

EAST-WEST CONFRONTATION AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper entitled an East-West Confrontation and Cultural Hybridity in Bharathi Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters. Tara, one of the protagonists is the narrator of the story; she begins the narration by telling the story of Tara Lata- the Tree Bride- a mythic character. The plot swings back and forth from the small village in East Bengal where her ancestors live. She indulges in a deep enquiry with the help of police and a detective to find about the real motive of the boy who claimed to be Chris Dey. But, this in turn irritates Andy who leaves her forever. As Tara delves into deep enquiry of Chris Dey, she explores her own memories, familial history and her own identity. At the climax, terrorists bombard her home causing injuries to her ex-husband Bish and her son.

KEYWORDS: *East-West Confrontation and Cultural Hybridity, Desirable Daughters*

INTRODUCTION

Materialism of the west can be complemented with the spiritualism of the East and subjugation of the east can be offset by the liberation of the west. In the end, Bish learns that running after money can never lead to fulfillment. Tara learns the meaninglessness of her attempts at sexual liberation. Rabi, the second generation immigrant learns that his parents' cultural legacy is a treasure trove of spiritualism and wisdom. Bharathi Mukherjee interrogates cultural essentialism and celebrates cultural hybridity.

Hybridity refers to mixture. The term originates from biology and was subsequently employed in linguistics and in racial theory in the nineteenth century. Its contemporary uses are scattered across numerous academic disciplines and is salient in popular culture. Hybridity is used in discourses about race, post-colonialism, identity anti-racism and multiculturalism and globalization developed from its roots as a biological term. M.K.Naik observes, "Growing cultural interaction between the East and West and the consequently changing social ethos after Indian independence have given an added impetus to the writing of novels on the theme of East West Confrontation, a theme still being written on variously" (219).

In Bharathi Mukherjee novels, she explores the theme of immigration and transformation. Her creation works comprise six novels *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It*

to *Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and *The Tree Bride* (2004). Her latest novel is *Miss New India* (2011). Her two collections of short stories are *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). Bharathi Mukherjee as a writer of Indian diaspora cherishes the American melting pot. Mukherjee distances herself with the Indian origin as she wants herself to be defined as an American writer who expands the border of the American canon. Her main theme, throughout her writing, deals with the condition of Asian immigrants in North America, with particular attention to the changes taking place in South Asian women in the New World. While the character in all her works is aware of the brutalities and violence that surround them and are often victimized by various forms of social oppression, she generally draws them as survivors.

Desirable Daughters is a brilliantly woven, thought provoking novel of Bharathi Mukherjee of which the foremost theme is East- West Confrontation. In India the happiness of an individual is always dependent on the collective good of the community he belongs to. The patriarchal Indian society is very partial in not giving the due regards for the women. They are not treated in equal terms with men; the situation is worse in certain backward communities where women are treated like animals. But the protagonists of *Desirable daughters* are lucky enough as they are brought up in a different way through born in a traditional family in Calcutta. The protagonists of *Desirable Daughters* are the three sisters- Padma, Parvati and Tara.

Tara, one of the protagonists is the narrator of the story; she begins the narration by telling the story of Tara Lata- the *Tree Bride*- a mythic character. This Tara Lata almost becomes a widow on the same night of her marriage as her boy husband dies of a snake-bite. But her father who did not want to see his daughter a widow marries her to a tree. Tara Lata is a bold woman who fought against forced to leave her father's home by colonial police as a punishment for her support of Indian freedom fighters. The protagonist Tara feels a connection with the tree bride Tara Lata for her namesake. Tara Lata never left her father's home until the police take her away, but the narrator Tara has left the country both physically and psychologically.

Desirable Daughters is the story of the three different paths taken by the three high-class Calcutta Brahmin sisters- Padma, Parvati and Tara. Tara and her sisters were well-known for their beauty, intelligence, wealth and privileged positions in the society. The three sisters were given enough freedom and expression at its furthest from its realities in their upbringing. They are inculcated with convent education by catholic nuns in their convent constructed school and college. The three sisters are born exactly three years apart from each other and share the same birthday. Their mother names them after Hindu Goddess hoping they will flourish in their lives.

Padma lives in New Jersey with Harish Mehta, her husband. She is a TV profession anchoring a famous programme on an Indian channel run by her lover. Padma is entirely Indian in her attire and cuisine. She always advocates the Eastern tradition and is seen criticizing Tara for being too Americanized. Her defense of her tradition seems to be ironical to the reader as she does not have a conventional marriage. Moreover, she has not revealed the mystery of Chris Dey. It is supposed even by her own sister that Chris Dey should almost certainly be her illegitimate son. But Padma has not assimilated into the American mainstream, even many years after her stay in the U.S., while Tara has fully engrossed herself into it within a few years.

Padma tries to maintain the appearance of a traditional Bengali woman at least for the namesake. She is much worried about her eminence. She says, "Tara, they're terrible gossips. May be you are shameless enough out there in

California with all your money and your American friends not to care about your eminence, but it's all I have" (197). As Tara feels, Padma remains a mystery till the end of the novel. The mystery of Chris Dey is not at all discovered by her. Mr. Harish Mehta's job is his position as Padma's husband and he is merely living off her fame.

Parvati is the second sister, who is a typical Indian wife and whose home is always open for her huge number of relations. She leads a much contended life in her luxurious apartment in Bombay. Parvati is the first to get married among the three Bhattacharjee sisters. Parvati has jumped in orderly from the marriage queue sending messages to neighbours and relations that Bhattacharjee could not control his daughters. When Parvati gets married Tara is sixteen and is at home and Padma is twenty two. She has found a job in the theatre in New York where she is living alone. These days it is Parvati who use to give all the details of their relations to Tara once in a week over phone. Parvati is a very good host and she used to joke that, "she manages a hotel not a home" (54). The optimistic aspect of Parvati is that she never complains of the exploitation done on her in the name of guests. Though her husband Auro comes from a middle class family he manages to climb up the social ladder without neglecting his family. Her life style is now "more conspicuously luxurious than Didi's and mine" (55) says Tara.

Tara is the most detached Indian of the three women. She is the narrator of the story. She is the recently divorced youngest sister of the Bhattacharjee family, living a comfortable life with her teenage son Rabi and her new lover Andy. But, when a violent stranger enters into her life, it is her sisters and to her ex-husband she turns for comfort and renewal unraveling the mysteries that threatens to destroy the family in the process. Her new lover deserts her in that commotion. Tara's marriage is a purely arranged one unlike her sisters. She is married to a multi-millionaire, Indian Silicon valley Icon, Bishwa Priya Chatterjee. She has married Bish simply because her father asks her to get married. After marriage, Tara lives in Atherton with her husband in a gated community.

When Tara first comes to America as a newly wedded wife, to Bish, she was deeply rooted in Indian tradition and culture. She is too submissive to her husband and is well versed in domestic duties. She wants to pursue her higher studies, but has to stay at home to take care of her son just like all the other Indian wives in Atherton, California. Tara comes to California to fulfill the role of a traditional Indian wife, but instead realizes that she is not the fittest to play that role. She leaves Bish after a decade of marriage, because the promise of life as an American wife is not being fulfilled. So she asks for a divorce.

Tara becomes more independent and more Americanized. She has ceased to be a good Hindu wife and good Hindu mother. After her divorce Tara leaves Atherton to live in a place where she feels to be more at home. She feels Upper Haight in San Francisco more suitable to her taste and lived there along with her son Rabi and her Hungarian lover Andy. Tara is a valley lady; being a divorcee, she works as a volunteer at a pre-school unmindful of her husband's high position in the social ladder, she is a single parent of a teen-age son, who reveals him to be gay and has a live in lover Andy who is an ex-biker, Buddhist and Hungarian. She has also unmindfully indulged in the mystery of an unknown boy, Chris Dey. The protagonists of Bharathi Mukherjee successfully overcome their deep-rooted traditional rules and regulations by enjoying sexual freedom.

Tara sees herself an American but is constantly aware of the India that is always within her. In one instance, she says that though she has distanced herself from the Indian in San Francisco memories of her family and culture so much that many a times, they have overwhelmed her. When she goes to Jackson Height along with Padma for a shopping the

Indianness of the area awed her. She reveals her deep rooted Indianness every now and then. Bharathi Mukherjee exhibits her liking for Indian tradition and culture through her protagonists. When her fully acculturated son, for the first time reveals him to be a guy she is fully taken aback, she shudders. But the American mother in her teaches her to handle the situation tactfully.

Life goes smoothly to Tara until a young man called Chris Day turns up at her doorstep and introduces himself to be her sister's illegitimate son. She is forced to look at the relationships she has with her three sisters and their past: three different people within a specific upbringing and the rigid cultural context. The plot swings back and forth from the small village in East Bengal where her ancestors live and San Francisco. She indulges in a deep inquiry with the help of police and a detective to find about the real motive of the boy who claimed to be Chris Dey. But this in turn irritates Andy who leaves her forever. As Tara delves into a deep inquiry of Chris Day she explores her own memories, family history and her own identity. At the climax terrorists bombard her home causing injuries to her ex-husband Bish and her son. The wealth that Bish earned makes them victims to underworld robbers who are after their big money. Towards the end of the novel Tara goes back to India along with Bish and Rabi looking forward for protection, comfort and healing. The reconciliation of the broken family also symbolizes the reconciliation of cultures. Cultures need not conflict with one another or be mutually exclusive. Bombing of her house symbolizes the end of a single existence.

This paper focuses on Materialism of the west can be complemented with the spiritualism of the East, subjugation of the east can be offset by the liberation of the west. In the end, Bish learns that running after money can never lead to fulfillment. Tara learns the meaninglessness of her attempts at sexual liberation. Rabi, the second generation immigrant learns that his parents' cultural legacy is a treasure trove of spiritualism and wisdom. Bharathi Mukherjee interrogates cultural essentialism and celebrates cultural hybridity. She also challenges the stereotypical notions of national identity. Tara is a cultural hybrid, who is at home in both the cultures. Padma is an Indo-American who believes in hyphenation. She is an Indian cultural ambassador in the United States. Parvati is a western educated Indian woman of the conventional mould. Mukherjee has effectively used the metaphor of earthquake to refer to personal relationships.

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