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**Locating Women Struggle in a Diasporic Situation: A Desire to Return Home,
Not Physically but Spiritually**

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Article Received: 8/4/2022,

Article Accepted: 28/04/2022,

Published online: 30/04/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.4.35

Abstract:

Despite professing to be an American author, Bharati Mukherjee sets her works in the backdrop of India and features predominantly Indian women as protagonists. Her works, like those of other diasporic writers, focus on the protagonist's immigrant experiences that lead to the feelings of homelessness, isolation, and uprooting. She gives novelty to her works as she foregrounds the variety of experiences of women characters of leaving home and adapting into the new world through her works. Her women characters, like men in diasporic experiences, go through identity crisis when they are thrown out of their familiar surroundings. This feeling of emptiness cannot be filled by materialistic achievements; so, they must also search for their own identity. In such situations, these alienated immigrants draw their strength from the memories of the home they had left behind. They return to their roots in order to understand and answer the issue of self-identity. This paper intends to explore the inner conflict and the spiritual quest of women in a diasporic situation through the study of the female protagonist, Tara Chatterjee, of Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and its sequel *The Tree Bride* (2004) who herself undertake this journey of uncovering the truth of her life.

Keywords: Diaspora, Diasporic consciousness, feminism, identity crisis

The centre for understanding diaspora and diasporic experiences for a long time had been men and their experiences in social and political context. Even literature focused on the meta narratives of male writers where women immigrants' experiences were either limited or appropriated largely to the experiences of their counterparts. However, with the surge of writing from women diasporic writers, the readers get the opportunity to delve into the unknown realms of women experiences as immigrants in the host land. Emma Parker in *Introduction: Unsettling Women* pointed to the new stance added to the feminist reading as, "As Diaspora Studies has developed, feminists have paid particular attention to how gender shapes both the material

RESEARCH ARTICLE

experience of migration and the ways in which diaspora is conceived and represented in gendered terms” (3). Certainly, the factors leading to the migration of women, their experiences during the process of migration and assimilation in the host-land have always been different from the experiences of men as their position in both the lands is different from them. Post the era of indentured migration, the immigration of women largely takes place within the patriarchal and cultural expectations as they are expected to continue the tradition of their ethnic community by abiding by their stapled duties as wife and mother. As Avtar Brahalso points out that, women are perceived as the embodiment of “culture” and “tradition” in both the homeland and the host land (12), making the journey of their life more complex in the distant land. The alien culture works in different ways for immigrant women depending on their psyche and personal experiences. Some women find liberty in the new culture to reinvent themselves whereas sometimes it breaks them when they come so far after leaving behind their family, around whom their existence had the true meaningful flavour. Tara Chatterjee the protagonist and the narrator of the two novels *Desirable Daughters* and its sequel *The Tree Bride*, is the immigrant women whose experience helps the reader to understand the predicament of immigrant women, who had looked to the west for a better future and the shift in the personality which is the outcome of the diasporic experiences. Mukherjee attempts to explore the life experiences of a woman immigrant and also the transformation of her outlook to resolve the issue of identity crisis.

Tara Chatterjee of *Desirable Daughters* immigrates to the United States after marrying Bishwaroop Chatterjee, a student at Stanford University, when she was nineteen years old. In the new land far from her homeland, she finds herself in the company of the most talented and intelligent people from across the globe, which makes her hope for a different predicament from an average traditional woman of her community, quite high. She sees the dislocation as a blessing in disguise for herself as a young girl with aspirations for a brighter future. Mukherjee reminds the readers of the societal and familial obligations that Indian patriarchal societies place on women for the rest of their lives in a very natural and accepted ways, as if women are born just to make sacrifices and fulfill the duties that have been assigned to them by the patriarchal society. She understands that this new life could not have been possible without the efforts of her parents and prays for them as, “Bless Daddy and Mummy, they found me the only man in the world who could transport me from the enchanted garden of Ballygunge to Stanford University in the early 1980s, which has to count as one of the intellectual wonders of the modern world” (*Desirable Daughters*, 81). The upper-class families of Bengal were also fascinated with the idea of finding a suitable West settled boy for their daughters as this brings pride for their family name and becoming an American wife is the safest future for the girls who have seen the nastiness of the patriarchal society where they would get laden with the cultural expectations and

RESEARCH ARTICLE

traditional roles as a bride/daughter-in-law of a traditional family. After living nineteen years of her life under the strict vigilance of a traditional family surrounded by relatives and society of similar stance, Tara had high expectations from her marriage with a west settled man as she rejoices on her upcoming future, “This is the life I’ve been waiting for, I thought, the liberating promise of marriage and travel and the wider world” (Desirable Daughter,81).

As for Tara who expected life to be liberating in the new world, had to encounter somewhat similar fate of the women of her native land for which she was not prepared. She like a Bengali woman from her traditional community is also expected by her well learned and established husband to carry on with the role of a woman of the house. As she becomes a mother; her life gets confined to the four walls of their Atherton house characteristically like the life of any other woman of her native community. As a traditional Bengali man, Bishwaroop Chatterjee expects his wife to be happy and satisfied with the life he has provided to her and wants her to carry on with the duties of a wife and a mother without considering her emotional needs. Sandhya Mehta notes that “while the choice of moving from one physical location to another is primarily seen to be a male one... the onus of retaining memories of home, of recreating them within new contexts and ultimately acting as cultural harbingers of homeland culture, remain vividly feminine” (1).

Tara is also entrapped in the same frame of a traditional way of living a life of following her husband for the rest of her life. Although from the very beginning, she had a desire to be more than just a traditional wife and a mother and she finds herself in situations which would compel her to rethink her position in the world. In situations like where she meets any other fellow Indian women independent in the foreign land would lead her to series of thoughts which would further lead her to an identity crisis as she is unable to find herself as an individual who can be visible to people other than being the wife of an Indian man. She recalls a similar experience of meeting an Indian immigrant woman working in a bank as, “Shobhna? Where had she come from? I hadn’t even noticed an Indian face behind the grille. I was still an Indian-graduate-wife. Wife-of-Bish-Chatterjee was my full identity. If I had plans for the future, they would be to follow my husband wherever he went, probably back to India” (The Tree-Bride, 19). She is unable to picture herself anything more than the wife of Bish Chatterjee due to the life she had been living as well as the traditional upbringing she had in her home. Dr Beena Agarwal points out the dilemma of an immigrant woman coming from a traditional society that, “on one hand the phenomena of migration has helped to break the barriers of traditions; it has also made the life of Indian woman more complex. Indian woman due to her traditional moral consciousness and limited professional skills find herself more isolated and insecure” (10). Such

RESEARCH ARTICLE

situations for diasporic women where they are unsure about their present as well as future as an individual result into frustration and loneliness. So, the diasporic experiences of alienation, rootlessness, identity-crisis etc in the lives of women in diasporic surrounding rise from both the public and personal experiences of their lives.

The stereotype life of a women in a patriarchal society which Tara had thought to have escaped has taken its form and working even in the host land. Tara a new woman wants a better understanding in her relationship but her husband though intelligent enough to achieve success in the foreign land but he fails to understand the woman of his life. After years of living the same life of emptiness and monotony, she decides to divorce her husband and start a life of her choice which allows her to have an identity of herself. Her family is unable to accept this turn of events for them it is a non-existing fact as for years they avoid mentioning anything about her marital status, but she continues to live up with her decision and even moves in with her boyfriend.

Tara has always been eager to be the part of the new world but later discovers that she also experiences double consciousness like other immigrants. She faces a constant struggle to find a place among the natives of the host land as she realizes she has a different past and cultural upbringing from her American friends. The conflict of being a new woman and a product of cultural upbringing keep her in an “in-between state” and does not let her be completely from one side. Like Samir Dayal talks in his work about the dilemmas and shift in the consciousness of immigrants as, “the diasporic's endless transformation and translation of self, his double consciousness, his ambivalent allegiance to, or double hesitation about, belonging to ancestral home on the one hand, and to the host country, on the other” (54). Already living in a chaos of leading two parallel lives and struggling to figure out her identity, she had to face a family secret unbelievable to a level that it could have ruined the family name which is so sacrosanct for the traditional Bengali family. This discovery makes another blow on her personality which was already struggling to find a ground for her to stand.

However, Tara’s suffering as an immigrant is not overhyped by the author as generally depicted in other diasporic works since she has her motivation and desire to live a life without the constraints of the traditional value system of her homeland where woman’s life is decided by the others of the family and the society. Since this character of Tara is semi-autobiographical and is a manifestation of Bharati Mukherjee’s personal beliefs, it is quite evident that she believes in the metamorphic identity of women in the host land. She had declared herself to be an American as she had lived there for years and embraced the life of the host land. In this story Mukherjee intends to instruct the other immigrants, who are still struggling for their identity, to stop

RESEARCH ARTICLE

resisting the new reality and acculturate with the present truth of their lives. The character of Andy while consoling Tara when she feels tormented by her past, says, “When I say nothing that includes us. The past is nice, this place is nice. It’s nice to visit the past every now and then. Just don’t live there” (Desirable Daughters 76). Mukherjee wants the other immigrant to feel the exuberance of the opportunities they have in the new land instead of torturing themselves to the memories of the past. She also brings forth the fact that variety of immigrants like her have come and settled in the United States and this variety has created a multicultural society where differences of cultures can easily dissolve. Tara also rejoices on this experience in US when she says,

I thrive on this invisibility. It frees me to make myself over, by the hour...Yet I’m still too timid to feed my Ballygunge Park Road identity to the kitchen Garburator. That dusty identity is as fixed as any specimen lepidopterist’s glass case, confidently labelled by father’s religion (Hindu), caste (Bhramin), sub caste (Kulin), mother-tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta), formative region of ancestral origin (Mishtigunj), East-Bengal, education (post-graduate and professional), and social attitudes(conservative). (Desirable Daughters,79)

Tara definitely makes use of the freedom, invisibility and the new opportunities in the host-land but the essence of her cultural native upbringing never leaves her. Women in any Indian society are raised in a traditional value system under the layered structures of tradition and culture. As a diasporic subject it was chaotic for Tara to leave behind her traditionally rich past and transform completely into an all happy and proud American citizen. With all those diasporas experiences of identity crisis, the family secret and the violent turn of events as her family was attacked, she feels more disoriented and then decides to take the route to find her root in her homeland. On the way to recovery after the violent attack on her family which occurred in pretext of the same family mystery, she reveals her plan to Bish about her new found purpose of writing and when she sits to write, “... the story that begun to emerge was of the Tree-Bride and of the class of Calcutta girls born a century later, both of them witnessed dying traditions (Desirable Daughters, 280).Tara decides to walk down Tara Lata's footsteps in search of her roots, as now she does not want to stay distracted by the dazzling American attitude. Tara feels a mysterious connection to the 'Tree-Bride' whose story has been passing on to the daughters of the family by their mothers as a legend. Through her close and critical analysis of the information she finds, she reconstructs the history of the Tree-Bride. This leads Tara to arrive at an awareness of her own identity which she had been missing for years.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

In the sequel book, the story line of *The Tree Bride*(2004) shifts between Tara Chatterer's San Francisco and Tara Lata's East-Bengal. Tara's journey to know her roots continues even after being pregnant but through this work Mukherjee also intends to foreground the life and its intricacies of British diasporas of the colonial period. The life story of Taralata Gangooly, the tree-bride had been a legend setting an unsaid benchmark for the women of the family to follow the footmarks of the great woman. She was married to a tree to be saved from a disgraced life of a widow and she followed the life of her husband by becoming like it. She was rooted in the Mist Mansion, her father's house for the rest of her life until she was dragged out of it by the British official before her death. Even after such imposed and restricted life, she goes on to create her own identity of Tara Ma. Owing to her way of living and the work she did for the people around, she was worshipped like a goddess. She did not limit her efforts for the cause of the local people but she also participated in the national Independence movement financially and intellectually. Tara realizes the greatness of her great grand aunt who had been a victim of the societal set-up but even when she was restricted by the norms of her family and the society, she could still achieve so much greatness. Mukherjee intends to tell the readers that one can make the best of their situation and find ways of doing things which they like to do giving them the sense of their individuality. What Taralata could achieve even from the four wall of her house makes her great. Taralata's life experiences rekindle the spirit in Tara as, as she thinks about herself, "The selfless Hindu wife dedicates herself to her husband's welfare. Even a divorced one. Even in America" (*The Tree Bride*, 280).

Tara again faces a violent attack intended to kill teaches her the value of life and she understands that duty and pleasure must not be delayed in life. She now stops struggling at the shallow level as she has understood the deeper meaning of human life. After all her struggle and search, she reaches the conclusion that it is not that she wants to go back to her homeland to escape this struggle or take random decisions to prove herself in the host land rather she requires a renegotiation of her ethnic identity and the host land culture to achieve her autonomous subjectivity. She accepts that immigrants like her only find their autonomy once they balance out between their past and the present. As just turning to one side and missing out on the other would not lead to a complete sense of existence as well as happiness. This viewpoint is indicated by Mukherjee even before the beginning of her novel *Desirable Daughters* when she quotes in the epigraph a Sanskrit verse adopted by Octavio Paz,

No one behind, no one ahead
The path the ancients cleared has closed.
And the other path, everyone 's path,

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Easy and wide, goes nowhere.

I am alone and find my way. (Desirable Daughters, epigraph)

Conclusion

Bharati Mukherjee's most of the novels deals with the question of identity where the past plays the burden in the transformation of the diasporic subject, Even in *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* the character of Tara Chatterjee who is eagerly waiting for the new life in the new world, finds it difficult to embrace the new reality of her life. Though all modern and westernized, she finds it difficult to leave behind her ethnic identity and traits. Mukherjee elaborately focuses that how these ethnic traits are not just a set of rules but a way of living for the people of the community and when placed in a diasporic situation, how difficult it gets for the diasporic subject to call for their identity. She mainly talks to her diasporic readers and attempts to tell them that making the best use of the available situation would be the finest way of living in any unknown world. The two works focuses on Tara's realization of her way for living life in the hostland with a hybrid status.

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