

Cultural Fusion in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee, one of the versatile immigrant writers belonging to a period of transition is a sensitive observant of the socio-political condition of the place she inherits and the place she submits, she is undoubtedly at her best when she touches upon the experiences of India at the backdrop of her American surrounding. Her discreet writing style, satirical plot expansions and humorous interpretations have always been noteworthy as she contemplates her work as a celebration of her sensations. The concerns of immigrant existence and cultural assimilation is wonderfully highlighted in Bharati Mukherjee's other novel, *Desirable Daughters*. Isn't it the dilemma of the author that she tries to reach out to that rebellious entity where conflict arises mainly because of the assimilation of native and foreign cultures? The Diasporic approach is undoubtedly very vehemently present in most of the books of Mukherjee and in this novel she goes to the extent of incorporating the mythical and ethical concepts of Indian system and culture.

KEYWORDS: Diaspora, immigrant, rootless, tradition, culture, identity, transition, assimilation

Introduction

It is the psychic consciousness of the Indian immigrants that is her dominant concern as she relates herself to this section and it is the trauma and struggles that these immigrants face in the foreign land which is presented by her in a convincing manner. Stationed far off in an alien nation, Bharati Mukherjee takes the liberty of revisiting her native country through anecdotes and imagination, through superstitious Indian beliefs and conventional submissions. On the one side she portrays the challenges of adapting and accommodating into an American culture and on the other hand she specifies ceremonious rituals of orthodox India where a girl is even married off to a tree. Why is it that Bharati Mukherjee is always comparing the eastern tradition and culture with that of the western world? Is it the feeling of loss that she regrets or is it the submission of novelty that she appreciates? Why is she so engrossed with Indian characters when she is in a foreign country where she can create and judge and comply with western characters? It undoubtedly is her Diaspora that speaks. Attached with sentiments to her homeland, sequestered with the type of individuals she has usually come in contact with and at ease with the way of life that she had led in her childhood, Bharati Mukherjee feels comfortable in that zone of Indianness where her heart belongs. No power, however modern and dictating, can wipe away or dominate that ethnic and holy attachment that usually one has with one's mother country. Externally we can project our western outlook, as Mukherjee does, but internally we know for whom our heart misses a beat. The roots maybe chopped but it is impossible to pull them out, the saplings growing out in the clay of heart can be severed but it's dehumanizing to haul them forever.

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The novel opens with the story of Tara Lata, the Tree Bride – when her teenage fiancé is killed by a snake bite on their wedding night, five-year old Tara Lata, who will not just be considered a widow by the society but a woman who brings misfortune and death, is compelled by her father to tie a knot with the tree to avoid further deliberations. Tara Lata, for the remainder of her life, is chained to her father's compound until the colonial police drag her off for having supported the Indian freedom fighters. This customary life of Tara Lata becomes a benchmark for the narrator who is also named Tara. The modern Tara is quite different from the conventional one – she is a wealthy Bengali Brahmin who has left India, has divorced the husband selected by her father and has completely wrapped herself up in a life of seclusion in San Francisco. How much is the home or the support of near ones responsible for the creation of one's own identity? Had it been possible for Tara Lata to survive had her father not taken such an abrupt decision? Is the loneliness of modern Tara because of sans attachment and sans harmony? The dilemma on the one hand and the amalgamation on the other of cultural trends are very apparent in the novel which is one of the basic themes of Diaspora.

The modern rootless Tara with all her Indian tradition and culture, exposing the typical behaviour of an Indian wife, immigrates to America after marrying Bishwapriya Chatterjee. Having led a sheltered life always under the protection of ethnicity and the guidance of Catholic nuns, Tara is quite lost between the pull of tradition and the haul of freedom when she reaches America. But in no time she tries to assimilate herself of the American opportunities and cuddle the unknown culture so that she can squeeze in with candidness and confidence, unconditionally and unapologetically. Tara, like any other Indian girl, has a traditional upbringing and so even in America the qualities of acquiescence and conformity keep following her which she desperately tries to unwrap. Perturbed with her husband's tradition-dependence she fails to accommodate her American style and approach which leads to conflicts of thought and understanding. She takes the decision of divorcing her husband, which in its way seems very American to her, that indicates her confident step towards an innovative perception. She longs for that western attitude of freedom where there is no dominance of any traditional culture, where judgments and opinions of others do not cause a constant menace, where the personal self leads a sequestered life of peace and tranquillity with any second person interference. The attempt of maintaining two identities, half Indian and half American, makes her the amalgam of a new culture and also questions her bona fide identity – the Diaspora effect.

In the alien nation Tara knows her limitations – she knows how strong the pull of the past is; she understands how difficult it is to come out of the clutches of tradition and culture; she realizes the problems of an uprooted self; she comprehends the situations and apprehensions of a lonely self in an unfamiliar land. She has to stand up against a community who can never relate themselves to her situation and she has to forego that community that can connect but has lost meaning in her life. Precarious is her condition and she stands alone to fight it – no words to explain, no expression to ascertain. She fails to explain the height of her misery and the blessing of their individuality –

Bengali culture trains one to claim the father's birthplace, sight unseen, as his or her desh, her home. Although she has never seen it, my mother's desh is Dhaka, by way of Mishtigunj, the village even few East Bengalis have ever seen.

When I speak of this to my American friends – the iron-clad identifiers of region, language, caste, and subcaste – they call me “overdetermined” and of course they are right. When I tell them they should be thankful for their identity crises and feelings of alienation, I of course am right. When everyone knows your business and every name declares your identity, where no landscape fails to contain a plethora of human figures, even a damaged consciousness, even loneliness, become privileged commodities. (Desirable Daughters, p.33-34)

In India the still dominant patriarchal society does not give women the due respect that they deserve but Tara in liberal America no longer adhere to that primitive culture that she feels is obsolete and unimposing. Although Tara initiates her story with the most American impulse, ‘the root-search’, she moves back to the days of her childhood in Calcutta with her two sisters Padma and Parvati. Tara’s introduction is quite catchy as she identifies herself and her sisters with that of a blooming tree – *Sisters three are we as like as blossoms on a tree. But we are not. (Desirable Daughters, p. 21)* The lady who wants to shun all connections of the past, who does not want to stick to the rich culture of her nation, who is determined to move ahead of conservatism and who appreciates the modern trend of individuality, is trying to link herself not just to her sisters but to a blooming tree which is resolute and rooted. Is Mukherjee trying to show that the more one tries to pull oneself out of the trench; the contrary force drags one to a deeper and darker trough?

Tara the extra-modern, Tara the rebel, Tara the admonisher, Tara who takes Andy in her life after her falling out of marriage with Bish – why does her thinking speaks something else? Why is it that when she fails to comprehend Rabi, her son with Bish, she decides to seek her ex-husband’s help? Is it just an eyewash compulsion or is it that deep within the connection still persists? When it is Rabi’s problem she knows that it is only Bish, the biological father, who can handle and not Andy, the adopted one. Is it that she realizes that however trendy one can become with live-in relationships, when actual quandaries strike one desires the comfort zone of that person who is ethically and customarily attached with the same kind of emotional rifts and sensitive exposures? Strange enough that even at intimate moments the mind flies to some distant area which is too known yet too distanced, too cherished yet too remote –

Andy joined me in bed. His weight on the mattress pitched me against his side. I smelled incense mixed with sweat. The brave smells of my “American adventure”; that was Parvati’s wry term for whatever Andy and I had going. Bish would have smelled of...what else, besides sandalwood soap and Listerine?

“Let it go,” Andy said.

“You mean, not discipline Rabi?”

“No, the toxicity. It’s in your body. It has to be expelled.”

“I should call his father. Bish would know how to handle him.” (Desirable Daughters, p. 91)

Although Tara looks forward for an independent life always, she fails to come out of her Indian origin and this creates not only confusion but also depression in her

subdued self. She looks forward to attain esteem and get recognized not by her husband's identity but through her own credit. Her separation from her husband and her live-in relationship with Andy, a balding red-bearded former biker, exposes her desperation and distinctiveness, her reason and her rebellion. Is Tara satisfied with her insurgence? Or is there still dilemma within? Is she happy to fulfil her dream of a separate identity or there is a question mark in her contentment? Now she can live on her own terms – is this what she wanted? Tara's so called modernity and individuality which she proves with her divorce is criticized by her eldest sister, Padma. Padma too stays in the US but both the sisters are strangers to each until Tara is visited by a stranger, Chris Dey, who introduces himself as the son of Padma. Tara knows not how to react at such unpredictable information and to clarify the fact calls their other sister, Parvathi, who stays in Mumbai. Parvathi warns Tara not to believe in strangers and even asks her to be careful of any kind of intrusion. Even Padma, when interrogated by Tara, rejects Chris as her son. But Tara is not satisfied with the responses and decides to dig into the past to reveal the secrets of the family. And it is her investigations that direct her into the life of her great grandfather, Jaikrishna Gangooly, and his three daughters, especially his youngest daughter Tara Lata, the tree bride and the lifetime virgin. Is Tara trying to find an escape route? Does the coming of Chris Dey give her an opportunity of going to her past which she had been longing for?

A follower of both the cultures, Indian and American, Tara's twofold identity is always at crisscross junctures creating havoc in her personal life. Though Tara is so critical about the Indian customs and practices like child marriage, polygamy, dowry system, etc., she is also happy to be a part of this big family – *We are Bengali Brahmins from Calcutta, and nothing can touch us. (Desirable Daughters, p. 44)* Tara's exploration of her family and its past discloses to her the fake identity of Chris Dey and she approaches the police to seek help from. The investigation by the police reveals the truth that Chris Dey had already been killed and the imposter is Abbas Hai, a member of an underworld gang, whose intention is to kill the techno-guru, Bish and his family. It is Jasbir Singh, an Indian origin Americanized policeman, who warns Tara against the dangers that her family is facing. Before Tara could comprehend the gravity of the warning, her house is bombed by an unknown person with the pact of killing Bish. Luckily enough Tara is saved from the explosion by Bish who in turn hurts himself badly.

Tara has always felt in her life that nothing could touch a Bengali Brahmin from Calcutta, but the presence of Chris Dey disturbs her mental equilibrium and destroys her confident assumption. She was aware of the fact that her sister, Padma, was in love with Ronald Dey, the Christian doctor and Chris's perceived father, but she was also self-assured of the stringent Brahmin Bengali parameters. She is quite sure of the fact that in India, especially within the grip of a rigorous cultural background, it is not just difficult but impossible to allow as well as accept anything that is out of limit –

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. So many eyes were watching, so many precautions were taken, and so much of value was at stake – the marriageability of

Motilal Bhattacharjee's oldest daughter, which unless properly managed, controlled the prospects of his second and third daughters as well – that any violation of the codes, any breath of scandal, was unthinkable. (Desirable Daughters, p. 31-32)

Secondly, even culturally Chris betrayed the specific ways, like smoking in front of an elderly lady and speaking a streetwise form of Bengali, and Tara confides these observations in the Sikh detective. Strange are the ways of the world – the more one wants to move away, the more one gets entangled in the mesh of the past, thus making the present very vulnerable. Andy tries to warn her against the upcoming consequences of digging the past, but Tara is adamant and determined and proceeds with her mission. The family and the culture that she has distanced herself from knock her down unfolding the obscurities and ambiguities of the past. Her past unfurls before her generating a divergence between the previous modes of judgment and the new outlines of consciousness. With the amalgamation of the clandestine past and the capricious future Tara tries to rediscover her conscious present. And then Tara is hit by another reality when she is exposed to the fact that her son Rabi is a gay. She imagines herself being blamed by the world for such negligence on her part regarding the bringing up of her son as well as the insecurities that she is not just facing herself but had ushered on Rabi too and had made him defenceless. The more Tara wants to come out, her past keeps haunting and hauling over her making her feel uncomfortable and insecure at every juncture of her pitted path. However firmly we might try, it is impossible for anyone to escape one's origins as it is the golden key to every locked query and secret and this is what Tara realizes at the last part of her traumatic journey.

For Tara life has taken shifts always; at times exuberant and at times reluctant she has stepped into the unknown and created an impression of her own. The challenge has always been to accept the new and in this progression she had thought of keeping her past shielded and forgotten. Never had she imagined that the times of yore will come crashing down on her with so much force and assurance that she will fall a prey to its commanding presence. The reconstruction of her identity becomes completely rooted in her recollection of her nostalgic and romantic past which undoubtedly assures her identity through her diasporic experience.

Even when her house is firebombed she is completely worn out and this makes her craving for her motherland and a traditional life more acute. It is Bish, her ex-husband, who, trying to save her, gets himself badly hurt. In the hospital, where he undergoes treatment, he is admonished with so many 'do not's' that life for him is definitely likely to become monotonous and uninspiring and he accepts the fact with endurance and forbearance. Tara is throughout at his service nursing him, talking to him about those narratives that are relevant to their lives as if trying to make Bish again a part of her life. Bish is reluctant in listening to those chronicles but Tara knows that her desperate hope lies in the rekindling of her suffocating past and that too with someone who can feel and understand. She knows that Bish, because of his Indian connectivity and sentimentality, is her trump card to replenish that anonymous past which she had always avoided but wants to append at present –

Buried deep in the consciousness of every Hindu is a core belief. Bish had it and in him it was rising to the surface. My father had embraced it like cool water on a summer day. Even Loreto girls with their

superficial Westernization and Catholic influence can tell the same story, and draw the same strength from it. It is strength, I've come to believe, although it can sound cruel, indifferent, fatalistic. (Desirable Daughters, p. 279)

In her trip back to India she tries to revitalize the yearning of finding the family's ancestral roots and their place in the history of the freedom movement of the country. In the process of searching for the hidden truths, is Tara trying to rediscover herself? And in this entrusting expedition of Tara, is Bharati Mukherjee searching for responses to her own hesitations? Tara finally comes to the resolution that she can never evolve as a single identity and accepts her dispersed self of being an Indian as well as an American. Is the declaration of Tara the final verdict of Mukherjee as well? Has she realized that neither can she splinter her entity into two parts nor is it possible to choose between two broken selves? Situations evolve, entities enhance and lives move on, taking turns and twists; but neither the past break lose nor the present let lose. Dangling in between, the tortured self fails to appraise the enticement of the directions and finally adjusts and accepts a compromising track. Mukherjee's Diaspora lies in that edifying synthesis of passion and promise, promiscuity and positivity, preference and predicament. She has been extremely successful in projecting the elements of Diaspora through her battered and blemished characters who have not just assured their existence but have created their identity with an optimistic outlook. The path is unidentified and unpredictable, but with the support of one's roots and the emphasis of one's novelty Mukherjee's characters, along with her, move on to attain such destinations where there is an amalgamation of things lost and things achieved.

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