

## **SOCIO FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Feminism as an ideology is a strong reaction against the subordination of women in family as well as society. It challenges the domination of patriarchal thought in which men claim to define what is right for women. Traditionally Feminism was a mass movement in which women fought for political equality, civil rights and job opportunities. Today the movement has achieved an individualistic nature where women demand human rights and personal independence beyond their existing socially defined roles.

Indian Feminist writers of post-colonial era have created literature with women at its centre. Sashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandeya, Anitha Desai and Manju Kapoor among others place women in the mainstream of society and portray them as source of strength, energy and action. Bharati Mukherjee, Indian born novelist, occupies a unique position among her contemporaries as the foremost chronicler of woman's immigrant sensibilities. She concentrates on the cross cultural forces at work in the formation of woman's identity. Mason observes, "Focusing on the multiple, and at times conflicting, life-scripts that inscribe the lives of women as they move from India to the New World, Mukherjee traces the process of immigrant women's subject-formation. It is her concern with female immigrant subjectivity, and her emphasis on women's agency in the construction of this subject-position as a form of personal liberation, which clearly marks Mukherjee as a feminist writer." Bharati Mukherjee's heroines are all immigrants and as such suffer the trauma of immigrant dislocation. While some of them succumb to the pain of alienation and relocation, others, due to their upbringing and cultural conditioning, are more resilient and innovative in facing the pressure of constructing new identities. Though they are better suited for adaptability in an alien culture, they find it difficult to completely break away from their past. So they seem to have a dual existence, that complicates the process of creating self-identity.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminism, Bharati Mukherjee's

### **INTRODUCTION**

The three sisters in the *Desirable Daughters* belong to the second category. Padma, Parvati and Tara live in two worlds – traditional Brahmin world of India and secular world of America. They are born and brought up in a conservative, wealthy Bengali family. They are pretty and intelligent and they go to excellent schools. They lead a sheltered life. Their father is a zealous guardian of their virtues. "Our father couldn't let either of my sisters out on the street. Our car was equipped with window shades. We had a driver and the driver had a guard." (22) But as they grow up, they rebel against the constraining social environment to live their own life. The first defection is the middle sister, Parvati, "jumping the marriage queue" while at Mount Holyoke when she chooses a husband on her own, a young Indian M.B.A. from Tufts. She is now a compulsively organized, God fearing and anxiety-ridden housewife under the care and protection of her hardworking financier husband. She has Auro's (her husband) relatives and family friends visiting her almost every day of

the year. However she is a dutiful wife and she never complains. She has hired a cook and enough servants and can casually joke that “she manages a hotel, not a home”(54)

Padma, on the other hand, is a lady of progressive vision. She lives with her plump, older, adoring Punjabi husband in New Jersey as a celebrity-entrepreneur of East Coast Bengali culture. She stars in the local New York cable channel and does gold Jewellery and sari business on the side. Her inalienable attachment to her home makes her the preserver of Bengali tradition in America. She maintains her Indian way of life and socializes exclusively with Indians. She also stages Indian mythologies for schools and community centres with readings, slide shows and recitations. At nineteen, Tara the youngest of the three sisters dutifully enters an arranged marriage and follows her husband to California. Within a few years her brilliant husband, Bishwapriya Chaterjee, PhD from Stanford, has parlayed his inventions into a global telecommunications empire. Tara becomes a billionaire's wife, living in a gated community in Silicon Valley. Bish (meaning poison in Bengali) is so busy expanding his Mughal-like empire that his humanity suffers. Working fifteen-hour days, at home he relapses into the role of a traditionally demanding Indian husband, hectoring and threatening his dreamy, artistic son Rabi. To save her son from his fathers crushing contempt, Tara flees the gated community and moves to San Francisco, where she takes a volunteer job at a local public school and a live-in lover, ex-member of a biker gang turned peaceful Zen master.

Thus marriage opens up new avenues for the three sisters' feminist struggle of growing up. Mukherjee contrasts this American Feminist culture with the native primitive culture in the “Tree Bride” episode. Several years before Tara's ancestor, Tera Lata faced greatest misfortune because her groom died of snakebite on the marriage day. As a matter of principle, namely his refusal to hand over his daughter's dowry to the family of her newly deceased bridegroom, Jai Krishna Gangooly takes his 5-year-old daughter Tara Lata to a deep forest and marries her to a tree. Married to a tree, he feels, she will at least “remain a wife, a wearer of vermilion powder in her hair part and not a widow”(15) It is an act of obstinacy that has far-reaching effects. For through his impulsive act, Jai Krishna turns his daughter into a mythic figure: Tara Lata, the Tree Bride, who lives her life a virgin and opens her heart and her home to the sick and the poor, to Muslims and Hindus, and to the soldiers who fight against the British. Through the Tree Bride episode, Mukherjee assaults the atrocities committed against women in the form of child marriages and dowry system in a patriarchal society. Ironically the Tree Bride also symbolizes liberation from male domination as she is “unburdened a time consuming, emotion-draining marriage and children, never having to please a soul...”(17) Unlike their ancestor, the three sisters are not bogged down by the conventional superstitious beliefs. Although they have obeyed their ancestral teachings and adhered to the laws of arranged marriage, they enjoy a life of freedom and unlimited possibilities.

Like Tara Lata's shifting identity, Tara's identity also keeps on sifting as she travels to and fro between India and America, past and present and memory and desire. When Tara arrives in America as a married woman, she is steeped in Indian culture and therefore feels the tug between tradition and freedom as she tries to meet expectations that are often wildly contradictory. But then she immediately tries to embrace American culture taking advantage of the opportunities it affords and attempts to assimilate as best as she can to the new society. She finds it impossible to convey to her American friends citizens of comparatively classless, mobile society how circumscribed and static Indian identity is: “[It] is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case, confidently labelled by father's religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), sub-caste (Kulin), mother-tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta)...” She feels estranged in American society. “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..... All the same I stand out, I am convinced. I don't belong here, despite my political leanings: worse, I don't want to belong"(79)

Tara's frustration at her endeavours to assimilate and Bish's lack of it eventually leads to a divorce. The divorce marks her transition into a new identity and a liberated self. She soon recognizes that her sexuality is also an aspect of her identity, which she can possess and embrace, after being accosted by the same men who had been respectful towards her during her marriage. She creates a new sexual identity that does not come in conflict with her previous self perceptions. In fact her husband and her lover Andy are such opposites that there are no points of comparison. The two men with their different cultural backgrounds seem to symbolize her cultural dilemma. Initially, she tries to seek solace by clinging on to the past through people, memories, visits or calls and by bonding with her two elder sisters, Parvati and Padma, who serve as links to a past that Tara has begun to forget. But the appearance of the mysterious Chris Dey exposes the shallow intercontinental relationship of the three sisters. The revelation also upsets the fine balance of the sisters' lives. Most affected is Tara for Padma, now a good wife living in the Jersey suburbs, refuses to corroborate, denying outright that an affair even took place. Divorced from Bish, and raising their teenaged son as a single mother, she is already struggling to cope with a reality for which her sheltered Calcutta upbringing did not prepare her. Nevertheless, her desire to know more about the boy unintentionally leads her on a path of self discovery.

Tara proceeds with her quest and as the mystery unfolds she is forced to face her family, her past and a culture that she has distanced herself from, resulting in a conflict between old modes of thinking and new forms of consciousness that have been created. When her house is firebombed she is completely exhausted, making her yearning for a homeland and traditional life more acute. A trip back to India rekindles a desire to find her family's ancestral roots and their place in the history of pre-independent India. And in doing so she understands her ex husband and understands why they are different.

Bhagabat Nayak in his essay observes Tara's quest for identity in her new land. "Tara after time-traveling finds that she is comprised of multiple selves accepting or rejecting certain aspects of both Indian and American culture" (Nayak 23). Tara resists the idea of a single identity, Indian or American and lives in the "world between". She does not fight with her multiplicity but rather accepts it as part of her progressive capacity. She believes in pursuing her individual freedom to mould herself and restructure her destiny. The Sanskrit poem in the novel's foreword lays out Tara's mission: "No one behind, no one ahead. The path the ancients cleared has closed. And the other path, everyone's path, easy and wide, goes nowhere. I am alone and find my way" (125).

Thus Tara, through her search for roots, moves from the liberating potential of American individualism to an exploration of the possibilities of cross-national identity to create a self-affirming hybrid identity for herself.

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