



Exploration of Self in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

Dr. AARTHI.P

Assistant Professor,

Department of English (SF),

Nirmala College for Women,

Coimbatore-18

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee as a diasporic writer has given new dimensions to Indian writing in English. She has played a significant role in universalizing the experiences of the expatriates and immigrants through her writings. The thrust area in Mukherjee's writings is the problem of women especially as immigrants. Quest for the self-identity is the basic concern of her heroines. This paper aims to study the trilogy, *Desirable Daughters*, by Bharati Mukherjee. The perspective of analysis will be to observe the search of the protagonists for their self-identity and also retrieving their past roots. The portrayal of characters by Bharati Mukherjee always has a tinge of struggle of balancing between past cultural moorings and to survive in the new alien country. Bharati Mukherjee herself has experienced the pangs of nostalgia and solitude which are explicit in her writings. Bharati Mukherjee has explored many facets of diasporic consciousness and immigrant experience of dislocations, ruptures and relocation of the migrant women in her fictions.

Mukherjee's protagonists are all receptive and are in a different way trained in the new cultural imagination. They are tossed in an environment of ambivalence regarding their identity, racism, sexism and other social oppression. They discuss displacement and face the multicultural reality in the process of cultural differentiation and adjustment. She has dealt with the ambivalence of their psychic and spatial identity and the tension of dislocations at multiple levels. The impact of patriarchy on the Indian society varies from the one in the West and therefore Mukherjee has tried to change her own strand of feminism.

Bharati Mukherjee has dealt with the ambivalence of their psychic and spatial identity and the distress of dislocations at manifold levels. The force of patriarchy on the Indian society varies from the one in the West and therefore Mukherjee has tried to change her own string of feminism grounded in the truth of compulsory displacement that they recurrently undergo. Indian expatriate writers do not write from all exclusive foreignness of their identity but their writing reflects the perspective of someone caught between two cultures.

Mukherjee has emerged with a postmodern counter narrative of assimilative and celebratory American citizenship. This new perspective preserves essential Indianness to be exotic but merge gleefully into American materialism. From this category of experience Mukherjee wishes to carve her own exclusiveness within the broader genre of American Literature. Migrancy and dislocation, either consensual or conflictual, is a global and trans-cultural necessity. Mukherjee's protagonists are all sensitive and are differently trained in the new ethnic imagination. They are tossed in an environment of ambivalence regarding their identity, racism, sexism and other social oppression. They negotiate displacement and face the multicultural reality in the process of cultural differentiation and assimilation.

Their cultural imperatives, interacting with the unknown focus of the new world, create a drama of co-options and collaborations which the story teller records. Dislocation, Relocation and Root Search. She has her characteristic way of defining her Indian heritage and affiliations through several assertions.

Mukherjee has expressed the reality of being located in a particular culture, geographically and ideologically separate from her chosen home and citizenship and has thus problematised her own identity. This aspect of her own cultural exclusivity is very strongly expressed while criticizing the Americans.

Mukherjee's sixth novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) marks a new trend in her writings. In an interview with Dave Weich, Mukherjee says: "The authentic Strategy for this book was also using the width of the field of history, geography, Diaspora gender, ethnicity, language – rather than the old fashioned, long clean throw"(72). In her earlier novels, diasporic transmigration meant new opening and emancipation from the clutches of convention bound society. In these novels, attachment to one's own native culture and homeland, living abroad was presented as something to be spurned and total assimilation into the host culture was hailed. It is to create a location of the presence that reduces the diasporic individual to delink the past and deconstruct the future.

In *Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee considers different pattern of belonging in the Global perspectives from temporality to assimilative permanence and further, hyphenated and unmixed nationness. The general tendency of the people in the diasporic space is to be centric to primary identities – religious, ethnic, territorial and national. Most of Mukherjee's novels deal with the question of such primary identities and the crisis of such identities along with transmission of ethnic traits. She takes in account the borderline condition of cultural translation in the postcolonial location of past present and future.

The author describes Tara Lata, just five years old and is being carried on a palanquin, all decorated in the ceremonial dress to be given away in marriage. The older sisters, seven and nine are already married. In Hindu culture it was authenticated that a father should give away his daughter in marriage before she reaches puberty and if the father is not able to do so he is considered useless and undeserving: In a palanquin borne by four servants sit a rich man's three daughters, the youngest dressed in her bridal sari, her little hands painted with red dye, her hair oiled and set. Her arms are heavy with dowry gold; bangles ring tiny arms from wrist to shoulder. Childish voices chant a song, hands tap, golden bracelets tinkle.

Tara Lata becomes famous for acts of rebellion and she becomes freedom fighter and martyr. Paradoxically, therefore, in pursuing a rapid Indian tradition and confining his daughter to a life without the distractions of husband, children and mother-in-law, the father transforms her into a symbol of essential womanhood under the patronage of traditional male symbolic order.

Precisely, the novel *Desirable Daughters* concentrates on complex ideologies revolving round the life of three sisters and their multiple alienations – Padma, Parvati and Tara. All of them maintain distinctive individuality in their attitude and approach to life. The novel begins with the description of bridal procession of Tara Lata, an ancestor whose life history becomes a focal point of Tara Chatterjee's, family chronicle. Tara Chatterjee, the narrator had always treated the story with a sense of awe and it is after divorce from her husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee she became curious to know about the trauma of the *Tree bride*.

While Tara undertakes this root searching mission as an attempt to come to terms with her fragmented and at times confused notion of self, Padma takes the world at her stride according to her own cultural poetics. Tara's positioning is different from Padma in the sense, Padma is a hyphenated immigrant. From her obsession on assimilation as a critical content of a survival strategy in an alien soil, Mukherjee vociferously talks against the status of a hyphenated immigrant because the hyphen marginalizes the Asians as minorities.

Parvati the middle sister, with an American education and an America trained Indian husband, lives the life of a privileged rich wife in India. She symbolizes the traditional life of an Indian woman with Western orientation. Each one traverses her own path of immigrant life quite happily. Tara, through the life of her other two sisters, Parvati and Padma her husband Bish her illegitimate nephew Mr. Christopher Dey, introspects on her own crisis of identity as an immigrant and she continually expresses her desire to seek a consolation in her native traditions.

In Tara's realization the novel reveals the spaces of tradition, personal memories, places, and life styles, tradition and modernity. She indulges in the nostalgic romanticism of the past, the inverted story of mobility, existential suffering, hybrid-subjectivity and plurality in her physical and psychic dividedness. In Mukherjee's poetics of Diaspora, rejection to the nativity and incapacity to deal with the new situation make the theme of identity more powerful and poignant in the mainstream American life. Tara at the age of nineteen was married to a software engineer from an outstanding Bengali family. After her marriage, Tara was shifted to American society, in Atherton California where her husband Bish tried to carve out a

semblance of Indian traditionalism. Mukherjee describes the reason for such selection of Tara's husband. He had that eagerness, and a confident smile that promised substantial earnings.

Her marriage to Bish did not have any immediate distressing effect as earlier experienced by Tara-Lata the Tree-Bride. While Tara- Lata became a widow by the foul mechanization of fate, Tara leaves her husband by choice in a self redemptive and self-assured role of a woman of the global era. She falls a prey to her own experiencing of America where the cream-colored houses seem to have tumbled down the hill sides like children's blocks, or-on bright days under a cloudless sky-like cottages in an Etruscan landscape." Here she feels „totally at home, unwilling to leave" (43). But her American summer suffers a jolt with a series of dislocations.

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