

CONTEXTUALIZING ACCULTURATION IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee, the vibrant diasporic writer dumbfounded the readers with her superbly designed novel- 'Desirable Daughters' where she sets forth the issues of acculturation. The term acculturation specifies a dual process and it entails the level of adaptability of a person to new cultural situations, whereas De-culturation is the phenomenon of getting estranged with one's own culture or roots after coming under foreign influence. This concept, has become more important today to bring to the surface the experiences of immigrants and displaced people. The diasporic novel 'Desirable Daughters', primarily discusses the acculturative burden encountered by first generation immigrants as shown by Bharati Mukherjee with dexterity. Thus, this research paper has been designed to exhibit how the characters make their headways to achieve the acculturated state.

KEYWORDS: Diasporic, Immigrants, Generation, Hegemony and Acculturation.

INTRODUCTION

In general, Culture is the depiction of the rituals, Folkways, mores, celebration of festivals, and spirit of brotherhood (liberty, equality and fraternity) with communication as an important part. Culture ,is a contested reality and it means different things for different groups. Whatever is practiced in a society becomes a culture. People try to dissociate by delimiting the sphere, relationships and then the communication. Thus, they would like to live in solitude ,which in turn becomes their culture. Literature highlights the practice through literary works. The literature reflects the culture of the times. Consider Rabindranath Tagore's Geetanjali, an example of ancient Indian mysticism: that man is mortal, and is replenished with life at the immortal touch of God. Social interaction is a way to develop a culture. Social interaction is mutual and every member of the society, acts according to the expectations of the other members. The outcome of group interaction is its culture. Parsons and Shils view is that the interaction is responsible for the development of culture on the human level, and they perceive that it further gives its significance in the determination of action. ¹ Culture is the "integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour". Culture includes customs, beliefs, ideas, taboos, moral codes, tools, rituals, language and so on. The culture of a place expresses the inhabitants' skills such as craft, design, music, dance, knowledge, traditional techniques, traditional natural resource management, and pattern of social interaction that contributes in the welfare and identity of an individual."²

Culture is so large and a well known and confused concept, as E.B. Taylor, a nineteenth century British anthropologist, defines in his treatise Primitive Culture:

“Culture or Civilization... [Is] that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”³ It means that all societies have a culture and a civilization and it is a very intricate whole which includes abilities and behaviours acquired by a man as a social member of the society. Anthropologists take the concept of culture, to define different forms of life and social expressions. The behaviour of people while eating, talking, interacting at work, involving in social customs such as marriage, family get together all form a culture.

Raymond Williams affixes more significance to the modern modes of communication, which play an effective role in shaping and inseminating cultural values through permanent institutions of capitalist societies. Such institutions are as powerful and competent as the institutions of mechanical production and distribution. In this sense, the economic capitalistic activities and cultural production cannot be separated. In *Contemporary Cultural Theory: An Introduction* by Andrew Milner and Jeff Browitt Geoffrey Hartman observes that, culture is “an inflammatory word”, as it provokes disturbing experiences and incite “actual wars”⁴. Culture became a territory of disputes and struggles, for marginalized people and acquired political character. In essence, culture has become an effective mechanism of politics.

In the beginning of 1970s, culture perceived as a type of 'hegemony' – concept, invented by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist of 1920s. Here, 'Hegemony' is a concept used to describe the social and cultural domination of one group, within a society over the other group. It involves not any physical oppression, enforcement, but, assent carried out by marginal's or dispossessed. Antonio altered the concept of classical Marxism and viewed culture as a fundamental implement of political and social domination. In his opinion, industrialists always use violent and cruel forces, such as suppression, military, prisons and law and order, to maintain supremacy. So, a befitting title for the notion given by Gramsci and cultural studies is, cultural hegemony.

The comprehensive meaning of culture leads to cultural imperialism. This approach is of hybrid nature and of extremely intricate and problematic to define. Cultural imperialism is the use of political and economic powers, to spread the ideology, values and habits of a foreign culture, at the cost of a native culture. Thus, it is a practice in which economic and political powers play an instrumental role. It means, cultural elements are instruments in maintaining the political-economic dominance. In fact, it is a process of imperialists control, and dominance is supported and promoted by importing encouraging forms of culture.

In the modern global world, in order to fully understand the inferences of the explanations about cultural imperialism, global capitalism comes out as a significant aspect of the cultural discourse. In this sense, culture is seen as a bundle of practices of consumption, within a worldwide market locale. These practices include advertising, which is a tool for mass communication and other activities, based upon routine necessity and also leisure activity, such as shopping. Cultural imperialism means cultural domination, because imperialism includes a distinct form of domination, which is connected with empire. When cultural imperialism is used in Third World countries, then it indicates the connection between present domination and colonial past. Domination might be the precise term in relation to those nations, which legitimized domination over colonized.

Edward Waid, defines that, culture is not limited up to the customary traditions, customs and language of a society, but, it has gone beyond the margins of a community. According to him, culture has played a significant role, in completing the meaning of imperialism. All functions of a culture – institutional, political and economic are dependent upon culture. In

Culture and Imperialism, it takes culture as “all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and the representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms, and that often exist in aesthetic forms.”⁵ (xi). He takes novel as a literary genre that reflects the perfect image of what had happened, and is happening in the diverse domains of the world. He establishes the fact that, through narratives the suppressed, colonized and marginalized can preserve their identities, and share their experiences of the past. He identifies that, “the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.”⁶ (xiii) He takes British, French and American imperialism, and critically examines the works of British and French authors, such as Jane Austan, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad and Albert Camus. Secondly, Culture is a “concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought.”⁷ (xi) This culture functions as a source of identity, for either nation or the state. In the first part, he affirms that, domination demands equally control and capital, and the second part of the book brings forth the formation of the history of textual writing of England and France, and how this tradition of writing justified the history of imperialism. Said maintains a detailed record of cultural interactions, through Culture and Imperialism. He states that, “Theoretically, we are only at the stage of trying to inventory, the interpellation of the culture of empire, As the study of culture extends into the mass media, popular culture, micro politics. The focus on modes of power and hegemony grows sharper”⁸

When groups from different cultures come in contact with each other, this leads to changes in the cultural patterns of one or more of the groups. To leave one's own country of origin and to move to another, often brings disconnection from family and social institutions, and separation from cultural practices. Migrants leave behind their homelands and enter a border zone of twin subjectivity, where they are bound to obey the culture of host lands. They are influenced by more than one place, and they have to remain in a new place, unless they get acculturated into the host society. They are dragged towards their heritage and culture, even after they absorb the new forms of their host culture. Migrants struggle hard to construct a link that will stretch across the geographical and social distances, covered by them. By doing this, they try to create a new mode of relation towards their present and their past. For many immigrants in this process of acculturation becomes very long, hard and depressive, as they face difficulties in learning and accepting new cultural norms of the new place, but, along with encounter to external conditions, ranging from political oppression, racial discrimination and class conflicts.

The variations and modifications, which comes about during the acculturation process to transform the immigrants into hybrid products. Their crossing the border zones, and adopting the new life as a refined person symbolizes their new ways, to look at themselves. In this new environment, migrants become a kind of new hybridized, cross-cultural and transnational individual. Here, to find the space Bhabha concept of cultural hybridity, to describe the construction of culture and identity within the conditions of colonial humility and injustice.

Immigrants constantly struggle with the idea of self-preservation, and this thought keeps on moving silently in their minds, when they shift to a new land. First generation immigrants, the process of acculturation confines only up to earning their livelihood, required for existence. All migrants have to follow the conventions and obligations of a new culture, for gaining acceptability and to maintain connections. The process of Deculturation occurs in second generation immigrants, when they revolt against the observed norms and customs at home. They prefer American norms and customs, want to look like Americans, eager to adopt the American language. Second generation immigrants develop antipathy and distaste for Indian culture. They dislike their mythical homeland, India. Second generation Indian American Immigrants

experience a cross cultural gulf, which they cannot cross. First generation immigrants are devoted to their Indian culture.

First generation immigrants are a part of a societal structure termed as 'cultural mosaic'. The concept of the cultural mosaic invites immigrants of various ethnic origins, by keeping their own identities. The ideas of the acculturation of the second generation immigrants follow the concept of 'melting pot', which focuses upon the assimilation into the host culture for making a unified culture. The dichotomy in the experience of immigrants of two generations stretches to cover their whole life.

First generation immigrants feel a sense of loss and otherness and make efforts to relive their past. They are overpowered with the feelings of nostalgia and they cannot accept host land as their homelands. Migrants face absolutely different society and their unwillingness to merge into host land, culture on the other hand creates a sense of marginalization, which is double, dimensional. They experience the paradox of otherness. At a certain point in the life of immigrants, they sense after visiting their homelands that things have changed wholly. Their old familiar places have been changed with the new changes; here they experience the paradox of otherness because the past images, which they carry in their imaginations, do not find any connection with the reality of their homelands. A sense of otherness again attacks them, but now in their own homelands. They find themselves in a very satirical situation as the homeland where they were born and brought up and where they get emotional satisfaction, but now nothing is left to be claimed their own and they experience displacement and feel confused and suspended. The estrangement and loss are more for first generation immigrants as compared to their offspring's.

Second generation migrants cannot escape from becoming the part of the process of cultural transformation. To attach themselves with the adopted culture is quite an easy process for them. They undergo the process of deculturation easily by rejecting their inheritance and taking steps towards the mixing with the mainstream. In their later stages of life they experience a sense of in-between's and try to maintain balance between their twin identities. Their biculturalism reflects their dual consciousness and reality.

Acculturation brings new ways of thinking and acting among different cultures. It promotes the development of individuals with dual cultural identity produced by the interaction of two or more cultures and where persons learn new outlooks, behavior and other cultural aspects of the ethnic groups. America is a multicultural society, which has been created by different immigrants from different places. Thus, they have enriched the American culture by associating different cultures. Acculturation is a long term process as it affects other generations also.

Desirable Daughters are Bharati's most autobiographical novel. Tara Lata Banerjee is the female protagonist and she continuously renews her sense of self and her association with her family in India and the United States. Tara leaves the Mukherjee's narrative of cultural hybridity. Tara is enforced to locate her roots in hard times. Desirable Daughters are a novel embedded with complex thoughts and analyzes the life of three sisters: Padma, Parvati and Tara. All three sisters maintain peculiar specificity in their perspective and approach to life. The narrator of the story is Tara Chatterjee and she narrates the story of Tara Lata, bears her nickname. Tara Lata's life history becomes the central point for Tara Chatterjee's family annals. Tara becomes inquisitive to unfold the agony of the 'tree-bride' after taking divorce from her husband, Bishwapriya Chatterjee. Tara self-explores her own identity as an immigrant. She constantly communicates her aspirations and desires to chase relief and peace in her own real heritage through the life of her sisters Parvati and Padma, her husband Bish and her illegitimate nephew Christopher Day. Bharati Mukherjee not only brings into light, the cravings of

immigrants for their ancestral heritage but she also exhibits her disliking for the changing conditions within India. In both situations she experiences a profound sense of loss. Tara expresses her sense of loss during her conversation with her sister Padma and states: "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 half – India kept on life support."⁹ (DD 184)

In America Tara comes across various Atherton families, meets Bish's friends, notices crowding courts, busy paths. But she cannot expect Bish can enjoy these situations. She feels ashamed of spending extravagantly and expresses, "I'm feeling 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"¹⁰ (75). This gloominess brings a profound desolation and sense of exile in her life. She feels totally detached her in the American culture. In Indian context, a person is known from the accounts of his/ her religion, caste, mother tongue, sub caste and birthplace and all these details regarding a person are essential to determine the personality and no one can bear the risk of going beyond these for finding out ancestral background. She conveys her sentiments and admits that: "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.... I don't belong here, despite my political leanings; worse, I don't want to belong."¹¹(79). She goes through intense pain due to separation from her husband, Bish because in Indian context being divorced is viewed with disrespect and is not acceptable. Tara leaves Bish when she feels that, her promise to lead a life of an American wife with Bish is not being fulfilled. She comes to a grim knowledge after her bitter relationship with Bish and holds, "In America, it seemed to us, every woman was expected to create her own scandal, be the center of her own tangled love nest"¹² (83).

In America, Jackson Heights is the place of contentment and relief for Tara because it is the commercial centre of Indian life. She takes delight in life at Jackson Heights because this place reflects Indian life, "sidewalks full of Indians, every face is Indian, every shop and storefront features Indian Jewellery, Indian clothing, Indian travel, Indian food and spices, Indian sweets and restaurants. The smells and noises are familiar."¹³ (199) everything is exhilarating for her. It depicts multicolored lives of the American Indian community in the modern world. This is a matter of distress when Immigrants have to make a choice between their own culture's and allurements of money. The majority of the immigrant communities comes to America with a determination to earn money and for them, "Jackson Heights is a landscape of potentialities that had been denied in India."¹⁴ (DD 200)

Tara oscillates between Indian and American culture. The hyphenated position of Tara and her son Rabi makes them feel that they do not belong to any one culture completely. Tara's visit with Rabi to her sister Parvati's home in Bombay fails in creating any congenial atmosphere for Rabi. She experiences Rabi's uncomfortably and he cannot build up an emotional bonding with his cousins, Bhupesh and Dinesh in Bombay, because Rabi is habitual to grasp only American culture and atmosphere. Tara after staying for a long time in the U.S.A, still she pines for her ancestral land, India. When she teaches the kindergarten students in America she expresses: "I'm not the only blue-jeaned woman with a Pashmina shawl around my shoulders... I am not the only Indian on the block... I don't belong here"¹⁵ (79)

Both sisters, the eldest and the youngest, Padma and Tara manifest the different priorities toward adoption of culture. Padma while living in New Jersey keeps clinging to the Indian culture. She has Indian friends, clothes, food and nice accent. Padma likes to wear sari at occasions. She does not violate her wedlock with Harish Mehta, her husband. On the contrary, Tara accepts wholeheartedly the American culture by shunning up the Indian culture. She does not like

anything Indian and forgets to give importance to ideological values of the original culture. She feels strange when she wears sari at Padma's home in New Jersey. Tara wants to drive, to work and to become an independent woman. In orthodox and traditional Indian society Husband is treated as a god, protector, food provider and shelter provider and a woman cannot lead a pleasant life without a husband. Beatings and harassment from husband is the matter of pride for them. Tara shatters all orthodox and old-fashioned Indian norms and standards. She rebels and chooses a man of her choice whom she finds suitable and who satisfies her physical desire. She does not want to become a submissive, silent and an unassertive wife of an Indian husband. Above all, she cannot keep the sanctity of the purest relationship like marriage. She breaks up with Bish and gets involved with Andy.

Tara expresses her intense sense of loss in both situations: Indian and American. During her conversation with Padma, she brings out that she experiences cultural pollution everywhere. She is disappointed with the materialistic ideology of the West and equally disgusted with India: "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"¹⁶ (184). Tara feels comfort and solace at Jackson Heights because it is the trade centre of Indian life in America. She praises its "sidewalks full of Indians; every face is Indian, every shop and storefront features Indian jewelry, Indian clothing, Indian travel, Indian food and spices, Indian sweets and restaurants. The smells and the noises are familiar."¹⁷(199). Every immigrant has to make a choice between his own culture and the greed for money. She acknowledges that a majority of immigrants come with the zeal for money but "Jackson Height is a landscape of potentialities that had been denied in India"¹⁸ (200). Here Bharati Mukherjee praises the Indian moral values, dresses, jewelry, religious scriptures and permanent human relations. Immigrants due to the blind craze of money do cyber crimes and drug smuggling and leading insecure and dissatisfied lives. She states "I know that money makes an enormous difference. But right now, all the money in the world isn't buying me even simple security"¹⁹ (233)

CONCLUSIONS

Tara Chatterjee of *Desirable Daughters* crushes all cultural values of her home and goes beyond all the margins of culture and gender imposed upon her by her Indian family. In the process of searching a new life for herself, she first gets divorce from her husband. In doing this, she brings disrespect for the Bhattacharjee family because during sixties in an Indian family the word divorce did not exist in the Indian family system.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the strongest voices of recent times. She pronounces clearly and distinctly the tales of the immigrants of the Indian sub-continent with the quality of arousing deep emotions like sadness, regret, misery and bitterness. Her all characters pass through the situation of displacement and rootlessness. Her female characters continuously find within themselves the strength of adjustment and assimilation.

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