

MULTICULTURALISM IN BHARTI MUKHERJEE'S *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS*

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Abstract

Multiculturalism has become the culture of the cotemporary world. With the prefix 'multi', meaning diverse, we are still reluctant to use the term 'culture', as applicable to the whole world. Culture has been an important factor in Writing in English. Bharti Mukherjee's stories revolve around immigrants entering into American culture from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, mostly Indian. There is often a strong element of feminism in the works of Bharti Mukherjee, although the main theme is always cultural complexity and multiculturalism. *Desirable Daughters* belongs to that genre of literature which deals with matters pertaining to immigrant life and cultural hybridity. *Desirable Daughters* may be read as a lucid account of the conflict arising from the interaction between native and foreign cultures and the inability of the individual to cope with the dynamics of the social and psychological issues which more often than not, come as an unpleasant surprise to the most broadminded and all accepting individuals of any specific culture. Bharti Mukherjee weaves her story around characters uprooted from their country of origin, struggling to adjust themselves to the vastly different American culture. This paper will explore the aspects of multiculturalism dealt within the novel.

"Through my fiction, I make mainstream readers see the new Americans as complex human beings, not as just 'The Other.'

- Bharati Mukherjee

Multiculturalism relates to communities containing a variety of cultures. It usually refers to cultural diversity and is applied to the political, socio-economic, cultural make-up of a specific place, sometimes at every level or crossroad of life e.g. centers of education, occupations, cities or continents. In this sense, multiculturalist society is a society which is at ease with the intricate sequence of events of human life and the desire amongst people to express their own identity in the manner they see fit. Ideologies very different from each other and individuals deeply

influenced by the same are shouldered with the responsibility of understanding the complexity of multiculturalism, creating a balance between the differences and ultimately maintaining social harmony and equanimity which could only come from each culture respecting the other and the cultures blending together or coming to terms with the multitude of differences which are a natural result of the mingling of different ethnic and religious groups from different parts of the world. Multiculturalism can be explained neither as a principle advocated nor a study of feelings and emotions with a rigid theory of man's identity in the contemporary world, but as a way of life in today's world and an interpretation of life and the modern world as a whole.

Identity crisis gets a classical expression in the multiculturalist literature of the cotemporary times. Many writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Arvind Adiga, Bharti Mukherjee etc. have expressed the feeling of alienation, isolation and rootlessness faced by the expatriates in places where they are treated as an outsiders. They have discussed the issues of globalization, consumerism, transnationalism, cultural hybridity, alienation and identity crisis faced by the individuals through the protagonist and the characters in their writings. Their works focus on the confused and dislocated psychological condition of an expatriate who desires to search for home and identity in transnational and trans-cultural space.

Halfway through her knowledgeable, wide-ranging discussion of South-Asian "diaspora" fictions, Susheila Nasta quotes a famous line from Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*. Musing on the aesthetic effects of certain kinds of postcolonial cultural displacement and the role of the Indian writer in Britain, Rushdie claims, "Those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths have perhaps had modernism forced on us" (Rushdie, 145).

Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel *The Namesake* (2003) focuses on the cravings of its protagonist Gogol Ganguli, a second generation U. S. immigrant, for cultural identity. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* explores real life anxieties of Indians living abroad who face identity crisis in which, despite his successful legal career, Sai's grandfather, Jemubhai Patel, faces such a dilemma. He is frustrated with those that cling on to the traditional Indian customs and, therefore, adopts the English way of life. Similar problem is faced by Chamcha of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* who has broken with his Indian identity as an emigrant in England. In fact, almost all works of Salman Rushdie examine the jumbled and fragmented identity of the people living in the sub-continent.

Bharati Mukherjee has also explored the positive and negative aspects of multiculturalism faced by expatriates in her writings. She places her protagonists in a variety of cultural settings where they find different races, cultures, traditions and different ethnic backgrounds. In such a multicultural and multi-ethnic setup, she portrays the journey for the quest of identity, along with the challenges and struggles faced by the protagonist. She draws her characters as transnationals who remain connected to their homeland and host land equally. Though her characters in *The Holder of the World*, *Leave it to Me*, *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* migrate to other countries, their roots always remain in their homelands. As a result, they are neither expatriates nor immigrants in their values and attitudes, but transnationals, whose networks cross the borders of the nation. In such a multicultural background, they go through identity crisis which leads them to undertake a quest of their own identity. In the following section an attempt is made to analyze this quest for identity with reference to the novel *Desirable Daughters*.

Desirable Daughters by Bharati Mukherjee appears to be just another 'finding the roots' book. *Desirable Daughters* is a story about three sisters, Padma, Parvati and Tara, from an upper

class Bengali Brahmin family, from the Bhadrakalok of Calcutta, born on the same date three years apart from each other. Bharti Mukherjee describes how the life of the three girls, brought up in a traditional Bengali Brahmin life style, but sent to a convent school for their education turns out to be completely different from one another. Each one is trying to hide the truth from the other two, as a result of the upbringing due to which we see many of the things they desire and have done in a bad light.

Padma, the eldest, stays in New Jersey with her husband Harish Mehta and his two grown up children. She is a television anchor, a well-known personality, very Indian in looks and behavior. She works at Jackson Heights, an ethnic area, in partnership with Danny, a Sindhi businessman. She had an affair before her wedding and a child out of wedlock. She involves herself in a series of relationships of conveniences and finally settles to a marriage of convenience in America.

Parvati, the second born, becomes a submissive wife and daughter in law, in a marriage with Aurobindo Banerjee, a person of her own choice, but fortunately blessed by their parents. She stays in Bombay and is blessed with two sons, Bhupesh and Dinesh. She is a housewife and caters to all the whims and fancies of her husband and his family. She leads a very comfortable life in her luxurious apartment with servants and drivers. Her frustration can be felt, but she continues living with the societal constraints that one faces in India.

The protagonist Tara is the youngest, who rejects the traditional structure of Indian society, but she gets into a traditional marriage with Bishwamitra Chatterjee, an Indian self-made millionaire and a man of her father's choice. Tara settles down with her husband in California for almost ten years, where she feels bored and ignored by her husband who is a generous, protective provider, to whom 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” (Mukherjee 27). 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 expects a different identity abroad by working somewhere rather than a housewife, but her husband never allows her to do so. She finally divorces her husband, after the birth of their son, and has a series of unhappy flings. She starts working as a school volunteer and lives with her teenaged son, Rabi and Andy, her live-in partner, who is Buddhist biker.

Tara remembers the orthodox community in India, where every word relating to family carries a special meaning. The elders are not called by their names, family friends are called as 'mashi' and 'mesho' for mother's side and “Pishi and 'Pishemashai' or Kaki and Kaku for the father's side” (36). Similarly, Tara mentions that “No middle – class Bengali man would smoke in front of his elders” (38). Such a kind of social set up leads her to think that Indian identity is as fixed as any specimen in an Aurelian's glass case, confidently labelled by father's religion (Hindu), Caste (Brahmin), sub caste (Kulin), mother tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta), formative region of ancestral origin (Mishtigunj, East Bengal), education (postgraduate and professional), and social attitudes (conservative). She is the follower of both Indian and American culture which creates her dual identity. She keeps double consciousness – partly Indian (Bengali) and partly American. However, she is afraid to use her Ballygunge Park Road identity in USA. The observations of Edwards Bradley regarding Tara's affinity to India and her Indian identity are quite revealing when he writes that “highly Americanized (Tara) . . . is not really far from her Indian roots in terms of consciousness” (122).

There is Christopher Dey, who turns up at Tara's house saying that he is the son of Padma and Ronald Roy, during her younger days in Calcutta and that he was brought up in an

orphanage. Tara discusses it in detail with her sisters, her ex-husband and San Francisco Police Department Sergeant, Jasbir Sidhu (Jack). Tara's live-in partner leaves her after this event and she finds that Christopher Dey is a fraudster with a dubious background. She is forced to confront her sister with this fact and again one can feel that her upbringing has caused some sort of restraint in her being open with either of her sisters with respect to this matter.

The whole logic behind Bharti Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* was to explore, in a rather twisty way, Indian inter-relationships and experiences, including those of immigration and how the characters choose to deal with being in a new country - whether accepting or rejecting the new culture. She has characterized a social order in which girls, preoccupied in their struggles of dealing with the new cultural shifts, set aside their own identity, in return for choice of a seemingly easy pace of life in a first world country. The female characters, along with the protagonist, lose the proactive vibrancy, but are also happy with it although there is no inner transformation in them. If *Wife* and *Jasmine* by Bharti Mukherjee were about the recent immigrant to the United States trying to adjust, then *Desirable Daughters* is about an immigrant who found success in the American Dream, but feels that she has lost something irreplaceable in the pursuit of that desire.

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