

(Re)Location of Women in Diasporic Condition

A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

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As a writer of diaspora, Mukherjee's fictions are centric to the question of nostalgia for a lost home, disillusionment of expatriation, fragmentation of the self, exuberance of immigration, assimilation, cultural translation and negotiation. 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.¹

In her earlier novels, diasporic transmigration meant new opening and emancipation from the clutches of convention bound society. In the same manner, attachment to one's own native culture and homeland, while living in an alien space 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 *(de)construct* 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 *women* 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 of the uprooted *women* in the postcolonial space extensively in the 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 they express through mixed *existential* code. 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 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.

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.²

Mukherjee has the affinity with the native soil, but discourages the vapidness and pollutants of the soil yet declining to pay short shrift to its vitality. 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 precinct 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:

[T]he 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

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 Tara says in *Desirable Daughters*:

The rhetoric of modern San Francisco makes me invisible. I am not "Asian,"[...] I am all things[...]yet I'm still too timid to feed my Ballygunge Park Road identity in to the Kitchen garburetor. That dusty identity is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case[...]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 leaning; worse, I don't want to belong."⁹

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. Most of her fictions stems from the dichotomy of growing up in two cultures as it is woven in Tara's trajectory from one location to another. The diasporic subjects like Tara experience the recurrence of this dichotomy and constitute the epicenter of the most important demographic dislocations of the modern times. It now represents an important compelling force in world culture. Salman Rushdie points out:

Our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will in short create fictions, not actual cities villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands India of the mind.¹⁰

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 distant dread and it is after divorce from her husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee she became curious to know about the trauma of 'Tree bride.' Drawing a thematic parallel with Spivak's phenomenal article, *Three women's texts and a critique of imperialism*¹¹ 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. 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 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*

The result of globalization is that it has created a 'Third space'¹³ to spread beyond the known 'location' and 'space.' It is now a situation of 'enunciatively split'¹⁴ to take from each other's heritage and sew it together into one's own heritage in the location of one's culture. Tara fails to generate the sense of belonging that she so desperately seeks in America. She fails to be absorbed beyond 'base-superstructure division'¹⁵ and remains unrepresented in the 'transnational totality.'¹⁶ Her Americanization remains elusive, despite all her attempts at assimilation. Tara at the end of the novel seems to believe that there is no simplistic answer to her quest. Tara's own stories is that of an entirely untraditional Bengali –American who has rebelled against the life of an Indian wife, and set up home with a lover in a multi-ethnic neighborhood almost synonymous with revolt unlike Tara Lata of *Tree Bride*. Hers is emphatically a modern world, a 'new global unconscious.'¹⁷ As a student her husband Bish discovered a process for allowing computers to create their own time, instantaneously routing information to the least congested lines.¹⁸ Bish, on the other hand is a part of the process of globalization, the process by which people become increasingly interconnected across natural borders and continents.

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 essay 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

Despite Parvati's exposure to the West, she always criticizes both Tara and Rabi for their American ways. To Auro and Parvati, Rabi looks like 'a savage, a trust-fund American savage.'²⁰ Auro and Parvati plead with Tara to return to India with Rabi before it is too late. They fear that at a later stage, Rabi may not be either Indian or American. But she does not understand that Tara and Rabi can be both at the same time. Parvati thinks that Tara's American adventure is over with her divorce, whereas to Tara it is just beginning. Parvati and Tara are closer to each other than they are to Didi, but they do not share a common language. As Tara says:

As sisters we were close, certainly closer than either of us was to Didi, but we didn't have a language for divorce and depression, which meant we couldn't fit in concepts like powerlessness and disappointment. We couldn't talk about why a young woman with everything she could ever want would decide to leave her protector and provider.²¹

Parvati's traditional life-style is more predictable, in the sense, there are no sudden shocks and surprises. So there are times when Tara envies Parvati's clarity and confidence as she thinks that Parvati seems to be in control of things that are happening around her. She does not tolerate anything that questions the tradition of the family or the community. When Tara asks Parvati about the liaison between Padma and Ron Dey, she reacts:

I cannot fathom what is going on in your life to force you to make such a bizarre request. Do you have any idea how mad you sound? Maybe you have lost touch with the way things work here, in which case, I think you need a good long Indian vacation away from all those crazy soap operas that keep putting bad ideas into susceptible minds. [...] Have you become so American that you don't realize how absurd your request is?²²

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. To quote Bill Ashcroft:

Post-colonial culture is inevitably a hybrid phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the grafted European culture systems and an indigenous ontology with its impulse to create or recreate an independent local identity. Such construction or reconstruction occurs as a dynamic interaction between European hegemonic and 'peripheral' subversion of them.²³

In America Tara could imagine any number of Atherton families, Bish's friends coming here for weekend, flooding the courts and riding paths but Tara could never imagine Bish enjoying these situations. 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. Old rules of the game are gone. It is exciting to formulate new rules. 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:

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 terribly 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. Though Tara does not belong to India or to America or to the Silicon Valley Wives Group, yet she is comfortable in all these cultures. She is a claimant of all legacies. She breaks out of the over-determined notions of identity; culture and homeland. There are many instances in the novel in which she deliberately flaunts her Brahmin heritage. 'We are Bengali Brahmins from Calcutta and nothing can touch us,'²⁹ are Tara's resounding words in honor of her Brahmin heredity. But these facets of her personality do not hinder her strategies of survival in the adopted land. For six long years, she defies the Indian tradition of arranged marriage and lives with a Hungarian refugee. 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 is particularly emphatic on the question of cultural inheritance and the total assimilation in the culture of adoption. Bharati Mukherjee 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 during her conversation with Padma expresses her sense of loss at westernized India and all pervasive cultural pollution. If she is disgusted with materialism of the west, equally disgusting is the scene in India:

Padma's diasporic self-fashioning has encouraged her to salvage her Indianness with retribution, adopting the discourse of authenticity to defend her space. Her career as an Indian American performer also dictates that she foregrounds her ethnicity, so as to appear more 'authentic' to her audience. Despite the outwardly stable identity, Padma projects the ambivalences and ploy that govern her life and that becomes visible:

Didi was sitting just inches away, a firm identity resisting all change [...] but under scrutiny, fractured, like cracks under old glaze. Up close, I didn't recognize her. I didn't know who she was. I was following the cracks, fascinated by their complexity, not the simple shining face. "Puffles and Piffles", Andy once called them, but I never thought that previously unidentified fault lines could refer to my sister or to me.³²

Tara's diasporic torment however, is relational, she is unable to affirm an authentic Indian self or assimilate totally in to American culture. It is these fault lines that disclose themselves just underneath her polished front. In an ironic turnaround of their actions during their youth, Tara had become more bohemian living in the Upper Height area of San Francisco, the epicenter of the hippie movement of the 1970s. 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 reprieve 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. Tara is anxious regarding the proper education of her son Rabi that may be close to typical Bengali tradition. The concept of American education was all illusion to her. She has a firm conviction:

Existence was too easy in Atherton, they agreed, America made children soft in the brain as well as the body; it weakened the moral fiber. They grew up without respect for family and tradition.³⁶

Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* testifies a kind of perturbed coexistence of double consciousness and a leaning to ethicize and problematize other aspects of their lives, and all other relationships among the Indian community. In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara expresses the same contradiction: 'It's one of those San Francisco things I can't begin to explain in India, just like I can't explain my Indian life to the women I know in California.'³⁷ Thus it is their ethnicity which gives the Asian American a *locational* status among the Americans. Tara is sternly shielding about her own territory, Calcutta, which gives her ethnic identity among American friends. In an intolerant tone she critiques the way in which they reduce Calcutta to a few tempting images. Her lived experience of Calcutta challenges these stereotypes:

The city was Calcutta in late fifties and early sixties. My American friends in California say God, Tara, Calcutta! as though to suggest I have returned to earth after a journey to one of the outer planets. It's one of those cities in the world with negative cachet, a city to escape, one of those hellholes made famous by Mother Teresa and mindless comparisons in the American press; dirtier than Calcutta. Crueler than Calcutta. Poorer than Calcutta. I grew up in city that never pitied itself, a city that deflected all these abuse. Insults were the badge of our superiority, proof of others' ignorance.³⁸

Mukherjee facilitates a cross-cultural understanding of problem like caste, exile and identity by persistently shuttling her setting between Calcutta and Jackson Heights. In Jackson Heights the Asian migrants are forced to consider themselves as a monolithic ethnic group. In this perspective, caste is only a part of one's memory. More than the caste, nationality becomes the marker of one's ethnicity. In Calcutta, in contrast, caste is still an issue. Tara moves between these two cultural locations and her mobility ultimately proves that caste and nationality have to be contested on the basis of personal experiences of living in and moving through different cultural spaces.

Desirable Daughters by Mukherjee reveals survival strategies at multiple levels ranging from physical, social, psychological and to spiritual levels. Mukherjee's protagonist in the *Desirable Daughters* stands at the transgressive rim of history and with a peculiar conviction surges ahead for a root search. Here one can see the survival strategy to retain her identity in a pluralistic society by not assimilating but by devising her own ways to articulate her immigrant conditions. In this new cultural and diasporic endeavor one feels tempted to locate autobiographical hue and to question, whether the novel is an ethnographic project. In *Desirable Daughters* one also gets to understand the dynamics of shifting personal and ethnic implications in adherence to the author's own ethnic transformation. Pramila Venkateshwaran in her article, "Bharati Mukherjee as Autobiographer", amplifies this issue:

Mukherjee combines autobiography with ethnography; her personal story is relevant only insofar as it relates to the outer set of events and the collective identity of Calcutta women. The world outside the self takes on an importance as it would to a novelist or a journalist, such that it provides an area for the narrator to either participate in or observe from the fringes. Her alienation or involvement is contextual; therefore, the centre of the narrative

constantly shifts according to the context, from the collective to the individual, from the socio-historical reconstruction of women to individual and personal revelation.³⁹

Desirable Daughters is a fictionalized version of Mukherjee's article entitled "Two Ways to Belong" published in *New York Times* 22 September 1996. In this article Mukherjee talks about how she and her sister Mira interact with the country of their choice. Mira arrives in Detroit to study child psychology and American pre-school education. Bharati Mukherjee follows her a year later to study Creative Writing in the University of Iowa. Mira marries a Bombay-born graduate student and the couple acquires Labour Certification, which is necessary to get a green card. Mira now lives in Detroit and works in South Field Michigan School System. She has gained national recognition for her contribution to pre-school education. Even after thirty-six years, Mira clings on to her Indian citizenship tenaciously and hopes to return to India after she retires.

Bharati Mukherjee on the other hand marries an American of Canadian descent. By marrying outside her ethnic community, Bharati Mukherjee has opted for fluidity, self-invention, renouncing three thousand years of caste-conscious, pure culture. She celebrates the cultural fusionism and *mongrelization* beyond the 'base and superstructure division.'⁴⁰ In short, Mira wants to maintain her identity in the host culture whereas Bharati wants to transform it. Mira pinpoints 'the lack of structure, the erasure of Indianness, the absence of an unvarying daily care'⁴¹ in Bharati Mukherjee's life. But Mukherjee points her finger at Mira's 'narrowness of perspective, involvement with the mythic depths or the superficial pop-culture'⁴² of the host society. As Bharati Mukherjee says:

America spoke to me-I married it- I embraced the demotion from expatriate aristocrat to immigrant nobody, surrendering those thousands of years of 'pure culture' the saris, the delightfully accented English. Mira retained them all. ⁴³

Mira and Bharati Mukherjee, like Padma and Tara differ in the way they negotiate with the host culture. Mira is happy to live in America as an 'expatriate' rather than as an 'immigrant-Indian.' But Bharati Mukherjee has the need to feel like a part of the community she has adopted. She, like Tara wants to put her roots down, and make a difference. It is quite evident that Mukherjee writes out of her lived experience and that the characters Padma, Parvati and Tara are modeled on Mira, Bharati and Ranu respectively.

All the three are desirable in their own ways. With all her experience and exposure to the West, Parvati reconciles for a conventional, disciplined and domesticated role of an Indian woman. On the other hand, Didi represents the way of life of hundreds of immigrants in the United States. To feed the nostalgia of Indian settlers in the U.S. is her cultural mission and also her survival strategy. In contrast, Tara's way to belong is a complex one. In the United States, she internalizes the progressive views of the host country, culture, and homeland.

Being played out with abundant superfluity in her life of the New World magnificence, Tara in *Desirable Daughters* breaks all shackles of tradition and walks out of the wedlock with her son Rabi choosing a live-in relationship with a Hungarian Buddhist retrofitter, and doing volunteer work in a pre-school in San Francisco, all for her self- fulfillment. Her divorce is not known to her parents in India who like every parents desire their three daughters desirable for all time to them. She has an entrenched ethnicity implanted in her cultural heritage. She has the native cultural classiness, contrapuntal to American cosmopolitan glitziness and paranoid fantasy. As a diasporic subject she is caught in the cross cultural complication and treads on a thin line between isolation and oneness.

This cosmopolitan consciousness has deeper impact in her daily affairs. She cannot be her own, as she is unable to get rid of her 'foreignness' she is at the same time, cannot quite negotiate her cultural nativity and rootedness. In California's High Street she has already a refined rearing. Her early affairs with Ronald Dey, a Christian boy, the brilliant brother of her friend Poppy was not liked by her parents as they advised her 'if you sow the wrong kind of soil, you are bound to end up with an unhealthy sapling. That means no inter-caste alliance.'⁴⁴ Tara neither is able to accept Bish as a sanctuary nor is she completely ready to become a traditional breast giver and a pure Indian house wife. In her subaltern and Third World marginality she comes into sight like Mukherjee's alterable and mutable heroine in just braving the New World.

In the peculiar global dynamics Tara has hyphenated herself with her native land though she undergoes anxiety in the inertia of being incapable to return home and also finding a new home in the adopted land. She imbibes the best of Indian and Western cultures through her struggle as a practitioner of feminist principles in which the social and legal aspects of formal procedural marriage are not essential and central to one's survival in personal and social acceptance. She however, finds family to be an indispensable social institution to feel attached and get nostalgic to. In India a wife's identity is part and parcel of her husband's identity but in San Francisco she finds 'maintaining a healthy home life and respect for culture and tradition'⁴⁵ is the identity of a

wife.

Tara thinks herself as a typical immigrant and locates compulsively in a strange obsession of anxiety between her feelings and response deep in her insulated and cocooned Indian self with an American garb. In her authorial voice and narrative method Mukherjee has presented splendidly, realized moments like the *Brahminic* culture and childhood memories in the texture of *Desirable Daughters* with an enthralled nostalgia. In her oriental glitziness, socialite text, hybrid dialogue and multicultural literary mechanics she has create a new discourse on immigrant identity.

In *Desirable Daughters*, Bharati Mukherjee has struck a balance between the past and the present through a deft blending of tradition and modernity. This she achieves through the character of Tara who has outwardly severed her links with tradition but still remains tied to her native country. She is influenced by ancient customs and traditions, but is also very much in to the glitziness and modernism of the multicultural America. She is caringly conscious of her existential predicament. Tara's tentative steps towards seeking her true self requires her to carefully navigate between prescriptive Hindu traditions and American notions of individuality and freedom.

Tara is thus an estranged self, languishing in the anxiety and uncertainties of the diasporic experience, which to Susheila Nasta is 'not only an unrequited desire for a lost homeland but also a homing desire to reinvent and rewrite home as much as a desire to come to terms with an exile from it.'⁴⁶ Tara's predicament as a diasporic subject is problematic as it is difficult to frame her character in Mukherjee's celebratory Americanism. Tara, after multiple fragmentations and displacements seems to decline Mukherjee's fascinating Americanism; instead her character takes the route to the root, in the shrine of Indianness and Tara Lata's mystical world. Through her critical reconstruction of the Tree-Bride's history, Tara is able to arrive at an awareness of her identity as a construct that is largely shaped by her consciousness. Tara arrives at the realizations that if Tara-Lata, aged virgin and a 'Tree-Bride,' could attain the status of a saint and freedom fighter in a society where it was unthinkable for a woman to be without a man, it was essential that she, Tara-Lata's descendent must forge her own path towards self-assertion.

The death of Tara Lata's husband had imposed virginity throughout her life which got converted into selfless sainthood. But her namesake, Tara Bhattacharjee leaves her life on her own terms. Bish's preoccupation with his software leaves her bereft in the new world. After living up to the instilled values of patriarchal Bengali society, she divorces her multimillionaire, Silicon valley entrepreneur husband to drift along rootless, having many affairs and finally finding solace

in the arms of her live-in partner, Andy, a Hungarian immigrant who believes in Buddhism and its philosophies, comforts her through her travails with back rubs and sayings of the Zen.

At this context of the traditional phallic past Tara Bhattacharjee's move to divorce her husband and her defiance look like a revolt against a patriarchal mindset, which is a part of immigrant life style in the New World of America. Tara Bhattacharjee, unlike Dimple in *Wife* believes in staying afloat like Jasmine. She frees herself from the shackles of marriage and the symbolic phallic power.

In *Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee has juxtaposed the Indian culture with American culture and describes the ambivalence of this mirror self. Tara Lata the tree bride is juxtaposed to her great granddaughter Tara Bhattacharjee. While, the former in essence is the symbol of Indian feminism, a virtuous lady with inculcated qualities of tolerance, a freedom fighter of yesteryears, a widow and a virgin she is a goddess who has not brought defame to herself whereas the latter, Tara Bhattacharjee a divorcee, tagging along a live-in partner, a Hungarian immigrant, a believer in Buddhist ideology, mother to a son who is a gay also tagged as a slut, she feels out of place in her immigrant existence, especially when she visits her sister and finds the same attitude in people around.

Bharati Mukherjee's construction of a diasporic female subjectivity in *Desirable Daughters* appears to be in consonance with Rahakrishnan's views regarding the critical and dialectic negotiation between the politics of proximity and the politics of distance required of the diasporic individual, seeking to redefine his or her identity.⁴⁷ Tara's tentative steps towards seeking her true self require her to carefully navigate between prescriptive Hindu traditions and American notions of individuality and freedom.

Thus physical dislocation is emphasized in its historical and existential conjecture which is dealt with in the profane, immoral and impure multi-religious and multicultural context. Now Tara's refuge is her ancestral world that is rooted in tradition away from Western adventure mechanisms. She has to seek shelter under the pristine halo of Hindu religion, be truthful honest and kind.

Tara's quest for tradition in the form of her namesake Tara (Lata) the 'tree bride' is symptomatic to this phenomenon of root search despite Mukherjee's strong assertion to her own Americanization and self-provoked assimilation in to the host culture. Here the immigrant suffers in postcolonial displacement but desires to return to the lost origin refusing to remain as wandering nomad. Thus, From Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) to *Desirable Daughters* (2002) one

can observe a steady metamorphosis from acculturation to self-actualization as a counter-narrative against the atrocities of dominant and central ethos.

'Migrants' says Salman Rushdie, 'straddle two cultures[...] Fall between two stools'⁴⁸ and they suffer 'triple dislocation'⁴⁹ comprising the loss of roots, the linguistic and also the social dislocation. Like many Indian immigrant women in their American status Tara has her frantic effort to seek, organize and affirm her identity and thinks how-

In India, we didn't have outside influences [...] we didn't know family breakdown. Our families inside an impenetrable bubble. Anyone entering or existing was carefully monitored. We honoured the proprieties. There was no rebellion, no seeking after individual identity [...] we three sisters were treated with absolute equality, and we responded in total unanimity.⁵⁰

In her Americanized status Tara has a philosophical quest in the web of dualism. This disentangles her complex in an indifferent city where she neither able to surrender her personality nor is able to accept a new giant identity in the crisis of her life. She lives physically in immense advantages but enjoys a nomadic life in the cultural desert of America in her psychological invalidity.

The discourse of the migrant as metropolitan and the fantasy of the land of opportunity could be described, borrowing Spivak's phrase as a *fantasmatic hegemonic nativist counternarrative*.⁵¹ Although she uses the term in a little different context, it can be deployed with slightly different emphasis to describe Mukherjee's neo-nationalist discourse, a discourse constituted by both her fiction and her comments on and readings of that fiction, and the ways her writing has been mobilized by critics and reviewers within the wider discourse of literary criticism. Anne Brewster has positioned Mukherjee in a new location of Diasporic subjectivity:

Mukherjee identifies the UK and Canada with imperialism and describes her choice to emigrate to the US as a choice for freedom from imperialism. Her mythologizing of herself as a writer is aimed at constructing herself as an American and at re-reading her own experience as national or, more precisely, neo-national. Mukherjee's neo-nationalism, figured in the fantasy of the land of opportunity and the romance of the immigrant is, therefore, the counter-narrative to her own diasporic condition and the dilemma of postcoloniality.⁵²

The mother country simply does not have the cultural means to cut them off. Another

interesting feature of the cultural representation of space in India has always been constituted as much by the notion of the periphery as it has by the notion of the centre. This notion of the periphery has now expanded to include the diaspora. In post-modern climate of the West among the diasporic population and emigrants there is a relentless pursuit for identity negotiating displacement, dislocation and diverse experiences of the beyond. Homi Bhabha says:

The 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past[...]we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond.'⁵³

This simultaneous dwelling in here and there contributes to the formation of double consciousness. In such non stereotypical progression of mutative and multiple transitions Diasporic identity is in flux, always changing like a nostalgic refrain. The protagonist of *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* constructs a new narrative of fragmented identities of a woman who, through the moods of disruptions and dislocations, dismantling, and assimilation yearns for the truth about the unattainable identity of a diasporic woman. In the process of writing her namesake's story, Tara redefines her identity in terms of dislocation while trying to establish a connection with the imagine community of woman of her culture and heritage by historically looking back through story of her sisters, mother, and grandmothers.

As Mandal has noted in her reading of *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee does not practice what she preaches.⁵⁴ Mukherjee's focus on the rituals and customs of the Bengali gentfolk in *Desirable Daughters* belies her assertion that she has extended the American mainstream. She underscores the heroism of the Tree Bride and uses it as a yardstick for her protagonist Tara, to measure her own evolving identity against it. Tara reaches the conclusion that a critical renegotiation of her Indian 'roots' and American proclivities is required for her to forge an autonomous subjectivity. Bharati Mukherjee employs the exotic narrative of the Tree Bride as a counter-hegemonic strategy to assert that a hybrid diasporic Indian American identity can only be constructed through a nuanced, critically informed dialectic with both ethnic sensitivities and American cultural imperatives.

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