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IMMIGRATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S *THE DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS*

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ABSTRACT

Immigration is a major life transition. Like any such transition, it is stressful. Bharati Mukherjee has exposed the problems of immigrants in US from the Third World, due to her own position being an immigrant American since 1980. She rejects her hyphenated identity, which is only imposed on immigrants in US. It is not because she is ashamed of her past but because she has written about the people who are immigrants going through the process of making a home in adopted country. She writes in the tradition of immigrant experience rather than of nostalgia and expatriation. Her transformation from expatriate into immigrant is the first hand experience to understand and voice the complexities of identity formation in the new world. This is evident by protagonist of Tara in *Desirable Daughters* make it successful in undergoing life to feel with all the excitement of immigration.

INTRODUCTION

Immigration is not a voluntary or conscious choice for Mukherjee's protagonists. The absence of choice in deciding to emigrate and their status as married women has a causal effect on the identity crisis of immigrant women. The decision to migrate is often made by the significant men in their lives the father or husband. Mukherjee's married immigrant women view immigration as an escape from the claustrophobia of their birth country. Without exception, they regard the husband as emancipator and redeemer. For these women, immigration is an opportunity to unshackle themselves from the stranglehold of tradition and male power.

The Indian born writer Bharathi Mukherjee is one of the most widely known immigrant writers of America. The immigrant writers in America can be divided into two categories. Firstly, the Willing Immigrant Writers who settled in America from Europe and Asia and who have made it theirs home. The second category consists of the Unwilling Immigrant Writers with American origin whose forefathers were brought to America in some slave trips. But Bharati Mukherjee considers herself different from other European writers for a variety of reasons. Bharathi Mukherjee's female protagonists are immigrants and suffer cultural shock but they are potential women and are anxious to establish their identity by undertaking their heroic journeys. Bharathi Mukherjee has received considerable critical attention from almost all the quarters of the globe in a relatively short period of just twenty five years. Even though she has been acknowledged as a voice of expatriate-

immigrants sensibility, a close observation of her novels reveals that she has written all the novels with predominantly feminist views. Since Bharathi Mukherjee's women characters are the victims of immigration, all the critics focus her novels as problems and consequences due to immigration but actually the problems are not because they are immigrants but because the women characters fight for their rights as a woman and then as an individual.

## IMMIGRATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S

### THE DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS

Mukherjee's latest novel *Desirable Daughters* is a tale of immigrants and the attitude of three sisters and their ways of dealing with situations. *Desirable Daughters* as the title suggests, one kind of daughter, which parents would be proud of and for whom every parent would crave. The three sisters, who are the daughters of Motilal Bhattacharya and the great-grand-daughters of Jai Krishna Gangooli, belong to a traditional Bengali Brahmin family. Padma, Parvathi and Tara are symbolic names of Shakti do not flaunt the some ethical values but have the grit to carve a niche for them. They are a blend of traditional and modern outlook. Padma and Parvathi do not regret their choices, the former an immigrant of ethnic origin in New Jersey, and the latter married to a boy of her own choice and settled in the plush locality of Bombay with an encourage of servants to catch her. Tara, the narrator of the novel marries Bishwapriya Chatterjee goes on arranged marriage. Tara finds that her married life is not fulfilling and she walks out of her traditional life, a typical American divorce settlement follows. Tara works as a volunteer in a pre-school. She enjoys her love life with Andy. Tara sends his son with his father as a divorce settlement. The fluidity of her identity, testifies not only his own but also the fluidity of the immigrants. Finally Tara returns to her father's house for solace. This novel to a certain extent seems to be the autobiography of Bharathi Mukherjee who has two sisters.

The tale is narrated from the first person point of view. Tara, the central character of the novel narrates the story of the lives of three sisters. She takes the readers deep into the intricacies of her life in America and her past in India. The story of three sisters of a traditional Bengali Brahmin family and their own course of voyage towards their destiny is narrated by one of the sisters, Tara. These sisters; Padma, Parvati and Tara and their ways of life are a mixture of traditional and modern outlook. Padma lives her life as an immigrant of ethnic origin in New Jersey and Parvati is married to a man of her choice and lives a luxurious life in the posh locality of Bombay.

Tara, the narrator takes pride in her traditional Brahmin upbringing, but with her desire to move forward in life and to carve an identity for herself, she embraces the liberated ways of American culture. Tara is narrating the history of her family and in recording this history she is projecting the creation of her identity. Here, the past plays an important role in constructing the present. In order to understand herself and recreate a new identity for her, she must delve into the past and unfold the intricacies of it. Mukherjee's mastery is in handling the story of the past and present simultaneously and making what has happened and what is happening equally interesting by infusing the new concept of time and space. So far as the use of language is concerned, Mukherjee succeeds in retaining the vitality of language by relating it to the everyday speech. She changes words, grammatical structures and syntax to suit the character. Tara, an assimilated immigrant in America is comfortable in expressing herself at both the places; India and America. She can freely use Indian expressions and even communicate in Bengali whenever require. At the same, she uses American slang expressions with her American friends. Whereas her sister Padma, enjoys being an immigrant of ethnic origin in America speaks a mixture of Indian and American English. Padma finds her obsession with her Indianness as a survival strategy in America.

In *Desirable Daughters* Tara Chatterjee expects her husband Bish Chatterjee to be an emancipator and redeemer who would usher in a new life for her. As a young bride who accompanies her husband to the US, Tara is overawed by Bish's plans for her to work in the library and then join him at the student pub, where there were other Asian American engineering students. The following lines express Tara's excitement and anticipation of the promise of a new life:

"This is the life I have been waiting for, I thought, the liberating promise of marriage, and travel, and the wider world. Bless Daddy and Mummy, they found me the only man in the world who could transport me from the enchanted garden of Ballygunge to Stanford University in the early 1980s, which has to count as one of the intellectual wonders of the modern world" (DD 81).

Mukherjee exposes the story of Tara and Padma to present the essential crisis of assimilation. Padma has recreated India in America by clinging to Indian culture and rejecting all that is American. She associates herself with the people of only Indian origin, she works in an Indian television channel and she lives in the area which is populated by South Asians, whereas Tara moves forward to embrace American culture. She is ready to face the challenges of assimilation and to recreate herself. She views her Didi's attempts to preserve Indian culture as her inability to cope with the challenges of assimilation as Tara says: Her clinging to a version of India and to Indian ways and to Indian friends, Indian clothes and food and a 'charming' accent 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. Tara on the other hand changes throughout her life in America. She views the multiplicity of her identity.

Tara Chatterjee and Tara Banerjee, despite their anglicised upbringing, find English inadequate to articulate the texture and nuances of their personal experiences. The two women are a product of postcolonial. Anglicised educational and social structures, juxtaposed with tradition. Yet Tara Chatterjee finds it impossible to convey the cultural complexities that accrue of her hyphenated Indian-American identity to either her American or Indian friends. Tara remarks on her relationship with her Hungarian lover Andy, "It's one of those San Francisco things I can't explain in India, just as I can't explain my Indian life to the women I know in California" (DD 25-26)

The resulting internal conflict heightens her alienation. Similarly, she is unable to translate for her American friends her arranged marriage to Bish. Tara remarks thus on the losses that result in conveying cultural complexities to people who do not share a common heritage:

"I have told my Calcutta story many times, and Americans seem to find them endlessly amusing and appalling. And yet, until last year, I'd never really understood what I was revealing and what I was suppressing. I was going for the effect, Tara, No! The easy approval. Oh! Tara, you 're so brave!" (DD 26).

Tara is acutely aware of her sense of her outsider status and her feeling of not belonging. Her inability to identify with mainstream American culture is evident in her cultural dyslexia on reading American magazines. Despite being an eager immigrant seeking to acculturate, she finds the process difficult. Tara remarks on the cultural discrepancies that block her from identifying with the conclusions of an article that linked birth order and personality traits: "Anyone entering or exiting was carefully monitored. We honoured proprieties. There was no rebellion, no seeking after individual identities" (DD 43-44).

Immigrants experience acute linguistic dispossession because their first language is inadequate to convey diasporic realities. The following lines reflect Tara's predicament when she realises that her birth language cannot adequately reflect social realities in the adopted country. "We couldn't talk about why a young woman with everything she could ever want would decide to leave her protector and provider" (DD 66). Such a chasm between the social mores of two different worlds and the inability to convey those experiences for oneself and for others is a source of identity crisis for immigrant women. Thus Tara Chatterjee, Tara Banerjee, and Dimple Basu experience considerable linguistic displacement despite their fluency in English.

## CONCLUSION

The difference between the public and private self is a source of conflict for the immigrant woman. Tara Chatterjee finds a rigid demarcation between the public and private spheres of her life. In the former, she is permitted superficial concession to Americanisation in manners, speech, dress, and employment. In the private sphere, however, she is expected to revert to stringent traditional roles and unconditionally expected to maintain the purity of the home. Immigrant women, in contrast to immigrant men, undergo rapid psychological transformation that causes them to reformulate and revision their identity. In *Desirable*

*Daughters*, Tara Bhattacharjee experiences sexual awakening as an immigrant. Tara realises painfully that she and her husband, Bish have polarised positions regarding the meaning of love. As immigrants, they experience acute dislocation and displacement at several levels—geographical, social, cultural, and psychological. The transitional dilemmas and bicultural conflicts constitute a diasporic burden that ferments a crisis of identity.

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