

MANIFOLD CULTURAL IMAGES OF FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS: A STUDY OF *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS*

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The journey of time never stays and never remains the same. It is true to the great extent if we consider the era in which we are living. This is the era of feminist movement, the era of the advancement of woman, downtrodden and the marginalized section of society. Particularly woman whose latent powers have been ignored for a long time in the social hierarchy in Indian patriarchal set up. Now in the rapidly shifting circumstances we see a new quintessence of woman who is daring enough to question the conservative assigned roles and challenged them with an evident aspiration to shatter all the confines of patriarchal prohibition. The present paper aims at the critical analysis of challenges and future prospects for the New Woman Tara in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*. Bharati Mukherjee belongs to the third world feminist writer whose literary urge is entirely channelized in the depiction of hardships and all the concerns of the South Asian Women particularly India. Dr. N.D.R Chandra aptly remarks: "Like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya(Suraiya), Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Pravar Jhabwalla and Githa Hariharan Mukherjee exposes many facets of feminism, encompassing agitation for equal opportunity, sexual autonomy and right to self determination"(267). Like other contemporary writers she is also deeply interested in spotlighting the recurrent feminist concerns but we observe an essential distinction in her approach as reflected in her utmost concern to mark out the troubles of Indian women immigrants in facing the dual subaltern pressure in the form of patriarchy and expatriation. In postmodern literature we find the recurrent academic discussion on two terms i.e. "Expatriate" and "Diaspora" in literary sphere. Particularly when we talk about Indian Diaspora it is replete with multiplicity of socio-cultural traditions and norms depicted with profound urge to optimize the opposite push and pull forces to accomplish an apposite state of subsistence. The process to attain a befitting position of subsistence starts from alienation to assimilation. She is well acquainted with the nuisance of this twofold colonization of an immigrant in America and Canada. The most striking feature of all her narratives is that they are well structured around female protagonists who are the candid representatives of thoughts and feelings tiding in her own heart and mind. Being an Indian she is wholly aware of the precincts and afflictions which are imposed by Indian patriarchy nourished by religion and mythological values on every female child right from her birth. In such a restricted female background she could well comprehend the qualms and quandaries of the emerging class of new woman who stand between two stools of modern western education and the orthodox norms and values.

In the novel, Tara stands for those new women who are interested in taking initiative role with all modern liberty in their matters of love marriage and sex. As far as the title is concerned it is very suggestive. It simply suggests the conditions applied to make the daughters desirable to

their parents, those who dare not to go against the established socio-cultural female framework, those who are submissive to the age old perception of laxmanrekha and those who are ready to be chained behind male dominated four walls.

It is a fact that we are living in the era of globalization and nothing is spared from the impact of it. So is the case with contemporary literature which under the high tide of globalization has lost the conceptual confines of nations and cultures. We find a very strong hold of a new generation of South Asian female novelists in contemporary literature especially their contribution to the global world of novel is exceptional. Without any misgiving Bharati Mukherjee belongs to that distinguished and pioneering group of diasporic writers whose accounts of diasporic experiences are enlightening to those millions of south Asians, residing in various countries especially in U.S., to comprehend the complex process of formation of multiple identities. These south Asians form a considerable portion of U.S. population and now they are at the nucleus of historical and literary developments as Padma Rangaswamy states in her novel *Namaste America* "The post-1965 Indian immigrant women are a different breed altogether.. .as articulate and organized professionals, they have expressed themselves in literature and recorded their immigrant experiences for posterity. Still, they have not received their fair share of focused attention.. .even though they represent half of the immigrant population"(147).

If we go through the selected works of Bharati Mukherjee, we are very much able to perceive a rough picture of the South Asian diasporic experience in U.S. and other countries . Mukherjee's accounts of diasporic experiences are chiefly characterized by a state of mind very much common to all diasporic communities i.e. the perpetual vacillation between contradictory push and pull forces of race and culture, time and space. This vacillation of south Asian women novelists living in U.S. resulted in twofold altered consciousness in their attempts to achieve reconciliation between past memories of south Asian culture and their present American ambience. Speaking about this altered double consciousness W.E.B. Du Bois In *The Souls of Black Folk* says "It is a strange thing, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others.. One ever feels his twoness-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.."(102). However we should keep in mind that Mukherjee's characters have a more complex identity of self which cannot be put under the head of double consciousness rather they possess a multiple consciousness creating a self neither cohesive nor crossbreed but rather a scrappy one. Her woman characters observe their personal experiences of love, marriage and sex through diverse lenses right from the beginning to the end of the novel.

As far as the identity of South Asian diasporic writers are concerned it is formed by various issues including individual and social, personal as well as collective. Since they live in contradictory cultural pressures which result in the formation of multiple selves made of diverse constituents. This newly formed self does not renounce the old culture to appropriate the new one; rather it seeks the prospect of holding positive facets of both cultures concurrently. In her study of female Indian immigrants in New York, Madhulika Khandelwal observed: "The lives of these Indian immigrant women.. .were not monochromatic stories of bewildered traditional women adrift in the United States. Neither were their experiences simple linear transitions from Indian to modern Western society. Indian women's experiences and viewpoints varied widely, running along class and generational lines. Significantly, few women were inclined to reject wholesale their cultural traditions for American social patterns and values. Instead, the sense prevailed that they faced the challenge of redefining their traditions and roles in the migration context"(124). The formation of identity has nothing to do with the choice of either culture

rather it refers to the act of redefining the cultural practices and traditions in accordance to one's own experiences. Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*, has delineated the formation of identity as an unremitting process of transformation without completion.

The female protagonist Tara, was born in Calcutta but moved to San Francisco at an early age of nineteen and her parents arranged a marriage with Bishwapriya Chatterjee a scholar of computer science at Stanford University. Tara instantaneously adjusts herself according to American culture and new society to grasp the opportunity. Soon Tara and Bish have a son Rabinrinath. Ultimately their relationship came to an end with divorce however they maintain a close friendship thereafter. Tara also has a close relationship with her older sisters Padma (Didi) and Parvati. Unlike her sisters Tara tries to obliterate the past. Meanwhile a very scandalous and baffling event occurs as a young man named Christopher Dey visits Tara in San Francisco with this claim that he is the illegitimate son of her sister Didi's love affair with a Bengali Christian named Ronald Dey. Tara is taken aback at this claim because she cannot imagine such an affair of her Didi. Eventually Tara goes to the police to discover the real identity of Christopher Dey. However, both Tara and her boyfriend Andy are worried about the outcome of scrutinizing the past which often mars the peace of present "[Andy] worried that I would only hurt myself, trying to lift every rock and throw open every door. It's good to rediscover my roots, but not if they rise up and strangle me"(114). But Tara goes forward to hunt the past reality which ultimately compels her to face her family, her Past and a culture that has been obliterated and she is plunged into a conflict of old sort of notions and a novel form of consciousness. Very soon she is confronted with her erroneous understanding of viewing a "real singular identity," and she comes to know that her own self is made of multiple layers each with its own perception and urges. Tara realizes that she will never be either American or Indian but rather disseminated between two diverse identities. One thing is very much striking in Tara unlike to other characters of Mukherjee that she easily accepts the multiplicity of her consciousness without any conflict or quandary. For instance Jasmine the other important character of her Novel *Jasmine* does not succeed to achieve the reconciliation of clash and discord of her splintered self. On the other hand Tara does not believe in struggling against the multiplicity rather she is heartily ready to hail this as a part of an unending process of identity formation. She is ever ready to greet changes in life which is based on diversity and gradual evolution because she believes that identity means being many at once with this desire to step forward to achieve more. Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* actually narrates the elusiveness of the diasporic experience as it is echoed in the Sanskrit epigraph "No one behind, no one ahead. The path the ancients cleared has closed. And the other path, easy and wide, goes nowhere. I am alone and find my way"(115). The idea of multiple paths symbolizes the inherent contradiction of the diasporic consciousness. Tara, the protagonist, receives the culturally defined consciousnesses of others as an insight into the formation of her own consciousness. "I have had the time, the motivation, and even the passion to undertake this history. When my friends, my child, or my sisters ask me why, I say I am exploring the making of a consciousness"(116). Tara does not intend to leave her past aside rather she probes deep into the past to develop the capacity to comprehend herself.

On her first arrival in America she behaves like a perfect model of a cultured Indian wife after an arranged marriage. Her obedience to her husband, to her conjugal responsibilities makes her husband feel pride to show his parents "...how well-trained this upper-class.. girl had become, what a good cook, what an attentive wife and daughter-in-law. What a bright and obedient boy she was raising"(118). Tara sacrifices all her desires for the desires and expectations of Bish and his family like other Indian wives believing in "liberating promise of marriage". But

Tara's inner dissatisfaction buried somewhere in her heart comes out as she incorporates the life in California when she says "I, of course, as a good Hindu wife-to-be, could not utter any of his names to his face. But we're progressive people; after crossing the dark waters to California I called him Bishu, then Bish"(119). Her words "dark waters" overtly indicates the commencement of the evolution of a new identity of a more progressive and liberated self who is no longer ready to participate in so called typical Indian family drama "When I left Bish (let us be clear on this) after a decade of marriage, it was because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled. I wanted to drive, but where would I go? I wanted to work, but would people think that Bish Chatterjee couldn't support his wife?(120) This inner disappointment directs her to take the most harsh step of divorce for which there is no space in Indian culture as Khandelwal states "Marriages are considered permanent and should not be altered by either partners' free choice.. Divorce was taboo, and considered a sure sign of Americanization." Tara's transformation from a good "Hindu wife-to-be" to a self-sufficient modern Californian is very much evident in the alteration of her perception of sexuality in such lines "Meena read the American magazines, and she would quiz us as we ate: Does your husband know how to satisfy you? ("First time I have heard 'husband' and 'satisfy' in the same sentence," giggled one of us.) Are you his breakfast, his snack, the main course- or the dessert? ("Definitely his Alka-Seltzer!" we giggled again"(122). After her separation from Bish she perceives Sexuality as an integral part of her identity quite contrary to the shameful perception of typical Indian woman. She no longer accepts the Indian double standard "In the months after I left Bish, one by one, nearly all of his oldest friends, those boys who had sat in the Stanford student pub with us while I sipped my Coca-Cola, found my new address in Palo Alto. I gratefully opened the door of my new apartment to them, thinking that divorce did not necessarily spell the end of my old social life, and I'd ask about their wives and children-and where, by the way, were they, still in the car?- and within minutes they were breathing hard and fumbling with my clothes. Your life is already shattered, they said, what more damage can this do.. I left the peninsula because of them and moved to the city" (125) Khandelwal also points out "Men's deviations from expectations seldom brought penalties and were easily forgiven, whereas women who strayed from prescribed gender behavior risked ruining the reputations of their natal and marital families"(124).

we find an alteration in Tara's view of sexuality after her meeting and dating with Andy and this alteration is very much similar to that form of sexuality portrayed in American magazines which she used to read with her friend Meena "When intimacy first struck me as inevitable between Andy and me (long before it occurred to him, he said), I was intrigued ... This would be a selfish act, no hundreds of generations looking on in approval. We were exotics to each other, no familiar moves or rituals to fall back on"(128). The same Tara who regarded the American expectations of a woman's sexuality as "selfishness and self-involvement," Now she is inclined to welcome that kind of intimate relationship with Andy. All Indian shameful feelings concerning sexual issues have given place to American brazenness because there are "no hundreds of generations looking on in approval," she is now free to behave as she pleases. As she describes this transformation, "Yesterday, practiced daughter of Calcutta that I was, comfortable within a filtered gaze.. One door had closed, another opened"(129). Now Tara's notions of sexuality have crossed all the confines of the fusion of Eastern and Western typecasts to approve her intimate relation with Andy as simply "exotics to each other," which knows no cultural fetters. Tara herself speaks about her departures from Indian sexual consciousness "It's one of those San Francisco things I can't begin to explain in India, just like I can't explain my Indian life

to the women I know in California”(130). This change in Tara’s outlook of sexuality is really interesting and remarkable to understand the nature of her new identity in which the difference of perceptions do not create any problem rather the old ones are readily prepared to be replaced by the new ones without any clash.

The transition is not only viewed in her sexual identity but in her perceptions of race and ethnicity too. Born and brought up in upper class Bengali Brahmin family, she naturally adhered to the biases of the hierarchical class system of India as is reflected in this statement "Any community whose roots were not in Bengal, preferably in the eastern half of Bengal; anything like the Marwari, Parsi or Sindhi community, was seen as alien and money-grubbing, worthy of our disrespect, if not outright contempt”(131). Very soon Tara realizes that in America the caste distinctions and hierarchical privileges do not hold the same implication as they did in India and says "When I speak of this to my friends- the iron-clad identifiers of region, language, caste, and sub caste- they call me 'over determined' and of course they are right"(134) Tara is really impressed by this anonymous attitude of American society and goes to the extent of saying "The rhetoric of modern San Francisco makes me invisible. I am not 'Asian, which is reserved for what in outdated textbooks used to be called 'Oriental.' I am all things.. I thrive on this invisibility. It frees me to make myself over, by the hour..”(135) Tara is really overwhelmed by this fragrance of cultural freedom in which identity is not imposed from birth rather it gives the opportunity to everyone to be involved in the process of making of a consciousness.

Some critics have slated Mukherjee for such an overt Americanized attitude of her characters like Tara who think the wearing of American identity is the only key to come out of the pressure of opposite push and pull forces. Rangaswamy has bitterly criticized Mukherjee for such outlook, "The only way for many of Mukherjee's heroines is to discard the past, totally and irrevocably, and embrace total Americanization”(138). Tara is the apt example of such protagonists who believe in obliterating all the marks of past identity. There is sharp comparison and contrast between Tara and her Didi when Tara says ." Didi has essentially transplanted India to America, living as though her Calcutta days never ended when she immigrated." In the nearly twenty-five years that [Didi] has been in the United States, she has become more Indian than when she left Calcutta”(139). Tara does not approve this attitude of Didi and regards it as a craven response to complex problems of cultural transition . "[Didi's] clinging to a version of India and to Indian ways and to Indian friends, Indian clothes and food and a 'charming' accent had seemed to me a cowardly way of coping with a new country. Change is corruption; she seemed to be saying. Take what America can give, but don't let it tarnish you in any way"(14). Through these contrasting characters the novelist has raised the crisis of cultural transition and adaptation and tried to discuss such issues like what should be the extent of incorporation of other culture and does this alteration lead to the corruption of true cultural identity?

The most glaring trends of Bharati Mukherjee’s protagonists are their intrepid and confident approach to life, their inclination to welcome changes and above all their pragmatic temperament to admit the veracity of life in its true form. Prof Anita Miles is of the same opinion that they "emerge stronger providing sustenance and equilibrium to the entire community"(118). In the *Desirable Daughters* Parvati, Padma and Tara are not just the three sisters rather they represent the three different feministic approaches to life. Parvati and Tara stand for two extreme feministic views of passive domesticity and radical postmodern autonomy respectively. But Padma is in favour of a reconciliation between these two extremes. Thus the three sisters are three substitute ways of life to be opted by Indian woman. They may go on the submissive contended way of Parvati, or on the drastic and daring way of Tara or on the evenly poised way

of Padma. As far as the novel is concerned it concentrates on Tara because of her plucky move on a dicey and demanding way of life which leads to the total liberty from imposed traditional and cultural confines which has been justified by Mukherjee as “surrender...to the whims of fate and the manipulation of the marital marketplace...What do they know of the needs of modern woman?”. The novel is obviously in favour of a genuine freedom regarding the selection of life partner and ridicules any imposition in the name of arranged marriage and socio-cultural norms as we observe in the irony of the collapse of Tara’s arranged marriage with Bish as starkly contrasted with successful conjugal life of Parvati with Auro based on love marriage. The novel delineates the nuisance of patriarchy and hierarchy as well as the emotional exploitation of woman in the name of marriage. Tara married Bish because her father told her to get married. 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”(26).

We thus see that the story of Tara begins with the set identity of a typical Indian wife and later on a mother, but soon she realizes that these fed-up roles of traditional Indian women cannot be her only identity. This realisation leads her to assimilate and celebrate the chaos of multiplicity of consciousness as she says: "Out of order, I created chaos. Out of chaos, one.. .will create something resembling a new American consciousness"(153). The multiplicity of time, space and culture and Tara’s chaotic experiences are the formulating forces to construct her identity based on manifold cultural images of female consciousness always eager to assimilate much more to come. Rangaswamy aptly remarks about the experience of the South Asian diasporic woman as: "While struggle, pain, and compromise are an integral part of the immigrant experience, many [South Asian] women do not necessarily see total Americanization or rejection of India as the path to wholeness... They anticipate challenges they will face or are already facing.. .[forcing] them to make new choices"(166). Hence a sense of psychological uncertainty is a trademark feature of South Asian diasporic women and this uncertainty or indeterminate identity enables them to express the voices of the multitudes that lie within her with this promise to sound the voices of those selves that have yet to be discovered.

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