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## AN IDENTITY CRISIS: EXPLORATION OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS*

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### Abstract:

*The present paper attempts to explore identity crisis depicted in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters. The novel unfolds the story of three sisters, who are settled in different countries, and are suffering to find out their own identities as they come to realize their marginal position as well as substitute role in family and society. The quest of its protagonist Tara for a separate identity in the traditional bound society leads her place to place, but wherever she moves, 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 diasporic consciousness depicted in the immigrant writing in general and in the writing of Bharati Mukherjee in particular; the second section analyses identity crisis reflected in the novel Desirable Daughters; and the third section concludes the paper with an overarching statement. Thus, the present paper will be a modest attempt to analyze the novel.*

### KEY WORDS:

Identity, alienation, diaspora, migration, immigrant, transnational

### INTRODUCTION

#### Section I

Diasporic literature, especially Indian diasporic literature is the result of colonization and decolonization, the period in Indian history in which numbers of Indian people were migrated to other countries either by colonizers or by their need for work. These migrated people began to face different problems as they were indifferent to the culture of other countries which lead them to search for their identity. This feeling of lack of identity gets classical expression in the diasporic literature of the period. Many writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Arvind Adiga have expressed the feeling of rootlessness in the migrated countries where they are treated as other. They have discussed the issues of globalization, consumerism, transnationalism, cultural hybridity, alienation, identity crisis faced by the individuals. Their works focus on the dislocated self, which desires to search for home and identity in transnational and trans-cultural space.

Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel *The Namesake* (2003) focuses on the cravings of its protagonist Gogol Ganguli, a second generation U. S. immigrant, for the cultural identity. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* explores real life anxieties of Indians living abroad who face identity crisis. 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 living a life. Similar problem faces 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 expressed this sense of loss of identity throughout her novels. She

places her protagonists in diverse socio-cultural milieu where they find different races having quite different ethnic backgrounds. In such a multicultural and multi-ethnic social setup, her protagonists probe to find out their identities. She draws her characters as transnational who remain connected to their homeland and host land equally. Though her characters in *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 find the mishmash of self which lead 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*.

## Section II

Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2002) focuses on the search of an immigrant for his roots, place of origin, family and culture. The origin of an individual establishes his identity in the homeland society, but raises a crisis in the adopted country – the host land. In fact, Mukherjee herself confesses in one of her interviews that Tara, the protagonist of her novel *Desirable Daughters*, speaks about the American quest to discover who is she? Where does she come from? Tara's search for roots takes her to India, and the land of her origins, Mishtigunj, the impacts of which are mostly on her identity in the migrated country. It helps her to form transnational identity, yet she is caught into another predicament and raises the question whether she is Indian Bengali Brahmin or immigrant American or somebody else.

The novel focuses on the life of three Brahmin daughters – Tara, Padma and Parvati – all of whom are eager to form their own identity in their own way. They belong to the wealthy Brahmin family of Bhadra lok to a fond father and a traditional-bound orthodox mother. Since their childhood, they are aware about their marginal position in the conventional society which has little regard for women. As all of them are well educated, they try to cast away the traditional identity denoting system by rebelling against the constraining socio-cultural set up and crave to form their own identity.

The real quest for identity in the life of its protagonist Tara begins after her marriage to Bishwapriya Chatterjee, a wealthy Indian settled in America. It is interesting to note here that though Tara rejects traditional structure of Indian society, she marries to a man of her father's choice. Bishwapriya, usually called as Bish, works as an electrical engineer in California, where afterwards Tara settled with him for almost ten years. 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. He 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). Tara expects a different identity abroad by working somewhere rather than a housewife, but Bish never allowed her to do so.

After a decade of marriage, she understands that the promise of life as an American wife is not being fulfilled. She wants to work somewhere, but is not allowed as Bish is a traditional Indian Husband. His 15 hours' office, and his public functions in Boston, New York, Tokyo, Taiwan, Malaysia, Manila make Tara alienated. She finds her world limited only to her husband and son, and beyond that her world is alienating that has no identity in American society. She is tired of explaining India to Americans. She is “sick of feeling an alien” (87). She says “I don't belong here . . . I don't want to belong” (79). She never wanted to be a part of American society and always tries to maintain her Indian identity. But she also enjoys the American life, an independent life, as she likes and wants. Vandana Singh rightly observes about Mukherjee's protagonists when she writes: “Though the female protagonist is comfortable with her American identity still she identifies with her Indian roots” (189).

Tara 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” (Mukherjee 82). She begins to live in a part of San Francisco called Cole valley with her son Rabi. She separates herself from husband for her own 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. Now she feels “for the first time in [her] life totally at home, unwilling to leave” (25). The feeling at home provides a sense of satisfaction to her. She feels as if her dream of separate identity as an individual were fulfilled. Now she can live her life in her own terms – being an immigrant American, “self-appointed Joan of Arc” (221). America has provided the opportunity of modernity to her. She shows her individuality which gives license to act out her desires. Her divorce is an attempt to develop her own individuality. She needs the liberating promise of marriage and the wider world. She doesn't want “to be preserved bug trapped in amber” (184).

However, Tara's American adventure is a great shock for Indian readers. It is because of Mukherjee is not "writing about nostalgic past . . . not . . . about only Indian American ghetto" (Weich. Web). Padma condemns and considers Tara's divorce as shame to the Bhattacharjee family. Though Tara and Padma reside in USA, they are strangers to each other. Tara has become American, self-engrossed, for whom the past is now darkest cave.

Tara's American life is shattered with the sudden arrival of her so called nephew Chris Dey who calls Padma as his mother. She could not believe in Dey and calls her both sisters to discuss the matter. Parvati, who lives in Bombay, India, warns her to do not believe anybody as the gangsters are activated in the country. Padma also rejects Chris Dey as her son. Yet, 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. Her investigation leads her to the life of her great-great grandfather, Jaikrishna Gangooly and his three daughters, especially his youngest daughter Tara Lata, the tree bride and lifetime virgin. Mukherjee highlights here cultural restraints for women in India. But, at the same time, she also points out how women can change the people around them and the total social set up. 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.

Tara feels connected to Tara Lata and wants to know more of her. She is proud of her origin – Bhattacharjee family, Bengali Brahmin. But 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. 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 a lepidopterist's glass case, confidently labelled by father's religion (Hindu), Caste (Brahmin), sub caste (Kulin), mothertongue (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 in her life that 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). But, Tara is also aware that the Indian identity is fixed, static formed by an individual's religion, caste, subcaste, 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 major issue throughout the narrative. The characters in the novel develop multiple identities due to their position – 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.

### Section III

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 constrains. Tara not only craves to establish her own identity, but she tries to reconstruct her own identity against the traditions to which she belongs. Yet, 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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