

Diasporic Identity and Psycho-Socio Assertiveness in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

M. Divya^{[a],*}

^[a] Assistant Professor, Department of English, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, India.

* Corresponding author.

Received 19 October 2022; accepted 13 November 2022

Published online 26 December 2022

Abstract

This research paper mainly explores the problem of dual identity and psycho socio assertiveness of female protagonist in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*. Here, there are three sisters namely called Padma, Parvati and Tara, were born and brought in India but they wanted to be settled in western cultures way of life. Each sister has different perspectives about the western cultures and its value. They have evolved from the stereotypical women to independent person trying to create for themselves an identity of their own. They are caught between the American and Indian culture, and the problem of trying to maintain a balance between their dual affiliations arises. The main character Tara carries the burden of cultural values; of her native land to her new country, making it more difficult and problematic for her adjusts.

Key words: Diaspora; Assertiveness; Identity; Assimilation; Psychology

Divya, M. (2022). Diasporic Identity and Psycho-Socio Assertiveness in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 25(3), 27-31. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/12823>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12823>

The term Diaspora, originally used for the Jews dispersal from their homeland, is now applied as a rhetorical designation for all expatriates, refugee's exiles and immigrants, whose lives, language and experience

have been altered by the paradigms of bilingualism, biculturalism and geographical dislocation. Diaspora is not merely a scattering or dispersion but an experience made up of collectivises and multiple journeys of alienated people and it also deals with the experience determined by who travels, where, how and under what circumstances. Diaspora is a displacement of a community or an individual from one geographical region to another geographical region. Either voluntary or forced, such spatial movements from one's native land to the foreign land are very common during post-colonial and postmodern globalized epoch. The dilemmas and contradictions can be experimental in the writings of Indian Diasporic writer. The term "Indian Diaspora" is used to refer to the historical and existing occurrence of people of Indian sub-continental origin in other areas of the world. The writers are products of a specific culture, drawing nourishment from it and elevating it with their experience. The world of diasporic writings belong to the between space and the cultural no-man's land.

Most accomplished Diaspora writers can penetrate the culture or language boundaries and can celebrate their inheritance without need of a specific space. There may be great loss and much yearning in rootlessness but there is also much gain. It is not only geographical boundaries that they go beyond, but is also mental leap which enable them to gain the trans-cultural approach to life. James Clifford, the historian and anthropologist, explores this diaspora negotiation with both 'routes' and 'roots'. Clifford emphasizes: "the uprooting of cultural identities no community is pure or discreet in the mobility and shift through the diaspora" (p.213). He also highlights "how diasporic formations characterized by movement and by the attempt to make "unmistakable" Communities in historical shift contexts "(p.308). Even one's combine the homonym "route" and the "root" to break any simple distinction between 'rooting' and 'displacement', a distinction that has been in each case reified as a function of modernity.

Hoverer, The Diaspora complex interplay of local and global conditions, including the lobby groups, socio-economic and political conditions of the country, levels of development, technological progress and other institutional development, such as, financial, educational, social, etc., and it is also have influenced the migration and diaspora of the host as well as source country in policy formation. Today, migrant and diaspora communities are seen as a critical component of the development process of a country. Development rendezvous is constantly mediated through social and cultural identities of the migrant and Diaspora communities. These identities are not only very diverse but are also a space for social, political and ideological contestation. Even the Cultural theorists and literary critics are all alike in this view. Like Ashcroft point out;

The diasporic production of cultural meanings occurs in many areas, such as contemporary music, film, theatre and dance, but writing is one of the most interesting and strategic ways in which diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial and ethnic formulations of identity. (*The Empire Writes Back*, p.218)

Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2004) is a contemporary story of an American woman who has in many ways broken with the tradition but still remains tied to her native country. It is about three sisters and their life. It is an intricate mystery story as it creates both intrigue and suspense but also initiates a quest for identity. The three sister's Parma, Parvati, and Tara are born exactly three years apart from each other and share the same birthday. Their mother names them after goddesses, hoping they will survive and prosper, which they all do. Parma lives in new Jersey but is completely Indian in her attire, her cuisine, her profession as the television anchor of Indian television program set in Jackson Heights, queens run by her Indian lover, while she stays married to a man once successful, but now merely living of her fame.

Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* is a contemporary story of an American woman who has in many ways broken with the tradition but still remains tied to her native country. It is about three sisters and their life. It is an intricate mystery story as it creates both intrigue and suspense but also initiates a quest for identity. The three sister's Parma, Parvati, and Tara are born exactly three years apart from each other and share the same birthday. Their mother names them after goddesses, hoping they will survive and prosper, which they all do. Parma lives in new Jersey but is completely Indian in her attire, her cuisine, her profession as the television anchor of Indian television program set in Jackson Heights, queens run by her Indian lover, while she stays married to a man once successful, but now merely living of her fame. Parvati is totally Indian to the point of allowing her Husband's relatives to be a guest for weeks at their luxurious apartment with its breathtaking view of the sky, and her

easy life with servants, drivers and other amenities at her disposal is family described by Tara as she relates her sister's very stressed out life.

Tara is the most un-Indian of the three. She lives in San Francisco and is divorced from an Indian Silicon Valley dotcom millionaire Bishwapriya Chatterjee and Indian immigrant. She is almost a valley woman- a volunteer at a pre-school, a single mother of teenage son who reveals he is gay and has a live-in love Andy, a balding, red-bearded former biker, former bad-boy, Hungarian Buddhist Yoga instructor. Tara looks back at her family's past and their future and comes to terms with her history and legacy, from which she is almost separated. And yet it is a part of her psyche. As she grows and matures as a character, one is drawn to her humor, her honesty, and her blunt assessment of the two worlds between which she travels be between- America and India, both psychologically and physically. This novel is the celebration of the American freedom to develop an individual identity, a freedom categorized by both pain and excitement. Most of her writings created an Indian microcosm in US; an Indian environment in a foreign land which is vibrant with Indian food, languages, dress, traditions and customs. One could say that her works reflect the women's plight in the transition.

In their expatriation Mukherjee's characters have reached an alienland after willingly giving up their known world of comfort. Unlike the earlier expatriates who came as indenture labour, these twentieth century expatriates are here in this foreign land because of their personal choice. Her characters face problems like racial discrimination and even attacks by the whites who resent their brown colour and who seem to be crowding their land. Mukherjee's characters also deal with extra-marital affairs. Mukherjee's characters share the experience of diaspora as they explore new ways of belonging and becoming in America, she also depicts characters that undergo personal changes in their transcultural movement. She describes the character's immigration experience as;

We (immigrants) have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived. When we uproot ourselves from these countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb two hundred years of American history and learn to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable often heroic (p.78)

Critics often point out that the violence in Mukherjee's fiction arises from the clashing of old and new worlds. Mukherjee insists that when such multiple worlds meet, the result can be shared freedom of the leaves of the kaleidoscope that completely intermix and produce a new pattern. Chief criticism against Mukherjee is that her optimistic narration of the American saga of immigrant incarnation elides the material realities impinging on third world immigration, namely the role of race, class and gender in the working identity politics in America.

Indian critics have taken up issues with her negative portrayal of Indian life and tradition, viewing that she has abandoned her past cultural history so as to gain the full benefits of Americanization. Many critics have pointed out that Mukherjee's body of works can be divided into expatriated and immigrant phases. Her early work, comprising the novels, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife and Darkness* can be separated from the later writings by a space of ten years when she left Canada and went as an immigrant to the United States.

Disillusioned by her experience in Canada she says that she was the invisible woman, the temporary dweller. In contrast she finds her experience in the U.S far more favorable and she claims that she enjoys the exuberance of immigration, in many ways Mukherjee's Asians are ideal immigrants, but they are so different from earlier immigrants, for example, their ideas were totally different from the deeply held American ideas about immigrants. The immigrants from south and central Europe came to America as unskilled laborers. Most of them lacked both the education and the self-esteem to challenge the idea of Anglo-Saxon, or Nordic, superiority. They were, however, white enough to fit in once they shed their foreign-looking clothing and hairstyle and picked up enough English to calm the fears of a foreign invasion.

Mukherjee depicts the atrocities inflicted on the 'gendered subaltern', that is, women. The forms of child marriage, imposed arranged marriage, and limited prospects of career for talented girls like Padma and Tara in the novel. Mukherjee seems to generalize the pitiable plight of women when she comments about the *Tree Bride* in the first chapter of the novel:

A Bengali Girl's happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrows of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her. (p.4)

The novel *Desirable Daughters* belongs to that genre of American literature which deals with issues of immigrant life and cultural assimilation. There are sufficient works in this genre that represent Hispanic, African and Chinese ethnic minorities in the United States, but relatively few that speak for South Asian immigrants in general and Indian Americans in particular. Mukherjee's work fills this void in the American literary canon. One can say that the novel is written by a woman for a women audience, as the story's central female protagonists. There are also elements of feminist thought that is woven into the passages of the novel, although, in its entirety, the novel was not meant to propagate the idea of feminism. The rest of this essay will elucidate the important themes dealt with in the novel. The foremost and recurrent theme of *Desirable Daughters* is the conflict arising from native and foreign cultures. The main characters in the novel grapple with the challenge of accommodating the American feminist culture into their traditional Indian one. But, as schools of thoughts go,

these two concepts are incompatible. The conventional role assigned to women in India is the very antithesis of what American feminists espouse.

For example, Tara Lata was first married to a tree in a ceremonious ritual, as a measure to mitigate the malefic aspects of her horoscope. It was earlier predicted by a Hindu astrologer that Tara's married life would be short lived as a result of this malefic aspect. Such conceptions of marriage are mere superstitions from the point of view of feminism. The American feminist movement, which was informed by scientific, sociological and historical knowledge would never approve of such primitive practices in the name of orthodoxy. This is a typical example of the sorts of conflict that Tara Lata and her sisters confront throughout the narrative text.

Mukherjee never fails to bring out the plight of divorced single women in this novel. Men find divorced women extra attractive, especially married men. "A divorced Indian woman, released inside a room of married Indian men was kitten in a dog pound." (p.3). Tara the divorced lady remembers their voices. "You divorced ladies have not yet lost your charm. You have only grown more desirable. Divorced ladies must be oversexed." (p.3)

After she has left Bish, all of his oldest friends find out her new address and come to her house one by one saying that her life is already shattered and there is nothing wrong in sharing the bed with them for a day. It is perhaps, the hardest time for the divorced women like Tara to cope with these beasts. Even though divorce is considered as a means of women's emancipation, the problems faced by the divorced women are limitless. Apart from this, being an Indian lady school assistant Tara tries hard to raise her son as a single mom. She finds it difficult to bring up her son in a disciplined manner. She herself says in one situation, "Poor Rabi. I am not worthy to raise a son." (p.3). She finds out undesirable magazines under his bed. She cannot stop him from talking to Christopher Dey, the illegitimate child of her sister Padma. Children born outside marriage like Chris and children of divorced parents suffer without family. This happens because of the profound changes incurred in the structure of the family.

In *Desirable Daughters*: Mukherjee essays to show a protagonist who withdraws from the stereotyped life, gives up her home country and expresses desires for a third space, oscillates between the double identity, whether to assimilate into an American culture or to live an Americanized life. The novel is all about the psychological journey of the protagonist Tara from America to her cultural roots, that is, India. One can visualize America and India from her perspective. The most avoided topic, that is, sex and Tara's desire for the size of organ and sexual experience with Andy, her lover and Bish have been frankly expressed. The primary issues discussed in the novel are marriage, love, sex, and dowry and woman subjugation.

In *Desirable Daughters*, identity emerges as continuous process, forever transforming and never truly complete. Mukherjee being the first generation immigrant has represented the journey from India to America as symbolic of the rite of passage from the constructing space of patriarchal traditions to the process of presenting her of self-assertion. Her protagonists are also shown to engage in the process of presenting a new independent self by transcending determined patriarchal parameters.

The three main sisters in the novel Padma, Paravi and Tara are created as typical of Mukherjee's characters that break traditional values and who want to lead their own lives. But one way or the other they find themselves bound with the Indian culture. Tara represents the cultural hybridist. Being both an Indian and American she has gained the third space of enunciation. Tara's position is different from Padma who is a hyphenated immigrant. Each one traverses her own path of immigrant life quite happily.

However, Tara is anxious to reconstruct the story of her ancestor, whose life has been determined by destiny since the fateful day of her groom's death and her marriage to a tree. This is an attempt to discover the meaning of her own life in a new time and a new world. She explores the making of her own consciousness. Uncovering of her memories and familial history parallels a revelation of her own identity. When she walks down the very road that the tree-bride had crossed, the only time when, as an adult, she had set foot outside her father's home on her way to the British prison, Tara finds a complete identity with them: their voices drift through time, they penetrate the thickest stone fortress: I open myself to them" (p.310).

Tara starts with the singular identity and soon discovers many roles and the multiple identities that comprise her. She says: "out of order, I created chaos. Out of chaos, one.... will create something as a new American consciousness" (p.155). She is able to overcome the notions of binary structures like east and west, orient and occident, man and woman. Her way of life becomes an insignia for new cultural fusion. Tara's subjectivity is composed of variable sources, different material and many locations. This feature destroys the idea of subjectivity as stable, single or pure. Her Indian past is invoked in order to constitute a firm basis for the immigrant woman's recreating an Indian-American present. She finds that her story and consciousness has created an inversion of history, for she is living her present life through the structure of an older story from the past:

I had been writing at night on recent typewriter, and the story that had begun to emerge was of the Tree-bride and of the class of Calcutta girls born a century later, both of them witness to dying radiations. Tara Lata Gangooly had turned the tragedy of her husband's death and a life time's virginity into a model of selfless saintliness. My story was

Western-minded family has been severely vituperated

by the conventional and typical men of Indian mindset. One of them condemns "You fancy city men, you have no respect for Hindu tradition" again someone says "You westernized types think you are stronger than our deities" (p.12). In *Desirable Daughters* can be compared to Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, where the protagonist Ashima comes to America after her marriage and finds her assimilating in the new community. After her husband's death she works in a Library and starts to lead her life independently. Later she realizes that for thirty three years India has been her world only in memories, and America has been the real world for her. So the country has changed her completely. In the beginning she was dependent and later she learns to do things on her own. She finally decides that she will stay six months in America and another six months in India.

However, The identity whether it is racial, ethnic or immigrant will continue as long as the world is fragmented into countries, races, religions, languages and so on. Unless and until the integrity prevails effacing the existing fragmentations as previously mentioned and establishes one world, one country, one religion, one language, one law, one color and especially one mind, the people will continuous be the prey of such sorts of identity crises. And the ultimate truth is that such a Utopian integrity is alien to the Earth and possibly be in the future too.

Mukherjee suggests live in relationship as a remedy. But later in the lastpart of the novel, she makes everyone realize that it will not bring any desirable change in the society. Tara wants to be different from her sisters. She has become completely American in her way of thinking and divorced her husband. She lives a love life with Andy without marrying him.

She feels that love is indistinguishable from status and honours'. "Love" she observes, "is having fun with that person than with anyone else, over a longer haul." (p.3). But when she gets involved in Chris problem and goes to the Police, Andy does not encourage this and leaves her saying good bye. She pleads to him that she needs him but he makes an exit paying little attention to her. In the moment of crisis, the live-in-lover like Andy will not be with the woman to share her sufferings. One cannot expect the commitment of the husband from the person whom they have live in relationship. As remarriage has fallen out of favor and increasing numbers of children are living only with their mother, the concept of the single-parent family has come into being. So divorce does not break a family but creates a single-parent family.

The next step in the evolution of the family was for the single mother to live with a boyfriend, commonly referred to as her 'partner', to form a cohabiting family. Experience has proved these relationships to be short-lived and some divorced women and their children are involved in a sequence of such relationships. Here, Mukherjee explores

“a complicated working out of the relationship between home, identity, and community that calls into question the notion of a coherent, historically continuous stable identity and works to expose the political stakes conceded in such equations”. The modern Tara begins her story with “that most American of impulses or compulsions, a ‘roots search”.

Feminist critics of the novel *Desirable Daughters* tend to perceive “the same distinction as a gender difference within Anglo-American bildungsroman, with the result that the genre itself is a form for examining this tension within women’s texts”. An integral part of this process of assimilation for the Indian American writer, the critics argue, “is the invention of a bildungsroman that describes a subject who combines independence, mobility and outspokenness with a deep sense of affinity with familial and communal others; as a group, these texts work to affirm that both halves of this equation are American and both are Asian. While others have focused on plots of second-generation separation and independence, however, my study questions the Asian American recasting of marriage plots.”

CONCLUSION

Mukherjee portrays a ‘double consciousness’ in Tara who is influenced by ancient customs and traditions and at the same time finds a foothold in the foreign land which is totally different from India. This shows her Americanized Indian identity which helps her to be independent in herself. She lives of the life of a true American when she lives in America and she never mingles Indian life style in it. But when she comes back to India she changes as complete Indian in style which proves that she can

manage both the identities in her life. Thus Tara’s identity is ever evolving. Identities are never fixed. They are always in recess in today’s world. As Stuart Hall says in his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora Identity* is never complete and it is always in process.

REFERENCES

- Agarwal, M. (2009). *English literature: Voices of Indian diaspora*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.2009.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory*: New Delhi: Viva Books Pvt. Ltd.2010.
- Bhaba, Homi K. *The location of culture*. London: Routledge. 1994.
- Bose, Brinda. *Cultural dichotomy in selected novels of Bharati Mukherjee*, Routledge: London, 2011.
- Hall, S. (1990). *Cultural identity and diaspora identity: Community, culture, difference* (J. Rutherford, Ed.). London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Hall, S. (1993). *Cultural identity and diaspora*. Ed. In P. Williams and Chrisman (Eds.), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: a reader*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Kumar, N. (2013). *The fiction of Bharati Mukherjee - A cultural perspective*. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd.
- Mukherjee, B. (1971). *The Tigers daughter*. London: Penguin Books Limited.
- Nelson, E. S. (1993). *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical perspectives*. New York: Garland Publications.
- Ray, A. (2011). Immigrant identity in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels. *Muse India*, 35(2), Feb 2011.
- Sharma, M. M. (2007). *The inner world of Bharati Mukherjee: From expatriate to immigrant*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.