

## **Dislocation, Relocation and Root Search: a Study of Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters**

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**Abstract:** *Mukherjee's protagonists are all sensitive and are differently trained in the new ethnic imagination. They are tossed in an environment of ambivalence regarding their identity, racism, sexism and other social oppression. They negotiate displacement and face the multicultural reality in the process of cultural differentiation and assimilation. Bharati Mukherjee has explored many facets of diasporic consciousness and immigrant experience of dislocations, ruptures and relocation of the migrant women in her fictions. She has dealt with the ambivalence of their psychic and spatial identity and the trauma of dislocations at multiple levels. The impact of patriarchy on the Indian society varies from the one in the West and therefore Mukherjee has tried to evolve her own strand of feminism grounded in the truth of compulsory displacement that they recurrently undergo. Indian expatriate writers do not write from all exclusive foreignness of their identity but their writing reflects the perspective of someone caught between two cultures. Migrancy and dislocation, either consensual or conflictual, is a global and trans-cultural necessity. In her earlier novels, diasporic transmigration meant new opening and emancipation from the clutches of convention bound society. In these novels, attachment to one's own native culture and homeland, living abroad was presented as something to be spurned and total assimilation into the host culture was hailed. It is to create a location of the presence that reduces the diasporic individual to delink the past and deconstruct the future. In *Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee considers different pattern of belonging in the Global perspectives from in-between temporality to assimilative permanence and further, hyphenated and unmixed nationness.*

**Key Words:** *ethnicity, ambivalence, identity, racism, sexism, social oppression, displacement, multicultural reality, dislocations.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Bharati Mukherjee has explored many facets of diasporic consciousness and immigrant experience of dislocations, ruptures and relocation of the migrant women in her fictions. She has dealt with the ambivalence of their psychic and spatial identity and the trauma of dislocations at multiple levels. The impact of patriarchy on the Indian society varies from the one in the West and therefore Mukherjee has tried to evolve her own strand of feminism grounded in the truth of compulsory displacement that they recurrently undergo. Indian expatriate writers do not write from all exclusive foreignness of their identity but their writing reflects the perspective of someone caught between two cultures. Bharati Mukherjee has been especially attentive to the changes taking place in the control mechanism of south Asian women in the New World, their otherness and alienation in 'the larger flow of a transnational history.' Mukherjee consciously avoids glorification of the native country, she also doesn't allow herself to demean or lower the adopted country or the center of the new location although there are criticism on her bicultural perception. Mukherjee has emerged with a postmodern counter narrative of assimilative and celebratory American citizenship. This new perspective preserves essential Indianness to be exotic but merge gleefully into American materialism. From this category of experience Mukherjee wishes to carve her own exclusiveness within the broader genre of American Literature.

Migrancy and dislocation, either consensual or conflictual, is a global and trans-cultural necessity. Mukherjee's protagonists are all sensitive and are differently trained in the new ethnic imagination. They are tossed in an environment of ambivalence regarding their identity, racism, sexism and other social oppression. They negotiate displacement and face the multicultural reality in the process of cultural differentiation and assimilation. The multiculturalism ethos with which they are confronted leads to the struggle for a new life and a near break with the past. They are shown at an emotional transit point and from their dual and bicultural perception they attempt to measure the disjuncture and persecutory paranoia. In the USA Mukherjee explores the immigrant sensibility, recognizing its duality and fluid identity and acknowledges its realities. According to Malashri Lal:

Undoubtedly, Mukherjee focuses upon the immigrants in America, that energetic, volatile community to which this gifted writer lends her voice and consequently appropriates 'another' America. But the immigrants, like her, have a pre-history. Their cultural imperatives, interacting with the unknown focus of the new world, create a drama of co-options and collaborations which the story teller records.

Bharati Mukherjee is her own theorist and exemplar since her novels illustrate the credo of immigrant writing as a 'Maximalist' act. She emphatically asserts her American citizenship. She has her characteristic way of defining her Indian heritage and affiliations through several assertions. Mukherjee has expressed the reality of being located in a particular culture, geographically and ideologically separate from her chosen home and citizenship and has thus problematised her own identity. This aspect of her own cultural exclusivity is very strongly expressed while criticizing the Americans. Mukherjee says in *Desirable Daughters* (2002): 'They have no idea of the wealth I came from.' Again, Mukherjee's powerful assertion that she is an American writer in the tradition of other American authors 'whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island' doesn't in any way, demean her original home just for celebrating her American citizenship.

With all such cultural problematic and diasporic ambivalence, Mukherjee has long used fiction to explore issues of identity and culture, often through displaced characters – Indian coming to the West or Westerns heading to Asia. The tremendous difference between two ways to life leads a person to a feeling of depression, frustration and delirium where 'Psyche and Society mirror each other.' In the modalities of translational selection and differentiation women have to assimilate the alien culture and accept the changed identity.

She is an outsider in a no man's land. She recreates herself into a new personality and forms emotional ties with the place where she lives and 'behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation.' Mukherjee's novels and short stories express the same dislocations and the neurosis in their wandering impulse and their deliberate search for materially better life. They migrate to the West and consequently face tension of adaptation and assimilation. She depicts the cross-cultural conflicts and shows how her heroines turn febrile and phantasmic to take control over their destinies.

Mukherjee's sixth novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) marks a new trend in her writings. In an interview with Dave Weich, Mukherjee says: 'The authentic Strategy for this book was also using the width of the field of history, geography, Diaspora gender, ethnicity, language – rather than the old fashioned, long clean throw.' In her earlier novels, diasporic transmigration meant new opening and emancipation from the clutches of convention bound society. In these novels, attachment to one's own native culture and homeland, living abroad was presented as something to be spurned and total assimilation into the host culture was hailed. It is to create a location of the presence that reduces the diasporic individual to delink the past and deconstruct the future. In *Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee considers different pattern of belonging in the Global perspectives from in-between temporality to assimilative permanence and further, hyphenated and unmixed nationness.

The general tendency of the people in the diasporic space is to be centric to primary identities – religious, ethnic, territorial and national. Most of Mukherjee's novels deal with the question of such primary identities and the crisis of such identities along with transmission of ethnic traits. She takes in account the borderline condition of cultural translation in the postcolonial location of past present and future. In Mukherjee's fictions the two geographical entities, the home and location thus support, and to an extent reflect each other.

In her narratives she takes in account of the spatial and locational subjectivity related to their homeland. Her characters experience the cultural inanity and the social displacement which are expressed in mixed identity codes. Such concept of diasporic space as theoretical construct, evolving out of the practical journey from alienation to acceptance seeks to project and map out the space of different culture and postcolonial heterogeneity. This space of diasporic experience is potent to become the pulsating contemporary parameter, offering various other new scopes of negotiations on the programmed location of culture.

*Desirable Daughters* is a tale of immigrants and the attitude of three sisters and their ways of negotiating the multiple dislocations in three different perspectives. The three sisters, who are the daughters of Motilal Bhattacharjee and the great-grand daughters of Jaikrishna Gangooly, belong to a traditional Bengali Brahmin family. They part ways taking their own course of voyage towards their destiny. They are a blend of traditional and modern outlook. Padma and Parvati have their own trajectories of choices; the former an immigrant of ethnic origin, New Jersey, and the latter married to her own choice and settled in the posh locality of Bombay with an entourage of servants to cater her.

Tara, the narrator of the novel, takes the readers deep into the intricacies of the New World and seems to float rootless with time. The fluidity of her identity testifies not only her own but also the fluidity of the immigrants. She values her traditional upbringing but takes pride in moving forward in life. Her image of her family values forms a wall of security around her that camouflages the fragile vulnerable self.

Tara as a young wife stays for ten years with Bish Chatterjee, but his almost sinister preoccupation with his profession leaves her yearning for companionship and care, the couple eventually separate. Next, she finds solace in Andy's arms, her live-in partner, but again, when Andy leaves her she feels threatened and comes back to Bish. Her rhapsodized soul takes dip as she is confronted with the realities of terrorism. New revelations unfurl as her son declares that he is a gay, tearing apart her cocoon and, the final blow is her house being bombed and Bish Chatterjee is crippled and dependent on her. Finally, Tara Bhattacharjee returns home to find

solace at her father's house. She further probes into her family tree to unveil the life of 'Tree Bride' her ancestor. The retrospective journey is in fact a return to the roots seeking Eastern solution to the weeds developed in the Western World.

The novel begins with the history of Tara Lata describing the dull disquiet of the time. The conflict between the inscrutable traditional corridor and simple quest for location and space constitute the description of the interpersonal world:

Tuberculosis is everywhere. The air, the water, the soil are septic. Thirty-five years is a long life. Smog obscures the moon and dims the man-made light to faintness deeper than the stars'. In such darkness perspective disappears. It is a two-dimensional world impossible to penetrate.

In *The Tree Bride* (2004) her namesake the child bride, Tara Lata is thus, headed towards her destiny. Before she gets married the groom dies on his way due to snake bite. The groom's father is greedy and wants Jaikrishna Gangooly to give the dowry. Jaikrishna Gangooly instead of bulking down to the demands of the groom's father, puts his foot down and refuses to hand over his daughter to her in-laws, dooming her to a life of servility. A Sanskrit scholar and a Brahmin, he decides to solemnize his daughter to a tree as bride so that she can overcome the curse of widowhood. It is presumed that she is united with God, and now she is eternally doomed to be a married woman leading a life of purity, sainthood and lifelong virginity. Tara Lata, the Tree-Bride becomes a family legend:

After the night of her marriage, Tara Lata returned to Mishtigunj and, at least by legend, never left her father's house. Unburdened by a time-consuming, emotion-draining marriage and children, never having to please a soul, she grew up and grew old in a single house in an impoverished village in the poorest place of earth, and in that house, the world came to her. She lived there seventy years and gradually changed her world.

Tara Lata of *The Tree Bride* shall never become a human bridegroom to continue an ancestral line. In marrying her to proxy husband, a tree, he permits her to occupy the respected position of married woman, within the family home. Married to a tree she will at least remain a spouse, 'and not a widow.' What appears to be a strange practice is in fact a highly efficient adaptive strategy.

The author describes Tara Lata, just five years old and is being carried on a palanquin, all decorated in the ceremonial dress to be given away in marriage. The older sisters, seven and nine are already married. In Hindu culture it was authenticated that a father should give away his daughter in marriage before she reaches puberty and if the father is not able to do so he is considered useless and undeserving:

In a palanquin borne by four servants sit a rich man's three daughters, the youngest dressed in her bridal sari, her little hands painted with red lac dye, her hair oiled and set. Her arms are heavy with dowry gold; bangles ring tiny arms from wrist to shoulder. Childish voices chant a song, hands tap, golden bracelets tinkle. I cannot imagine the loneliness of this child. A Bengali girl's happiest night is about to become her life time imprisonment.

Her return to tradition is also a revolt against modernity. Tara Lata becomes famous for acts of rebellion and she becomes freedom fighter and martyr. Paradoxically, therefore, in pursuing a vapid Indian tradition and confining his daughter to a life without the distractions of husband, children and mother-in-law, the father transforms her into a symbol of essential womanhood under the patronage of traditional male symbolic order.

Precisely, the novel *Desirable Daughters* concentrates on complex ideologies revolving round the life of three sisters and their multiple alienations – Padma, Parvati and Tara. All of them maintain distinctive individuality in their attitude and approach to life. The novel begins with the description of bridal procession of Tara Lata, an ancestor whose life history becomes a focal point of Tara Chatterjee's, family chronicle. Tara Chatterjee, the narrator had always treated the story with a sense of awe and it is after divorce from her husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee she became curious to know about the trauma of the 'Tree bride.' Seemingly, a thematic parallel with Spivak's phenomenal article, *Three women's texts* and a critique of imperialism Mukherjee has written three different texts in the novel that unfold and also entangle the politics of diasporic consciousness of three women. Though the three sisters had different opportunities to assimilate America with their Indianness, each sister's reactions to the confrontation are distinct. While Tara undertakes this root searching mission as an attempt to come to terms with her fragmented and at times confused notion of self, Padma takes the world at her stride according to her own cultural poetics.

Tara's positioning is different from Padma in the sense, Padma is a hyphenated immigrant. From her obsession on assimilation as a critical content of a survival strategy in an alien soil, Mukherjee vociferously talks against the status of a hyphenated immigrant because the hyphen marginalizes the Asians as minorities. Parvati the middle sister, with an American education and an American trained Indian husband, lives the life of a privileged rich wife in India. She symbolizes the traditional life of an Indian woman with Western orientation. Each one traverses her own path of immigrant life quite happily.

Tara, through the life of her other two sisters, Parvati and Padma her husband Bish her illegitimate nephew Mr. Christopher Dey, introspects on her own crisis of identity as an immigrant and she continually

expresses her desire to seek a consolation in her native traditions. In Tara's realization the novel reveals the spaces of tradition, personal memories, places, and life styles, tradition and modernity. She indulges in the nostalgic romanticism of the past, the inverted story of mobility, existential suffering, hybrid-subjectivity and plurality in her physical and psychic dividedness. In Mukherjee's poetics of Diaspora, rejection to the nativity and incapacity to deal with the new situation make the theme of identity more powerful and poignant in the mainstream American life.

Tara at the age of nineteen was married to a software engineer from an outstanding Bengali family. After her marriage, Tara was shifted to American society, in Atherton California where her husband Bish tried to carve out a semblance of Indian traditionalism. Mukherjee describes the reason for such selection of Tara's husband.

He had that eagerness, and a confident smile that promised substantial earnings. It lured my father in to marriage negotiations, and it earned my not unenthusiastic acceptance of him as husband. A very predictable, very successful marriage negotiation.

Her marriage to Bish did not have any immediate traumatic effect as earlier experienced by Tara-Lata the 'Tree-Bride.' While Tara Lata became a widow by the foul mechanization of fate, Tara leaves her husband by choice in a self redemptive and assertive role of a woman of the global era. She falls a prey to her own experiencing of America where the 'Cream-colored houses seem to have tumbled down the hill sides like children's blocks, or-on bright days under a cloudless sky-like cottages in an Etruscan landscape.' Here she feels 'totally at home, unwilling to leave.' But her American summer suffers a jolt with a series of dislocations.

Swerving away from the tradition she ends up becoming a fun loving woman who is 'ethnically ambiguous' and finds comforting charm in the arms of a Buddhist retrofitter. To her love is no longer a matter 'indistinguishable from duty and obedience.' But such Western excesses of untrammelled fun and glitziness of the exotic perturbs her inner self, and she contemplates an alternative way to survive. A transition is on the cards, from imaginary homeland to imagining the homeland:

I wasn't, perhaps I'll never be, a modern woman. These are the objections of modern American woman who know me now, all of whom have passed through at least one unarranged marriage and who are raising at least one child with or without the bottom line of child support. They have no idea of the wealth I came from.

The nostalgia of Tara for her past, her protective existence in India, her helplessness to assimilate in the glamorous life of the USA has become a voice of all these immigrants who lead a life of 'subaltern' in the highly mechanical, progressive and prosperous society of America. In his review of *Desirable Daughters*, Jopi Nyman Comments: 'Bharati Mukherjee's fictions rewrite the traditional immigrant story, imagining new spaces and favour of identity as a result of travel and dislocations.'

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