



Quest For Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee is a Third World Feminist writer, who deal with the problems and issues related with the South Asian women particularly India. Her novel shows the mood of the society in which she lived. This present paper attempts to explore quest for identity depicted in her novel Desirable Daughters. This novel unfolds the story of three sisters, who are settled in different countries and are suffering to find out their own identities Tara, the protagonist of the novel quest for her separate identity in the traditional bound society. Whenever she moves from one place to another place, she finds the spaces of tradition and a fixed sense of identity as an Indian Immigrant. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the diaspora depicted in the immigrant writing in general and in the writing of Bharati Mukherjee in particular. The second section analyses the quest for identity reflected in the novel Desirable Daughters and the third section concludes the paper.

Key Words: Identity disappears, immigrant, quest, tradition, female protagonist.

I. QUEST FOR IDENTITY

In the age of globalization the diasporas literature is continuously enriched by the issues of diaspora, transnationalism, cultural mongrelization, hybridity and identity crisis. The concept of root, the quest for identity, home, nostalgia and alienation are interlinked with the diasporic phenomenon. According to diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Agha Shahid Ali, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai have dealt with the major and complex issue of the searching root in the postcolonial era. The present paper highlights the quest for identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* which is critically demonstrated by the diasporic critics.

Identity determines one's mind and attitude. It is a consciousness and quest that can affect individual level, a group, a class, a profession

and even a nation. It means different things to different persons. For many people, the search for identity may be a desperate struggle while others may be conscious of it. Balachandra Raja defines identity as "the process of creative self-realization."

According to Sudhir Kakar,

"An individual's sense of identity is neither completely conscious nor unconscious, although, at times, it appears to be exclusively the one or the other. At some place identity is referred to a conscious sense of individual uniqueness, at others, to an unconsciousness striving for community of experience, and at yet other places as a sense of solidarity with a group's ideal." (Pathak.3)

The quest for identity imitates the need for roots. Iyengar said: "only a tree that has drives deep roots into the soil could put forth ample foliage and yield abundant fruit". When the sense of rootedness or the sense of belonging gets disrupted for one reason or other one suffers from identity crisis. It is a postcolonial civilization crisis in its centrality and an obsession.

In quest for identity as an Asian American woman Barathi Mukherjee suffers from self-distancing from India and adventuring in America. Though she has been a citizen of India (Bengali), Canada and U.S, she clearly identifies herself as American. This transformation is a two way process which affects both individual and the national cultural identity. She changed her style as Americans and adopted the US as her home and viewed herself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors. To her, immigration and transformation is a major motif. She gives importance to the condition of Indian women immigrants in North America in the aspects of cultural collisions and their control of their destiny. Her characters always struggle for identity and cultural hybridity. She focuses on the immigrant's experience moving in three zones – the past, the present and the future. In her women protagonists are role models for several immigrant women in North America in their problem of falling



in love, searching for freedom and establishing relationship.

Her issue of identification can be psychological, sociological, linguistic, cultural and emotional. Her Canadian experience immigrants are lost souls and so she is ready to welcome the freedom and liberty of American. In her impression, America has a culture of dreamers and a land of transformation and a cultural mosaic where an individual can reverse omens. She craves for the identity like many postcolonial Asian and American women authors who suffers from complex issues of racism, sexism, violence, high social expectations and pressure, poverty, cultural adjustment, lack of family support and posttraumatic stress disorders.

America in the postmodern climate is considered a 'melting pot' of different cultures, ethnic identities and proletarian claims. So the migrant as economic refugee struggle in cultural hybridity. The expatriates become immigrants by breaking the umbilical cord with their home country. This struggle in the host country enables Mukherjee to write from a wider and more exciting angle. The immigrants suffer in their displacement but desire to return to their lost origin. The fragile and fluid identity of Indian immigrants in American cities has become the theme of literacy circles as they are neither nostalgic for their personal past not afraid of the unfamiliar present.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2002) deals with the obsession as her favorite theme. This novel is mingled with the issues of identity and collision of cultures. It focuses on the search of an immigrant for his roots, place of origin family and culture. The major theme is the conflict arising from native and foreign cultures. The novel begins with a traditional Brahmin Indian family in Bengal with three beautiful sisters, Padma, Parvati and Tara, who are eager to form their own identity in their own way. These characters are the victims of double civilization in their fighting against predominantly male ethos. They belong to the wealthy Brahmin family of Bhadra Lok to a fond father and a traditional bound orthodox mother. Tara, the younger daughter is the protagonist of this novel, married Bishwa Priya Chatterjee, the poster boy of Indian entrepreneurship.

Bish's idea is to develop a system in computer technology called "chatty" a patented one in information technology. The real quest for identity in the life of Tara begins after marrying Bish, a wealthy Indian settled in America. Eventhough Tara rejects traditional structure of Indian society. She marries to a man of her father's choice. She says, "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. (P26) The irony is that the successful marriage negotiation turns out to be a disastrous misbegotten marriage in Tara's life. Tara settled with Bish for almost ten years in California. She is aware that her identity as an Indian wife in California is safe by Bish because he is a standard product, an electrical engineer who discovers the big facts in America. Being a good Hindu wife, she never calls her husband by his name whenever she is in India, but in America she calls him Bish. Tara says, "He is generous, protective providers to who 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" (P27).

Tara expects a different identity in abroad by working somewhere rather than a house wife, but Bish a traditional Indian husband never allowed her to do so. His fifteen hours office and his public functions in Boston, New York, Tokyo, Taiwan, Malaysia, Manila makes Tara alienated. She finds her world limited only to her husband and son. Her world is alienating that has no identity in American society. She says, "I don't belong here I don't want to belong" (P79). She never wants to be a part of American society and always tries to maintain her Indian identity, but she enjoys American life, an independent life as she likes and wants. She finds it impossible to convey to her American friends citizens of comparatively classless, mobile society and static Indian identity is, "fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case, confidently labelled by father's religion (Hindu) caste (Brahmin) Sub-caste (Kulin) mother-tongue (Bengali) Place of birth (Calcutta)..." (P85) It goes on and on in ever decreasing circles.

Like many Indian immigrant women in America, Tara has insane effort to seek, organize and affirm her identity. In India, she did not have any outside influences and family breakdown. There the families were inside an impenetrable bubble in which the new comers are carefully monitored. There was no seeking after individual identity. In America, she has a philosophical quest of dualism which unknots her complexion and identity. She feels the tug between tradition and freedom as she tries to meet expectations that are often contradictory. She is looking for respect for an independent life apart from her husband's identity, while he is expecting her to be a good cook and an attentive wife. She begins to live in a part of San Francisco called Cole Valley with her son Rabi. She



separates herself from her husband for her own identity-immigrant American wife and liberated self. She develops relationship with Andy, a Hungarian Buddhist, contractor, yoga instructor and carpenter.

In relation with Andy she becomes selfish, intimate and involved in relationship without any expectations for the first time in her life. The feeling at home provides a sense of satisfaction to her. Her divorce is an attempt to develop her own individuality. In parallel projection the men in her life symbolize two diverse cultures and her cultural dilemma. Padma condemns and considers Tara's divorce a shame to the Bhattacharjee family. Though Tara and Padma reside in the USA, they are strangers to each other. Tara has become American and for whom the past is now a darker cave.

Tara's American life is shattered with the sudden arrival of her so called nephew Chris Dey who calls Padma his mother. She could not believe in Dey and calls her both sisters to discuss the matter. Parvati, who lives in India, warns her to do not believe anybody as the gangsters are activated in the country. Padma also rejects Chris Dey as her son. Tara is not satisfied with all that comes to her and decides to go back into the past to find out the secrets of her family. Mukherjee highlights cultural restraints for women in India. Tara Lata, the victim of tradition transforms herself into freedom fighter and a spiritual healer. She is a good example of a woman who creates her own identity by following all conventions of the traditional Indian society. She is proud of her origin of Bhattacharjee family, Bengali Brahmin. She also criticizes Indian practices of polygamy, child marriage, dowry system, and virginity. She remembers how in India every word relating to family carries special meaning. She keeps double consciousness – partly Indian (Bengali) and partly American. However, she is afraid to use her Ballygunge Park Road identity in USA. Tara is also aware that the Indian fixed identity is formed by an individual's religion, caste, sub caste, birth place, origins and social attitudes.

After realizing the truth of her family, Tara complains to the police regarding fake Chris Dey. The police investigation ends at the fact that Chris Dey is already killed and in the guise of Chris Dey, Abbas Sattar Hai, a member of Dawood gang wants to kill the techno-guru Bish and his family. An Indian origin Americanized policeman Jasbir Singh warns Tara about the dangers of her family life. Meanwhile, an unknown person bombed Tara's house aiming to kill Bish, Tara and Rabi. Bish rescues Tara from the explosion, but in his attempt he is badly injured. Thus the novel ends happily, but

the problem of identity remains a major issue throughout the narrative. The characters in the novel develop multiple identities due to their position of being Diaspora. The transnational identity, immigrant identity and expatriate identity are mixed in Tara Bhattacharjee – Chatterjee. Her communication in Bengali and English, the food she cooks is Indian and American, the clothes she wears are Indian and American, even her sexual life indicates that she sustains both the Indian and American identities. Mukherjee uses the flash back technique and makes Tara to recollect the past events to form her present identity.

Thus, 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 constraints. Tara not only craves to establish her own identity, but also she tries to reconstruct her own identity against the traditions to which she belongs. While doing so, she also maintains her Indian identity of which she feels proud. The efforts of maintaining both identities – partly Indian, partly American make her the hybrid of new culture that again poses the question of her real identity. Thus throughout the novel, Bharati Mukherjee depicts the identity crisis of its protagonists who is longing for her new self.

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