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Painful Journey of Self Discovery through Different Cultural Spaces in *Desirable Daughters* by Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the feelings and emotional longing of the Indian migrated community in U.S.A. through the protagonist Tara and her two sisters Padma and Parvati in the novel 'Desirable Daughters' who are settled in U.S.A. They project their feelings of homelessness, marginalization and expatriate feelings of being an outsider in an alien land and seek a momentary compensation and relax for the emotional longing of their home, people and their own country by visiting Jackson Height, a commercial building in U.S.A. where maximum shops are owned by migrated Indians and almost all Indian people use to come there not only for purchasing but also to meet their Indian friends. Their interest to assimilate culturally within the new culture, their constant longing for their people, place, food and dressing, their psychological trauma of translocation and for the native people and culture, their haunt for their roots and identity and many more problems they encounter in new environment at a new place are mirrored through the each and every page of novel. As much they try to forget their past, so for they are haunted. It appears very difficult to locate them in the new cultural space.

Key Words: Self discovery, fragmented, cultural space

Cultural identity is a collectively shared history of individuals associated to particular race or ethnicity which is considered to be fixed or stable. Diaspora writing addresses the question of one's cultural identity which is projected in creative writings of the migrated authors and writers of Asian continent. Stuart Hall theorizes two ways of reflecting one's cultural identity; - collectively shared historical identity which is stable and unstable metamorphic identity in a new shifted soil, marked by multiple points of similarities and differences as well.

From the second form of identity, we feel that it is more complex form of identity to understand. Multiple presences and absences are responsible factors of constituting cultural identity in Diasporic Asian writings. Presence of Indians in America is the new site of cultural confrontation that emerges from the hegemonic construction of knowledge and presence of Indians in the American continent.

The present research paper aims to explore the condition of Asian migrated writers in North America, an adapted land and their fragmented identity in post colonial countries. The paper

intends to capture and reflect the feelings of Diasporic writers who appear enigmatic and haunted for their roots. It reflects India in microcosm through the lens of expatriate realism in the works of Diasporic Indian writer Bharati Mukherjee. The paper is an attempt to project the various problems, trauma and mental conflicts faced by the novelist Bharati Mukherjee which emerged as the themes in her fictional creative world. In the light of these observations the paper tries to fathom the major problems faced by the novelist while she migrates from her cultural soil to the different unknown soils and cultures.

Diasporic writers represent the new migrated generation of the new settlers in a new alien land who come and settle in such countries for better career opportunities and growth perspectives. But migration to a new place creates a kind of cultural gap and emotional longing for their roots, soil and people. They are ever haunted for their cultural identity which is rarely achieved by these settlers. Bharti Mukherjee is also of the same vein who settles abroad but is always caught in the emotional haunting and memories of her place and people. She intends to adapt the new culture and tries to adjust with the place and people with in family and in the society but she always feels isolated at both the places. Her longing for her own cultural identity intensifies and finally compels her to think about return to her native place.

Bharati Mukherjee is a well established and renowned scholastic voice of the

Indian Diasporic writing from North America whose critical literary career spans for more than thirty years that she has engaged in exploring herself as a global identity and redefining the idea of Diaspora as a process of one's personal gain and cultural loss. Immigration and displacement bring unbearable pain to these migrated Indians. It brings a sense of great loss and feelings of dispossession to these people. In her novel she unfolds her feelings of expatriation and immigration imposing the complexities over her life against her religious and cultural background. Her fictions are created and plotted around the realistic experiences and psychological metamorphosis of the characters who have settled abroad - North America. Her characters belong to different ethnic backgrounds and national origins: economic and political refugees from Afghanistan, Uganda, Iraq and Bangladesh; illegal stowaways from Ludhiana; professionals from Bombay and Calcutta; mail order brides from Nepal; and domestic helps from Trinidad.

The most important fact about all these immigrants is that they are from different cultures and they have social differences in their practices and rituals but they bind together as they belong to the same community in an alien land at a particular place to relieve themselves from the feelings of strangeness and uprootedness. They stand together in exploring their belongingness at the American place and try to turn themselves as the part of cultural

assimilation of America. They try to translocate and reconstruct their identity in new land but they are always being haunted with the dream of their homeland and ancestors. They are the people who are away from their homeland and who have emotional and sentimental attachment with it but they don't have desire for permanent return because of their high ambition and better career perspectives. Mukherjee has tried to relocate her identity under the impact of cross-cultural shift and its politics in the course of crossing and re-crossing multiple borders of languages, history, race, time and culture. She has embedded her identity as an Indian, Canadian and American.

Bharati Mukherjee was born in Kolkata in 1940 to an upper middle class Bengali Brahmin family. Her school education was completed at Britain and Switzerland which gave her an opportunity to develop efficiency and perfection in English language and excellent communication skills in English as well. Mukherjee has completed her under graduate and post graduate degrees in English from the University of Kolkata. To become writer was her dream since her childhood. After completion of post graduation in English she went to the University of Iowa in 1961 where she had persuaded her Ph. D. degree in English and comparative literature and was awarded with Ph. D. degree. She got married with a well established writer, Mr. Clark Baise and settled to Canada.

After marriage she settled for a very short span of time in Canada where she strives to establish herself with in the new cultural space of the place. But shift from one's motherland in a foreign adapted soil is not easily achieved. This aspect has been widely explored in her novel 'Desirable Daughter'. She got disillusioned with the new place and its culture and was forced to settle at United States with her family in 1980.

The novel 'Desirable Daughter' is an attempt of Bharati Mukherjee's yearning for her home-land which appears as her prime concern in this novel. The novel is very close to Manju Kapoor's 'Difficult Daughters' and Sudhir Chandra's 'Enslaved Daughter' which are an attempt of search for one's roots. It is an excellent blend of historical fact and imagination of the novelist Mukherjee. The novel has of course the feminine stand that develops close understanding with the novelist and her emotional yearning. This is a story of such a female character that is tossed between two different cultural spaces to survive.

Bharti Mukherjee has woven the plot of the novel 'Desirable Daughter' around the socio cultural history of Bengal and her personal family history. Her story reveals that how Bengali ethnic society is affected with the globalised cultural practices. Her novel reflects the earliest influence of colonialism which throws light on pathetic psychological conditions of migrated people. As we go in to the deep study of the novel we find that there is an emerging transition in the process of cultural assimilation, and

simultaneously a reactive pattern manifesting in a gender transformation in the society. Earlier women were protected from an infusion of alien culture due to the intractability of social patterns and conventions of the community where cross cultural impact was restricted to men's mobility in the East but it has been frequently happening.

The first and foremost problem that the Diasporic Indian English novelists face is the quest and assertion of their identity. These novelists have found themselves in typical Indian predicament of emptiness. Most Indian writers, settled abroad, have felt themselves homeless orphans, children of conflict born in transit. While discussing their confusion, Edward Shill tells us, "These Indian writers in English are neurotic schizophrenic who are suspended between two worlds and rooted neither."¹ The greatest challenge before the Indian English novelists is to seek and assert their identity. Therefore the dispossessed person's search for identity is a common place theme in modern fiction. Mukherjee, like other Diasporic writers, also tries to map the emergence of her identity and re-conceptualizes the notion of her cultural and national identity as well.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel 'Desirable Daughter' is set in America and India similarly. The author begins the novel with the story of her ancestors, the Tree Bride, and then takes the reader on a long journey from Calcutta to Sanfrancisco, New Jercy and Bombay.

The 36 year old novelist tells her husband that; "There is one thing I may be capable of: I have stories to tell"² The story of the novel begins with the story of Tara Lata, the Tree Bride, the ancestor of the protagonist modern Tara who has been residing in America. The story Tree Bride is set hundred and twenty years back in a small village Mishtigunj (now in Bangladesh). The scene opens with the wedding ceremony of a five years old girl who is the youngest daughter of Jai Krishna Ganguly. She performs all the sacred rituals with the wish that her marriage would be successful and everlasting. But all these chants couldn't come true and she couldn't make her marriage success. Her husband dies of snake-bite in the same night of marriage and she herself is cursed and blamed for this tragedy. Her life becomes cursed in such a premature age in which hardly a girl acquires the sense and meaning of marriage. Her life is turned in to a tragic disgrace. Tara Lata becomes the Tree Bride to save her cursed life and lives with her father in his compound throughout her life as Tree Bride. She becomes a touchstone for the next coming generation. This mythical past inspires her to interweave the plot of her novel around her feelings and experiences of being an outsider. It also stimulated her to see her native place Bengal. Tara travels to different part of the new world, but even as she absorbs the energy and vitality of this world, her traditional world view remains intact with her.

In this novel Mukherjee dramatizes the immediate cultural negations which are demanded by the immigrants. Tara's traditional background enforces her to feel that "she isn't, perhaps never will be, 'modern women'" 3. Tara feels torn between the dual place and its culture that brings her nothing else than the broken identity. She is acutely aware of her cultural differences. Even at her home in San Francisco she reminds the beautiful mountain resorts of India. Her home at San Francisco appears as an unhappy home. She says;

"I am not the only blue jeaned woman with Pashmina shawl around my shoulders and broken down running shoes on my feet. I am not the only Indian on the block. 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." (p.79)⁴

Tara is very much upset with her cultural fragmentation and displacement. She is unable to cope with the traditional mould of an Indian woman in spite of her willingness to adopt and accept new culture. However Tara in 'Desirable Daughter' is unable to fit herself within the conventional gender role of a wife and mother. She tries to be the part of the cultural assimilation of American Indian community but she feels a heavy stress on herself. It appears very difficult for her to adjust with new place and culture of her husband's place and to forget her Indianness as whole from her personality. This is her attempt to reconstruct her hybrid identity. Nyman in an interview tells that;

"This is the efforts of Tara to meet her desire of constructing hyberdity and

forming new sort of identity and culture in a new unknown space to come up with the cultural trauma."⁵

This depicts very clearly that how one experiences after the fusion of two different cultures and its impact on one's life. The central theme of the novel is Tara's quest for identity as her traditional Brahmin roots and American interlude coincide together. When she lives in San Francisco, she is intermittently grappled with the past-memory of her Bengali Brahmin childhood that portrays the contrast of the two different cultures and the internal dilemmas of migrations. It shows us the portrait of a traditional Bengali Brahmin family and simultaneously the story of an American woman who has been bewildered between two cultures. She has been broken with the hybrid interfused cultures, traditions and practices of America and India.

Padma, her sister lives in New Jersey but is completely Indian in her attire, dresses, and in her cuisine and profession. She is T.V. anchor of an Indian television program held in Jackson Heights, Queens, run by her Indian lover. Once she stayed with her partner successfully as being married couple, now she lives alone without his fame and support.

Parvati, her another sister is totally Indian in her entire cultural practices as she allows her husband's relatives to be the house guests for weeks at her luxurious apartment with its breath taking view of the city. But for Tara all

her treatment to the relatives, servants, and drivers appears very funny and awkward as she shows herself much more modern in her attitude and follows the American way of life style. She feels that her sisters lead very stressful life and make her life uncomfortable for unwanted things. So whatever Parvati does that is because of her Indian bend of her mind and she doesn't care for American practices while as Tara displays herself as the most modern lady among all her sisters who don't care these ways of showing Indianness and intend to adopt the practices of American culture. She does not like all that her other sisters do because of their Indian attachment.

Tara lives in San Francisco with her ex-husband, Bish Chatterjee, her son Rabi and her lover, a Hungarian Buddhist. She is divorced from her Indian Silicon Valley millionaire Bishwa Priya Chatterjee who is an ideal to all Indian immigrants, a type of Bill Gates, for his contribution in creating a network of communication through the internet. There is the projection of two men in her life who symbolize two different diverse cultural dilemmas between which she feels trapped. Her son Rabi is a typical product of cross-cultural upbringings who exposes the conflict of imposing the Indian parenting over him. Her son feels irritated within the different cultural dilemmas under which he has been brought-up. He rebels her cultural parenthood as he looks for his own cultural predicament where as Tara is

upset with the behavior of his son and caught up in typical complexities of life.

She is too upset with all this and is completely lost in the two different cultural chaos. Everything irritates her and makes her confused. She is lost between Indianization and Americanization and has been left with no option except looking for old homeland and ancestors. After coming back to India Tara comes to know that she belongs to the family of Tara Ma (Tree Bride). Staying at California she develops an emotional bond with Tree Bride. She is worried about her son's disassociation with Indian culture. She hopes that her son should have some respect and attachment with his cultural roots but he is fully assimilated with the hybrid culture of America and India. She says;

"I look at Rabi and, for the first time in my life, I want to slap him, scream at him and tell him to shut up, but parents can't feel this way. No, that's not right; I have seen them in parking lots and supermarkets. They get furious and make fools of themselves and security guards have to be called and they get in the papers for child abuse and end up in jail. Indian mothers don't; we don't have violent feelings except against ourselves, and never against our children, at least not against our son."⁶

She has tried to bring up her child in very Indian style but she along with her child is showcased in the U.S.A. and is intending to adopt and become the part of Americanization. There are cultural complexities and contradictions not only for Tara But also for Bharati Mukherjee who feels the same cultural dilemma.

She looks back at her past and realizes the history and legacy of her family she has been separated from. As much she grows up and acquires maturity, she is caught between the turmoil of two cultures through which she travels. She hangs between being American and Indian space.

Multiculturalism is the main theme of the novel 'Desirable Daughter' that focuses light on the situation of South Asian women who have migrated to the other part of the world. They are often subjected to experience the trauma of cultural hybridization that makes them uncomfortable and put them in state of isolation. During their stay they long to their native soil with which they are emotionally attached and they don't get this in an alien land and its culture. Throughout the novel we experience the hybrid multicultural echo of the different place from where the characters have been associated. Tara reacts on her life at San Francisco and tells that;

"All the neighborhood services, except the laundries and the Japanese restaurants, are owned and staffed by crack-of-dawn rising, late night closing Palestinians, whose shifting roster of uncles and cousins seems uniformly gifted in providing our needs and anticipating our desires."⁷

Mukherjee takes the help of Jackson Height to clear the immigrant dilemma in an alien soil. She describes the beautiful portrait of this Jackson Height to depict the emotional and cultural longing of the Indian community in U.S.A. They all come to this place to attach themselves with the community

people and search their cultural bond. This is the place where all the Indians visit to have some purchasing. It does not appear as a place for marketing, but as a place where all Indian must come and make their pilgrimage. In fact visiting this place makes the Indian migrants to feel close with their culture and people. Though they all come for only shopping and purchasing purposes but that only instills the sense of belongingness to a particular community in an unknown country. They have hardly direct communication and familiarity with each of the visitors but coming to the place automatically fulfills the sense of cultural belonging. Jackson Heights itself turns as the symbol of migrants' pilgrimage place. Mukherjee writes;

"Jackson Height is not a China town or even a Japan town on the San Francisco model... Indian people shop collectively, but they don't live together in tight little communities... they travel from distant suburbs... or from neighboring states. We are a billion people, but divided into so many thousands or millions of classifications that we have trouble behaving as monolith."⁸

In the novel 'Desirable Daughter' the formation of identity evolves as the constant process in which Tara Lata continuously strives and makes efforts to establish an identity for herself. She has been in efforts to transform her personality so that she may have her own identity at the place she has been residing but her such dream of a well established identity at the place never turns up true and it becomes only dream for her that remains incomplete forever.

Tara, the protagonist of the novel is divided in Calcutta and San Francisco where she migrates at the age of nineteen with her husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee (Bish). After arriving in America she encounters the problems of cultural gap between India and America. She feels herself as an object rolling between the tradition and her freedom. She tries to adjust within the two different cultures but is crushed between her own dream and the expectations of her husband and son.

Finally Tara re-unites with her family and visits back to India with her son Rabi; strolls here and there in the ruins of the village of Mistigunj to remind her past roots and its linkages. She comes more close to the traditional concept of home and community. On reaching here Tara realizes herself, her identity, her existence for which she was longing since decades. In America she was just the victim of cultural hybridization and assimilation but she never realized that alien soil and place belonged to her. She

realizes her Diasporic immigrant identity that never gave a sense of permanence and constant identity in the foreign soil. She accepts her tradition but in a new changed way so that she can make them fit for adaption in new Diasporic life and cultural climate of U.S.A. Rangaswamy rightly observes;

“That struggle, pain and compromise are integral part of immigrant’s experience. Many South Asian women do not necessarily see total Americanization or rejection of India as the path to wholeness. They may have accepted America as their home, but their yearning for India and sense of loss is also accepted as an inevitable corollary of immigration. Most of all these women see that the world of their children is very different from their own. They anticipate challenges they will face or are already facing...”⁹

Finally Tara expresses the voices of multitude hybrid culture that is hidden in herself and discovers a new identity for herself-a global identity.

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