

Diasporic Displacement in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughter*

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Abstract

Life is full of ups and downs. It's not easy to lead without an adjustment. Adjustment in immigration is very essential to everyone. Stanley Arnold rightly says in *Six Attitudes for Winners*, "Every problem contains the seeds of its own solution. You can find the answer to your problem if you look deeply into the problem itself" (7). The Migration problem will come over when Adjustment must be there in their life. Though migration is stressful, it demands social, economical, cultural, educational and economic adjustments. Migration of individuals and families, for temporary purposes or permanent resettlement, has occurred throughout history, and like numerous countries in the world, the United States is largely a land of more recent migrants. Because many people outside America think that once someone migrates to America, his life will become great in an instant. Presently immigration is a self-imposed exile pursued by the social and economic flourishing. Identities and cultures though get transformed and delocalized across space and time, yet immigrants seldom detached from the memories of past places and times. In the opinion of Raymond Williams, emigration is depicted as a 'crisis of epistemology'. 'Imagined worlds' features the deterritorialized groups like immigrants, expatriates, refugees. As a part of the diasporic community, immigrants sometimes feel isolated and alienated because of the absence of the native culture and the language in the overseas countries. Alienation creates a state of mental disbalance, a situation of estrangement where a person feels his\her inability to adapt with the external alien environment and feels uneasy and isolated as well. In the foreign countries, lack of adaptability, lack of acculturation, multiple identities of the immigrants make them feel lonely and solitary. It's difficult for the immigrants to feel oneness with the alien environment and the sense of solitariness binds the immigrants with the soil of indigenous land. Due to globalization, diasporic phenomenon, mongrelization in culture, food, creolization in language and cross-cultural networks are incorporated with the fluidity and uncertainty of identity and belongingness. These components dominate in the diasporic writings in the twenty first century. The present novel *Desirable Daughters* is a successful product in the present era.

Keywords: Diasporic, Displacement, cross-cultural, creolization, identity.

Life is full of ups and downs. It's not easy to lead without an adjustment. Adjustment in immigration is very essential to everyone. Stanley Arnold rightly says in *Six Attitudes for Winners*, "Every problem contains the seeds of its own solution. You can find the answer to your problem if you look deeply into the problem itself" (7). The Migration problem will come over when Adjustment must be there in their life. Though migration is stressful, it demands social, economical, cultural, educational and economic adjustments. Migration of individuals and families, for temporary purposes or permanent resettlement, has occurred throughout history, and like numerous countries in the world, the United States is largely a land of more recent migrants. Because many people outside America think that once someone migrates to America, his life will become great in an instant.

Presently immigration is a self-imposed exile pursued by the social and economic flourishing. Identities and cultures though get transformed and delocalized across space and time, yet immigrants seldom detached from the memories of past places and times. In the opinion of Raymond Williams, emigration is depicted as a 'crisis of epistemology'. 'Imagined worlds' features the deterritorialized groups like immigrants, expatriates, refugees. As a part of the diasporic community, immigrants sometimes feel isolated and alienated because of the absence of the native culture and the language in the overseas countries. Alienation creates a state of mental disbalance, a situation of estrangement where a person feels his/her inability to adapt with the external alien environment and feels uneasy and isolated as well. In the foreign countries, lack of adaptability, lack of acculturation, multiple identities of the immigrants make them feel lonely and solitary. It's difficult for the immigrants to feel oneness with the alien environment and the sense of solitariness binds the immigrants with the soil of indigenous land.

Though Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian born Canadian-American novelist, she has made a deep impression on the Literary canvass. Her novels, honestly depict the issues of her own cultural location in West-Bengal in India, her displacement [alienation] from her land of origin to Canada where she was "simultaneously invisible" as a writer and "overexposed" as a racial minority and her final re-location [assimilation] to USA as a naturalized citizen. Through her characters, she explores the migrants' own perceptions about their integration rather than natives' attitude toward immigrants. She says:

I am an American citizen ... I need to feel like a part of the Community I have adopted. I need to put roots down, to vote and make the difference that I can. The price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids is the trauma of self-transformation (11).

However, everyone says that America is a melting pot owing to the diversity of culture that immigrants have brought into the country of over generations. It's like a tureen of

rich porridge simmering over time that a thorough stirring and mixing of all of its precious ingredients are conducive to the delicious taste. Like one of the immigrants, Bharati Mukherjee also struggled more of new culture. She brings her sufferings and views in her writings. Her works are about dislocation and its psychological consequences, in particular the subversion of identity.

Moreover, her novel *Desirable Daughters* is set in America and India equally. It is both the portrait of a traditional Brahmin Indian family and a contemporary story of an American woman who has in many ways broken with the tradition but still remains tied to her native country. An intricate mystery that unfolds throughout this compelling novel, it creates both intrigue and suspense but also initiates a quest for identity. She rightly reveals about *Desirable Daughters*,

Bengali culture trains one to claim the father's birthplace, sight unseen, as his or her desh, her home. When everyone knows your business and every name declares your identity, where no landscape fails to contain a plethora of human figures, even a damaged consciousness, even loneliness, become privileged commodities (34)

Although the immigrant experiences of the female protagonist Tara and her elder sister Padma, Tara's dwelling within dual identities and her search for 'root' are located in the transmigration phenomenon in the twenty first century, the popular hearsay 'home is where the heart lies' brings the appropriate relevance to Tara's desire for an eventual return to the native land. Tara belongs to traditional Bengali Brahmin family where the women like Tara and her elder sisters have no scope to establish their own individual identities. Tara's transplanting from Ballygunge with her husband and re-creating new home in the USA never make her feel at home. Despite being a wife of affluent Bishwapriya Chatterjee, Tara's Athertonan life spends as if she belongs to an outsider community.

With one of the all-time great opening chapters, a traditional Hindu marriage of a five-year-old girl, Mukherjee establishes her themes, conflicts, and contrasts. Amidst the lyrical, atmospheric details of sparkling oil lamps, the impenetrable jungle, banks of fog, and smoke from cooking fires, she inserts the singular detail of retching coughs from tuberculosis, suddenly shocking the reader and abruptly signaling that this is not a novel which will sugarcoat reality. And when the bride's and groom's families differ in interpreting the events which occur on the way to the ceremony and the bride ends up married to a tree, "It seems all the sorrow of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her." Tara Chatterjee, the main character and a descendant of the tree bride, is an orthodox Bengali Brahmin from a well-known Hindu family, someone who accepted without question the

groom her father chose for her and who settled in the U.S. when he established a business in California.

However Bish's excessive business in the cyber world and Tara's position to her husband like 'a princess' and 'queen' make Tara fail to reconstruct the home of intimacy, familiarity and emotional hearth in this alien environment. Tara's longing to get rid of the constriction of the Bengali orthodox family in the USA and to lead an independent life get shattered for Bish's traditional approach. The estrangement between them and Tara's solitary life impel her to brood that she is now out of safe cocoon of Calcutta's life, "the narrow world of the house and city felt a secure to me as it must have to Taralata in Mishtigung" (23). In spite of presence of her physical body, Tara feels the very absence of soul in this alien country.

In San Francisco, Tara intends to lead her life as an American wife enjoying full freedom. The journey of her inner self is unveiled in the foreign country. Her outer self aspires only for the liberal life that is contrasted with inner self which cannot keep aside the bygone days in Calcutta. Unlike the sweet old home in Calcutta, the city of San Francisco emerges as the place of residence without any emotional attachment: "I'm feeling just a little alien and uncomfortable, a tinge of not-belonging, in the midst of such welcoming comfort..." (75). As a diasporic writer, the author in this novel delicately associates the element of nostalgia with the protagonist's quest for root. In general terms, nostalgia is defined as "the state of being homesick, a sentimental yearning for return to a past period or irrecoverable condition" (Merriam Webster's, 1997).

Dual identity or impure identity develops the idea of root searching. The concept of hybrid identity shakes one's fixed identity. This novel depicts the immigrant Tara's oscillation between Indianness and Americanness. Dual or hybrid identity constructs an identity crisis in one's constructing a true home of proximity in the alien environment. The hyphenated position creates no congenial atmosphere for Rabi to be relieved in Bombay at his Parvati 'masi's [aunty] home. Tara feels Rabi's uneasiness to make a kind of emotional bondage with his cousins, Bhupesh and Dinesh in Bombay, as Rabi is accustomed to inhabit American environment. In spite of prolonged staying in the USA, Tara's inner self pines for returning to her native land where she can find out original root.

However, the main focus of the novel is the pull of two cultures. Tara and her teenage son exemplify the Indian trying to meld with American culture. Her sisters - one in New Jersey and one in Bombay - hold onto traditional culture in the face of pressures to assimilate. Mukherjee beautifully expresses,

I swam to where the river was a sun-gold haze. I kicked and paddled
in a rage. Suddenly my fingers scraped the soft waterlogged carcass
of a small dog . . . I'm twenty-four now, I live in Baden, Elsa County,

Iowa, but every time I lift a glass of water to my lips, fleetingly I smell it. I know what I don't want to become (Jasmine, 57).

At the end of the day, now a woman in her mid-thirties residing in Atherton, California, she is divorced, raising her son alone, living with a red-haired biker, and teaching kindergarten. When a stranger, Christopher Dey, arrives at her house claiming to be the illegitimate son of one of her older sisters, she is shocked and forced to contend with the issues he raises, while facing possible dangers, as she tries to check out his story. The contrasts between life in Calcutta and Atherton, between her ex-husband and her lover, and between her traditional, protected life in India and her free and independent life in the U.S. are very obvious throughout, but as Tara deals with the complexities of Christopher Dey's appearance, we also see how tradition and family stories also guide her inner world, shape her responses, and affect both her views of the external world and her behavior within it--even after she has "changed worlds."

But Tara's frustration at her endeavours to assimilate and Bish's lack of it eventually leads to a divorce. It marks her transition into a new identity and a liberated self. She soon recognizes that her sexuality is also an aspect of her identity, which she can possess and embrace, after being accosted by the same men who had been respectful towards her during her marriage. She realizes the sexual double standard, the unfair distinction between male and female sexuality in the Indian culture. Yet her life remains surrounded by her ex-husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee, her son Rabi, and her lover Andy Karolyi, a Hungarian Buddhist. It is only with Andy that her perceptions of sexuality get altered as for the first time she becomes selfish, intimate and involved in a relationship without any expectations. She creates a new sexual identity that does not come in conflict with her previous self-perceptions. They merely get replaced by the new and different perceptions. In parallel projection are the two men in her life who symbolize two diverse cultures and her cultural dilemma.

Initially she tries to seek solace by clinging on to the past through people, memories, visits or calls and by bonding with her two elder sisters, Parvati and Padma, who serve as links to a past that Tara has begun to forget. But the appearance of the mysterious Chris Dey exposes the shallow intercontinental relationship of the three sisters. He acts as both Tara's catharsis and nemesis. Finally Tara is shaken out of her complacency, her emotional paralysis shattered, as her family is stalked by menace. Tara's boyfriend Andy warns her about the consequences of investigating the past, as it has the power to dominate one's entire present. Nevertheless, Tara proceeds with her quest and as the mystery unfolds Tara is forced to face her family, her past and a culture that she has distanced herself from, resulting in a conflict between old modes of thinking and new forms of consciousness that have been created.

Moreover, Padma is a shuttling between two identities. Yet even though she speaks with hate about the past, she also tries "to lead a traditional Bengali life in New Jersey" (181). When Tara visits Padma in New York, she initially sees her as possessing "a firm identity resisting all change" but upon closer examination Padma appears "fractured, like cracks under

old glaze” (196). The stress of maintaining the appearance of a traditional, Brahmin, female identity in New York leaves Padma concerned only with her reputation, unable to focus upon the emotional and social ramifications of her past actions. Tara uses the metaphor of “fault-lines” to analyze the distinctions in her family, separating the “forward-looking from the traditional and the adaptable from the brittle” (133).

As the situation becomes more ominous, Tara is finally forced to call her eldest sister, Padma, who lives in New Jersey and is also very wealthy. Padma is "more Indian" now than she was in Calcutta, wearing saris, socializing with the Indian elite of the area, etc. Tara bluntly states - in American fashion - why she is calling. Padma, of course, is also evasive. Tara then flies to New Jersey to make a personal visit. Padma continues to refuse to acknowledge anything. This interlude is a particularly entertaining one. Padma whisks Tara off for a shopping spree in Jackson Heights, New York’s Indian district for the elite. She insists Tara buy some fashionable saris, get her hair done, buy some gold jewellery, etc. A big Indian house party follows, in which Tara, dressed in her Indian finery, becomes flirtatious with the men, enjoying her role. While on the east coast, however, she receives some highly disturbing news from the San Francisco detective and the tension mounts, building to a fiery climax.

When all is said and done, Tara and her son - who has confessed he is gay - travel back to India to stay with Parvati and explore their roots. The gay son business may sound like a concession to contemporary pop fiction, but in fact it is not. During the course of the novel, we discover a whole substratum of Indian men in America, who are clever and wealthy but not quite right for the "marriage market." Many of them, however, have taken wives, as a front, and so everyone continues to live the lie. At least Tara’s son is removed from this hypocrisy. In an amusing scene at the end, he is reading a book of poems written by some disciples of Ramakrishna, and comments: "These guys are so gay, I can’t believe it. Doesn’t anyone ever talk about it?" To which Tara replies: "Yes, you have understood it all" (310).

Although this is a rich and rewarding novel that speaks volumes of the cultural differences between the Indian and American way of life, Mukherjee gives us a vivid picture of the India of her childhood - a world that no longer exists - and probes the effect of this upbringing on the three sisters. Indian-American culture-clash identity, with an intriguing conspiracy theme that will keep you turning the pages. Due to globalization, diasporic phenomenon, mongrelization in culture, food, creolization in language and cross-cultural networks are incorporated with the fluidity and uncertainty of identity and belongingness. These components dominate in the diasporic writings in the twenty first century. The present novel is a successful product in the present era.

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