Diasporic Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters

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Abstract: The present paper attempts to explore identity crisis depicted in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters. The novel unfolds the story of three sisters, who are settled in different countries, and are suffering to find out their own identities as they come to realize their marginal position as well as substitute role in family and society. The quest of its protagonist Tara for a separate identity in the traditional bound society leads her to select places to select but wherever she moves, she finds the spaces of tradition and a fixed sense of identity as an Indian immigrant. Displacement not only leads to separation but it also leads to alienation and rebirth in a new country, new culture, new society and new adjustments in an alien land. Thus, the present paper will be a modest attempt to analyze the novel.

Migrations have both erased and re-inscribed patterns of being and belonging, producing a self with multiple and partial identification which is simultaneously both individualized and community oriented. Thus the diasporic writer occupies a space of exile and cultural solitude which can be called a hybrid location of antagonism, perpetual tension and pregnant chaos. Here the reality of the body, a material production of one local culture, and the abstraction of the mind, a cultural sub-text of a global experience, provide the intertwining threads of the diasporic existence of a writer. Therefore the writer begins by mapping the contours of their own transited identity that are in constant negotiation and transformation because of the interaction between the past and the present.

This transformation is also seen in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, who is one of the most celebrated writers of the Asian immigrant experience in America. To elucidate her viewpoint, Mukherjee describes her narratives as “stories of broken identities and discarded languages”, that nevertheless, represent her characters as fired by the “will to bond to a new community” (introduction Darkness).

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 a boy of 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 camouflage the fragile vulnerable self.

While writing about the two invariables of the transnational conditions - exile and homeland, Mukherjee in her novels captures the temporal and spatial dynamics of immigrant sensibility lost in the space between home and location. The estranging consciousness of relocation is haunted by some sense of loss, an urge to reclaim or to look back at the transgressive precint of the past. To quote Maya Manju Sharma:

In her fiction Mukherjee handles western themes and settings as well as characters who are westernized or bicultural. Yet she is forced to admit that the very structure of her imagination is essentially Hindu and essentially moral.[3]

But in Desirable Daughters Mukherjee focuses on the alternative ways to belong, cultural hybridity simultaneity and the ‘third space of enunciation’[4] which are markers of the post-colonial condition of existence. Clifford says ‘Diaspora women are caught between Patriarchies ambiguous pasts and futures. They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways.’[5] Likewise, Tara in the novel finds herself caught between Patriarchal histories of her past home and legends created by her husband in the acquired home. She cuts short the legend by walking out and, in turn, gets stagnant in a relationship of retrofitting with a man who leaves her alone in her time of need. According to Avtar Brah:
In other words, diasporic experiences and double identification constitute hybrid forms of identity. Such forms of identity differ from the essential notion of national and ethnic identity. It also explores multiple belongings that enable people to inhabit more than one space at the same time. Under such condition in the absence of a dominant code, culture is becoming an individualistic enterprise, in which people create their own super structure and super culture, becoming in a way their own ‘cultural programmers.’ [7] Tara is a fictional rendering of such cultural hybridity. Tara’s assertion that she is both, being simultaneously an Indian and an American, helps her gaining the same ‘third space of enunciation.’ [8]

In Desirable Daughters, Mukherjee fuses near and far, traditional and modern which transform and recreates the meaning of cultural space. In the novel Tara attempts to reconfigure her meaning as a trans-national and trans-cultural subject and attempts to center the narrative upon her individual experiences as a diasporic shuttle. She is a frustrated woman dwindling menacingly in the alternative models of survival between territories, migrations and mediations. Tara, like Mukherjee’s diasporic characters struggle hard to occupy the translational space, after multiple dislocations and ruptures.

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. Parvati the middle sister, with an American education and an America trained Indian husband, lives the life of a privileged rich wife in India. She symbolizes the traditional life of an Indian woman with a 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, locales, nostalgic romanticism of the past, and the inverted story of mobility, existential suffering, hybrid-subjectivity and plurality in her physical and psychic dividedness between rejection to the nativity and incapacity to deal with the new situation that makes the theme of identity more powerful and poignant in the mainstream of American life.

In its opening epigraph of Desirable Daughters, Mukherjee evokes tradition-both as impossible to follow, and as a felt necessity. The epigraph to the novel, a Sanskrit verse adopted by Octavio Paz that provides an insight in an immigrant’s quest for identity and authenticity of oneself:

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.[12]

Bharati Mukherjee depicts a fluid society in her novels, a society in flux. It is a society of constant flow, the flow of migrants, the flow of machines, flow of criminals, flow of exterritorial power structure, even we have the crossing of geographical boundaries when Tara in an assay to search her roots remembers her ancestral ties with Tara-Lata, the ‘Tree-Bride’ of Mishtigunj. She was attempting to redefine the importance of her cultures through space and time. Sense of home plays a significant role in Tara’s construction of her identity:

We have to stop living in a place that’s changed on us while we’ve been away. I don’t want to be a perfectly preserved bug trapped in amber, Didi, I can’t deal with modern India, it’s changed too much and too fast, and I don’t want to live in a half-India kept on life-support.[19]

Bharati Mukherjee asserts that in the process of splitting and cultural dislocation man seems to lose his meaning and purpose in life. In the process of migration, the immigrants can neither adopt alien culture nor can leave their culture of ‘home’ and finally a new hybrid culture comes to flourish.

In America, Tara always feels herself guilty of lavish spending and conspicuous luxury, “I’m feeling just a little alien and uncomfortable, a tinge of not belonging, in the midst of such welcoming comfort and I think it must be the way Bish feels.” [24] Love, to Bish, is the residue of providing for parents and family, contributing to good causes and community charities, earning professional respect, and being recognized for hard work and honesty. Love is indistinguishable from status and honors. ‘I can’t imagine my carpenter, Andy, bringing anything more complicated to it than, say, ‘fun.’ Love is having fun with someone, more fun with that person than anyone else, over a longer haul.’[25]

Tara however enjoys her love-life with Andy because she feels that there is something exotic, something that defies the set norms and structures. Tara swerves away from Indian traditionalism and allows herself to be physically involved with Andy. Her dislocation from cultural codes fragments her once again. Tara defines her relationship with Andy:

The identity of diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given[...]. As such, all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even though they are implicated in the construction of a common we.[6]
We were exotics to each other, no familiar moves or rituals to fall back on. He interpreted my fear as shyness. He was not my first American lover, but he was twice the mass of any man I’d ever known, a bear-man.[26]

Thus, loneliness brings a greater isolation in the life of Tara and she feels alienated in American society. She seeks solace outside the traditional world of austerity and self-preservation. In India the details of religion, caste, sub-caste, mother tongue, place of birth are all integral part of man’s personality and one cannot dare to go beyond them. Tara further confesses:

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 and broken-down running shoes on my feet. I am not the only Indian on the block. All the same, I stand out, I’m convinced. I don’t belong here, despite my political leanings; worse, I don’t want to belong.[27]

She terrifically suffers for her separation from Bish because the concept of divorce is not acceptable, according to Indian code of matrimony. She left Bish because the promise of life as an American wife had not been fulfilled. When the relationship between Bish and Tara becomes intolerable, she comes to a bitter realization. ‘In America, it seemed to us, every woman was expected to create her own scandal, be the centre of her own tangled love nest.’[28]

As in a usual divorce-settlement Tara sends her son with his father, Bish on holidays and weekends to resorts in Australia. She is a claimant of all legacies. She breaks out of the over-determined notions of identity; culture and homeland. But these facets of her personality do not hinder her strategies of survival in the adopted land. The reconciliation of the broken family also symbolizes the reconciliation of cultures.

Padma on the other hand, in spite of her immigration and dynamic attitude to life, devotes herself to the popularity of Bengali life and culture. Padma, after excavating her past, concludes that a true Bengali family cannot even be fully Westernized- ‘our family westernization was superficial, confined to convent school, metro cinema and movie magazines, which overlaid a profound and orthodox Hinduism.’[30] Mukherjee here resolutely deals with the margins of national culture and also reflects on dislocations due to cultural cohesion between longing and disgust for Indian cultural tradition. Bhabha attempts to explain this ambivalence in the following language:

Cultural globality is figured in the in-between spaces of double frames: its historical originality marked by a cognitive obscurity; its decentered ‘subject’ signified in the nervous temporality of the transitional, or the emergent provisionally of the ‘present. [31]

Mukherjee, in her endeavor to explain the diasporic condition in the unstable temporality, is conscious of the mechanics of splits and doubles in the making of the third location of culture. She thus, not only highlights the longing of immigrants for Indian cultural heritage but also expresses her disgust at the changing scenario within India itself and the shifting dynamics of American culture. In both the situation the sense of loss is intense.

Tara’s diasporic torment however, is relational, she is unable to affirm an authentic Indian self or assimilate totally in to American culture. She had divorced her wealthy, handsome husband as she felt stifled in her marriage. Tara, in direct contrast to Padma had embraced the American notions of freedom and self-fulfillment as being of primary significance in her life, seeking refuge in this discourse as a reprise from the orthodoxies of the Bengali Brahmin culture:

The gap between the youngest and oldest, the disparity of our marriages and the paths our immigration have made us strangers. Her reaction to my divorce (that I had brought shame to the Bhattacharjee family had been her refrain) had hurt.[33]

The middle sister Parvati had also rebelled in her youth. Her rebelliousness however, was not subversive, as she had chosen for her husband a Bengali Brahmin, Aurobino Banerji. Parvati and her husband had relocated to India and had established a typical upper class milieu to raise their two sons. In many ways Parvati was the most conventional of the sisters plying the role of the Bengali wife to completeness:

Parvati makes her routine stops to her favorite Goan meat and poultry seller, Parsi baker, two or three fresh water fish vendors in the fish market, and half a dozen vegetable hawkers in the produce bazaar [...] Parvati’s in-laws expect her to meet them when they arrive and to see them off when they leave.[34]

Bharati Mukherjee seems to establish that India is a land of spiritual values, stability, variety of languages and tradition that American society would never be able to appreciate. She says: ‘I am tired of explaining India to Americans. I am sick of feeling an alien.’[35] Mukherjee, through the nostalgia of Tara, significantly exposes the loss of spiritual values in the materialistic glamour of the west.

Mukherjee’s women are perennial in a quest for freedom in all aspects of their lives. In Desirable Daughters, there is a celebration of an evolving identity, an identity that changes constantly when cultural connections are lost, resulting in creation of multiple selves. The efforts of maintaining both identities – partly Indian, partly American – make her the hybrid of new culture that again poses the question of her real identity. Thus, throughout the novel, Bharati Mukherjee depicts the identity crisis of its protagonists who is longing for her new
The three women characters portrayed in the Desirable Daughters are individualistic, react, to different circumstances in dissimilar ways, and yet there is a gradual process of self-actualization in them that helps them to realize their dreams and overcome the sense of isolation and disillusionment.

References