee in her writings points out that the basic idea is self-empowerment, which is essential for any human being and one can equipoise between the characteristics and the blending can produce the characters. Bharati Mukherjee novels as we have seen show her genuine concern of women especially Indian women who are exiles, immigrants or simply migrants. Their struggles and appeals are projected for a social and cultural reform in the present world. To conclude, contemporary feminist movements are partly rooted in transformations in social experience and reforms that challenge widely shared categories of social taboos and male dominance" (Nayak 20). Bharati Mukherjee is one among those novelists who are preoccupied with the problem of adjustment thereby exploring the feelings of women who fall a victim to the conflict between the traditional and the newly acquired values.

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