



TARA CHATTERJEE: AN EXEMPLAR OF MONGREL EXISTENCE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS*

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Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee, as a Calcutta-born expatriate in 1970s in Canada, has crafted novels that reflected an outsider's feelings of alienation. After obtaining American citizenship in the late eighties, she celebrated a new sense of identity what she calls racial and cultural "mongrelisation" by exploring the transformative power of immigrants in her Short Stories and Novels. In her novel Desirable Daughters, Mukherjee continues her investigation of how immigrants, usually Indians, both shape and are shaped by American culture. This paper analyses the "mongrel existence" of the protagonist of Desirable Daughters, Tara Chatterjee, who perceives immigration as a positive opportunity of self-remaking by carving out an Americanized individualistic and independent feminine self, disregarding Indian traditions and conventions. Furthermore, it projects Tara's inability to completely dissociate herself from her Indian roots. The incidents that make Tara to feel the need to go to India in search of her roots to define her identity is also delineated. At the end Tara's in-between condition is justified as "mongrelisation". Through this analysis, it has been found out that the survival of an immigrant in the alien milieu is possible only by forgetting cultural past and by complete assimilation.

Key Words: Assimilation, Hybridity, Identity, Mongrelisation, Self-assertion.





Bharati Mukherjee, an apostle of immigrant writing, presents the image of a suffering woman preoccupied with her inner world, her sulking frustration and the storm within: The existential predicament of a woman. Her novels have Indians as central characters who alternate between the Indian and American way of living. Her novels, written since she moved to the United States of America, reveal all the characteristics of diasporic fiction, that is concerned with the fate of immigrants, and a growing distance from reality of India, which can be viewed from the outside perspective. The writer has explored the female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. Her protagonists face the challenges of the contrasting cultures between the traditional Indian way of life and the Western modernism. Mukherjee is solely concerned with the inner weather of the characters. The writer is a painter of their kaleidoscopic moods, their wills and conflicting choices.

Bharati Mukherjee, through *Desirable Daughters*, has represented the journey from India to America as symbolic of the rite of passage from the constricting space of patriarchal traditions to the realm of freedom of self-assertion. She has advocated assimilation into American culture relinquishing traditional Indian roles and values. Assimilation is a term referring to another part of the adaptation process initially proposed by Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist. Through assimilation, one has new experiences and incorporates them into the existing ideas. The process is somewhat subjective, because one tends to modify experience somewhat to fit in with the pre-existing beliefs.

Assimilation is about the great intermingling of cultural influence that comprises the American condition. Mukherjee prefers to use the word “mongrelisation” to describe precisely the process of fusion and two-way transformation that she dramatizes in her fiction, especially in her novel *Desirable Daughters*. In general, the word “mongrel” denotes any animal resulting from the crossing of different breeds or types. Mongrelisation suggests a spontaneous, spirited union of disparate entities. Mukherjee asserts:





'Assimilation' is no longer useful because of the politicization of that word. I don't like "hybridity" as a word because it seems to me to imply a kind of scientific, laboratory setting in which experiments are being controlled by a scientist. "Mongrelization" is a word that I want to take back from its original pejorative connotations. To me it implies a kind of accidental, spontaneous coming together- you don't know what is going to result from this coming together- and the energy that a new group or new species brings to society. So, for me "mongrelization" means that you don't care about preconceived social hierarchies, about racial or class status. (Edwards 164)

Desirable Daughters is set both in America and India. It highlights the struggle of Indian women in America who find it hard to sever their links entirely with their mother culture. They have to reconnect and reclaim their cultural roots and their links with their past to experience true fulfilment in life. So, however Americanized one may proclaim oneself to be, his/her sense of home will be an inextricable part of his/her being. As a book-jacket review of *Desirable Daughters* notes, "It is both the portrait of a traditional Brahmin Indian family and the contemporary story of an American woman who has in many ways broken with the tradition but still remains tied to her native country" (Rupa Books 2003).

This novel revolves around three Bengali Sisters who grew up in Calcutta and in due course end up in three different corners of the orb leading three different lifestyles. The protagonist says, "Sisters three we are ... as like as blossoms on a tree. But we are not" (*Desirable Daughters* 21). One lives a contented life in residential vicinity on Mumbai keeping herself busy in household chores. Another ends up in New Jersey among the elite class of migrant Indians. The third ends up in the West in California leading a more pedestrian life after getting a divorce from her tycoon spouse. It's an interesting tale about how life puts one in different circumstances. Though the story is about three 'desirable daughters', the focus is on Tara, the youngest of three. Of the sisters, Tara is the most removed from her family's traditions and its legacy until events





cause her to examine her tenuous relationships with her homeland, her two sisters and her divorced husband.

In *Desirable Daughters*, Bharati Mukherjee has struck a balance between the past and the present through a deft blending of tradition and modernity. This she achieves through Tara who has outwardly severed her links with tradition but still remains tied to her native country. She is influenced by ancient customs and traditions, but is also very much in to the glitziness and modernism of the America. She is caringly conscious of her existential predicament. Tara's tentative steps towards seeking her true self requires her to carefully navigate between prescriptive Hindu traditions and American notions of individuality and freedom.

The narrator of the novel, Tara, liberates herself from the tradition bound life and chooses to lead her own way of life. The real quest for identity in the life of Tara begins after her marriage to Bishwapriya Chatterjee, a wealthy Indian settled in America. Tara's migration from Ballygunge with her husband and re-creating new home in the USA never make her feel at home. Despite being a wife of affluent Bishwapriya Chatterjee, Tara's Athertonian life creates a sense as if she belongs to an outside community. Bish's excessive business in the cyber world and Tara's position to her husband like 'a princess' and 'queen' make Tara fail to reconstruct the home of intimacy, familiarity and emotional hearth in this alien environment. Tara's longing to get rid of the constriction of the Bengali orthodox family in the USA and to lead an independent life get shattered by Bish's traditional approach. Bish is a generous, protective provider, but

Love, to Bish, 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. Love is indistinguishable from status and honours. I can't imagine my carpenter, Andy, bringing anything more complicated to it than, say, 'fun'. Love is having fun with someone, more fun with that person than anyone else, over a longer haul. (*Desirable Daughters* 27)





Tara faces the enigma of modern women after her settlement in America. She undergoes transformation from a desirable daughter to an advanced American lady. She differs from other women, as she does not want to be provided and protected by her husband as is desired in the case of other women. She is the protagonist of the novel because she has the indomitable courage to transcend the boundaries, to take initiations on an unknown path. 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, an attentive wife, and raise a good boy. She wants to join the community college but cannot as it would not fit to her husband's values. Hence Tara has "left Bish . . . after a decade of marriage, it was because the promise of life as an American was not being fulfilled" (82). She begins to live in a part of San Francisco called Cole valley with her son Rabi. She separates herself from husband in order to assert her femininity and reconstruct and redefine her identity – immigrant American, American wife, and develops live-in relations with Andy, a balding, red-bearded, former biker, former bad-boy. He is a Hungarian Buddhist contractor, Zen retrofitter, Yoga instructor, and carpenter. Tara enjoys her love-life with Andy because she feels that there is something exotic, something that challenges the traditional Bengali norms and structures.

Though Tara wishes to lead a liberated American life, she could only partially assimilate in to the alien soil of America. Her bond with the American culture is only shallow and superficial. Her relationship with the New World is ambiguous. Bharati Mukherjee rightly brings out Tara's marginality and the aloofness as,

The moment I step outside the bookstore on to the crowded Haight Street, I lose the heady kinship with the world that I feel through my reading. Nobody pays attention to me other than to ask for spare change or press a handbill into my closed fist. I am not the only blue-jeaned woman with a Pashmina shawl around my shoulders and broken-down running shoes around my feet. I am not the only Indian on the block. All the same, I stand out, I'm convinced. I don't belong here, despite my political leanings; worse, I don't want to belong. (79)





It is clear that Tara has an intense feeling of being cut off from her community and its life style. She lives as an outsider. She is in the milieu physically, but not with the milieu. Tara feels: "I'm feeling just a little alien and uncomfortable, a tinge of not- belonging, in the midst of such welcoming comfort..." (75)

Tara's attempts to locate her own individual identity embroil her in crises in the U.S. As she has already shunned her traditions in the process of Americanization, she is unable to choose what cultural apparatus she should provide for Rabi's growth. Her crisis is intensified when Chris Dey, allegedly an illegitimate son of her eldest sister, Padma, enters in her life. Tara is confronted with a number of dilemmas leaving her groping for answers, inextricably linked to her own identity. In trying to solve the complicated tangle of her life, Tara gets a broad canvas of her consciousness. Tara suffers from the guilt of not keeping up with her traditions:

All the tender frustrations of dealing with unvarying ritual, the sweet sameness of daily life where anything new or unplanned can only bring disaster, and the guilty irritation of ancient bonds between the bhadra lok and chhoto lok, the master and servant, fills me both with pride and dread, because I have not fulfilled my duties, and I have not passed them on. As far as I have drifted from the path of piety, or even of family, their names sudden swell by dozens, the hundreds, filling my heart, brain, memory, soul and if were to speak at that moment, my words would have come out chocked...(246)

Tara belongs to both tradition and Modernity. Her identity is highly assimilative. She can adopt and accommodate herself both to her traditional Indian way of life and to her newly adopted American ethos. But she does not stick to the value systems of either of these ways of life. She moves on both the planes – the Indian and the American. She wavers between two lives: "maybe I really was between two lives..." (251). Yet to strike roots, yet to belong to any of these lives, she illustrates the dilemma of diaspora and the problems of an immigrant who has a fluid identity associated with mobility and duality rather than stasis and singularity. Tara wants to redefine herself, to reconstruct her true self in time with her novel experiences in an alien soil. She wants to





have a new identity but her efforts are futile. In spite of her liberated and emancipated attitudes, her desire to construct her own identity, her acceptance of her son's gay sexuality and live-in relationships, she fails to go beyond the tradition-bound life of an Indian woman. Tara's position is clearly observed as,

Tara represents the dilemma of an average migrant. The demands of tradition and their hold on one's psyche are never ultimately rejected. [...] She tries to create a personal space for herself through compromise. Rejection of her husband and associated security is a bold step for an Indian girl of Tara's background.[...] Despite an obvious diffidence, she questions, at least for sometime, traditional notions and shuns the clichéd answers provided by conventions. She wants to redefine herself and create fresh gender relations. (qtd. in Swain 132)

Through Tara, Mukherjee expresses her belief in the individual's liberty and freedom to mould him, to reconstruct and reshape his identity. She does not believe in a reality that suppresses one's self-expression and expectations: "Life was of all a matter of shaping up and hitting one's mark, satisfying expectation, achieving a quota. Repudiations of reality were destined to die a dishonourable death." (*Desirable Daughters* 153)

Though Tara has liberated and brave nature, she finds her identity only in the native soil. Tara solves all her problems of identity crisis by identifying herself with the legend of Tara Lata. Her visit to her motherland represents final moments of liberation. It further indicates her belongingness, and search for identity in her homeland which is lost by her migration to USA. Tara feels a strange connection to the Tree-Bride, whose history she had heard from her mother. Tara had been married, has a son and travelled all over the world, yet she submits, she had never changed her world. Whereas Taralata had accepted her marriage to a tree and then unburdened by the demands of husband and family, she had assumed a redemptive role for herself. She had opened her house to beggars, the poor, the sick and then the young soldiers fighting for the British Raj.





She had transformed herself from the unfortunate Taralata to “Tara-Ma”, a rescuer, saint and freedom fighter.

As a diasporic writer, Mukherjee in this novel skilfully associates the element of nostalgia with the protagonist's quest for root. Being the part of the diasporic community, the authors always tend to elucidate on the heavenly past and tormenting present situation they are in. The meeting point of the past and the present too are intensified by the nostalgic representation of the characters endeavoured by the writers. In *Desirable Daughters*, through the nostalgic exploration, Tara has juxtaposed the past and the present situation. In order to unearth an unknown identity of a stranger, Tara's yearning to come back to her original root is unravelled. The sudden nostalgic exploration acts as a catalyst to discover her inner self. Besides, Tara's reconstruction of identity is rooted on her nostalgic recollection of the 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. The importance of nostalgia is expressed here: “In discussing the significance of the past and in showing how much of Tara's identity, however Americanized it is, is based on her memories of India, and her grandmother's stories of the past, the novel reconstructs Tara as a Mongrel. Like her namesake Tara Lata of Mishtigunj, the Tree-Bride, she learns to resist colonization and the fixing of identities” (qtd.in swain,S.P. 131).

Thus, the analysis reveals that Tara's retrospective journey is in fact a return to the roots seeking Eastern solution to the weeds developed in the Western World. Tara exhibits the intricacies of the New World and seems to float rootless with time. She is the alienated self, suffering from the anguish and weariness of the diasporic experience, yet to create a place for herself. She belongs to nowhere, oscillating between the nostalgia for the traditional past and the romantic present. 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. The image of her family values forms a wall of security around her that camouflage the fragile vulnerable self. Hence, like the other diasporic women protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee, Tara “stands





in the shaky ground where East meets West and the sound of cultures clashing could shatter glass” (qtd. in Swain,S.P 133). Hence, Tara’s desire to have both Indian and American identity makes her a perfect exemplar of ‘Mongrel Existence’.

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