

Is Female, an Object of Prestige? : A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's "*Desirable Daughters*"

NITASHA BALORIA
Ph.D Research Scholar
University of Jammu, Jammu (J&K)
India

Abstract:

*Bharati Mukherjee is one of the feminist immigrant writers. She has received considerable critical attention from almost all over the globe for her effective writing. This paper deals with one of the old question that is deep down in every woman's heart: Is woman, an object of prestige? Is this the only identity she has in the patriarchal society? Why is she always passed on from one person to another as one's property? And above all why people set their respect and reputation on a woman when everybody is individual in this society? Why she is always forced to be a "Gendered Subaltern"? This research paper will try to find answers to these entire questions in context of Bharati Mukherjee's novel "*Desirable Daughters*".*

Key words: Patriarchal society, Gendered Subaltern, Exploitation.

The Indian born writer Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most widely known immigrant writers of America. She is famous for her women writings. Bharati Mukherjee's female protagonists are immigrants and suffer cultural shock but they are women who are anxious to establish their identity by undertaking their heroic journeys. This is the reason why Bharati Mukherjee has received considerable critical attention from almost all over the globe in a short period of just twenty five years. Even though she has been acknowledged as a voice of expatriate-

immigrant's sensibility, a close observation of her novels reveals that she has written all the novels with predominantly feminist views. Since Bharati Mukherjee's women characters are the victims of immigration, all the critics focus her novels as problems and consequences due to immigration but actually the problems are not because they are immigrants but because they are women and these characters fight for their rights as a woman and then as an individual. Women have always known to be the "**gendered subaltern**". Bharati Mukherjee has tried to create a new relationship between man and woman based on equality, non-oppression, non-exploitation so that the creative potentials of both are maximized as individuals and not gender dichotomies. The male, as a representative of the patriarchal society has, at last, being jerked off the centre of woman gravitation. The woman is preparing now to be her own gravitational force, beyond the fullness of patriarchy.

This paper deals with one of the old question that is deep down in every woman's heart: Is woman, an object of prestige? Is this the only identity she has in the patriarchal society? Why is she always passed on from one person to another as one's property? And above all why people set their respect and reputation on a woman when everybody is individual in this society? Why she is always forced to be a "Gendered Subaltern"? This research paper will try to find answers to these entire questions in context of Bharati Mukherjee's novel "Desirable Daughters".

Bharathi Mukherjee's latest novel "Desirable Daughters" (2002) is a story of immigrants and the attitude of three sisters and their ways of dealing with situations. "Desirable Daughters" as the title suggests, one kind of daughter, which parents would be proud of and for whom every parent would crave. The title of the novel is significant and ironical. It suggests that daughters are the object of family prestige, so their behavior should be desirable, that is to say, in tune with the norms laid by the society and not deviant. Only such

daughters who do not cross the 'Laxman rekha' of etiquettes would be liked and appreciated but in the novel two daughters including the protagonist cross the borders and search themselves in the male dominated society and make their own identity. The three daughters of Chatterjee family namely Padma, Parvati and Tara are desirable in their girlhood in the sense that they fulfill the requirements of daughterhood-beauty, intelligence, politeness, obedience – and they remain confined within four walls for the sake of family status and respect. The youngest, Tara, seems to have flown farthest from the nest. Tara is divorced from Bishwapriya, a multimillionaire hand-picked for her by her father; she's raising a "sensitive" teenaged son on her own. The story is narrated by Tara from her adopted San Francisco home, where she lives with Andy Karolyi, a strange sort of Hungarian Zen carpenter who earthquake-proofs houses. The lifestyle of the protagonist implies, a sort of free and easy hippie lifestyle, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Tara initiates her tale of repression in a curious way, with a legend about her namesake Tara Lata, also known as the Tree Bride -- a remarkable figure who became prominent in the fight for Indian freedom. Tara then delves into telling story of her own, which seems to be dislocating in nature. She recalls the utter lack of romanticism in her marriage, in which her father told her, "There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks." Tara, not knowing any other way, submitted: "I married a man I had never met, whose picture and biography and bloodlines I approved of, because my father told me it was time to get married and this was the best husband in the market."

Tara reports about her early life in Calcutta, "Our bodies changed, but our behavior never did. Rebellion sounded like a lot of fun....My life was one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage." (*Desirable Daughters*. 27-28). Further in the story, Mukherjee depicts the atrocities inflicted on 'gendered

subaltern' , that is, women in the forms of child marriage, imposed arranged marriage, and limited prospects of career for talented girls like Padma and Tara in the novel. Bharati Mukherjee seems to generalize the pitiable plight of women when she comments about the Tree Bride in the first chapter of the novel: "A Bengali girl's happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrows of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her."(*Desirable.Daughters.p.4*).The image used for marriage indicates the oppressive confined life. The novelist exposes her disapproval of child marriage and consequent widowhood through intervention of the story of Tree Bride TaraLata. The story of TaraLata who is cursed and disgraced for the death of her would- be husband and ultimately married to a tree symbolically brings out the backwardness of conservative society of India. It is totally inhuman on the part of society to deprive a girl of her inborn right to survive and fulfil her needs. The exploitation of women in the name of religion and social prestige is denounced by the novelist. In the novel *Desirable Daughters*, the main character (Tara) in the form of Tara Lata (the Tree Bride) struggles with the major themes of Self versus Society, Self Destruction and Self Discovery.

Through this novel the novelist depicts the hold of patriarchy and different forms of exploitation upon women. The novelist depicts marriage as the medium of exploitation rather than a desirable heavenly bliss. In Indian patriarchy, marriages are imposed on girls. Girls are not allowed to make love or marry a man of their choice especially of other caste. This issue is raised in case of Padma who establishes liaison with Ronald Dey, but could not marry him. "...any violation of the codes, any breath of scandal, was unthinkable."(*Desirable Daughters p.32*) Tara's unsuccessful marriage is outcome of imposed marriage. She married a man she had never met. She married Bishwapriya because her father told her to get married. She says;

"I married a man I had never met, whose picture and biography and bloodlines I approved of, because my father told me it was time to get married and this was the best husband on the market." (Desirable Daughters p.26).

According to Bharati Mukherjee, it is unjustified to "surrender...to the whims of fate and the manipulation of the marital marketplace...What do they know of the needs of modern woman?"(Desirable Daughters p.27). Here the writer suggests females, not to surrender themselves to the imposed marriages for the sake of their families. It is high time now to stop oneself from becoming scapegoat for our parent's happiness, because the consequences of an imposed marriage or a marriage without love are really drastic. The case of imposed marriage can also be seen in Bharati Mukherjee "Wife", where the main character Dimple, ties her in a marriage, willingly, where her husband takes her to America and does not give her time. The result of which was murder of her husband, by Dimple. It was because of the frustration, the anger, and the pain. Tara faces the enigma of modern women after her settlement in America. She undergoes transformation from a desirable daughter to an advanced American lady. Like the New Woman she is caught in the struggle between tradition and modernity. She rejects to be an object of sacrifice, a showpiece and a silent and subservient creature to her husband .She aspires to be loved and respected and does not want only to be provided and protected by her husband as is desired in the case of other women. So she differs from other women .She is the protagonist of the novel because she has the indomitable courage to transcend the boundaries, to take initiations on an unknown path which may lead her to ruin. Padma calls Tara "American" meaning self engrossed. She reminds Tara to follow the models of Sita and Savitri "...things are never perfect in marriage; a woman must be prepared to accept less than perfection in this lifetime-and to model herself on Sita, Savitri and Behula, the virtuous wives of Hindu myths."(Desirable

Daughters p.134), but Tara chooses her own way. The instruction of Padma represents the perspective of male chauvinism and by defying it Tara establishes the feminist perspective over phallogentrism. As soon as Tara was divorced, she was not same for Bishwapriya friends.

"In the months after I left Bish, one by one, nearly all of his oldest friends, those boys who had sat in the Stanford student pub with us while I sipped my Coca-Cola, found my new address in Palo Alto. I gratefully opened the door of my new apartment to them, thinking that divorce did not necessarily spell the end of my old social life, and I'd ask about their wives and children-and where, by the way, were they, still in the car? - And within minutes they were breathing hard and fumbling with my clothes. Your life is already shattered, they said, what more damage can this do. I left the peninsula because of them and moved to the city." (*Desirable Daughters*,125). Tara's view of both Indian culture and American culture slowly changed, thereby influencing her perception of her sexuality and her coming to view herself as a more sexually liberated woman. Specifically, Tara is still subject to the traditional cultural perceptions that other men have of her sexuality. One evening at a party amongst many upper class South Asians, an Indian man approaches Tara and attempts to seduce her by characterizing, in his opinion, the sexuality of divorced women. "You divorced ladies have not yet lost your charm. You have only grown more desirable. Divorced ladies must be oversexed, isn't it? For some ladies, one man is not enough. Always looking for adventure isn't it. The divorced Indian lady combines every fantasy about the liberated, wicked Western woman with the safety net of basic submissive familiarity.

These episodes make the picture more clear that wherever the women goes, whatever she does, she will always remain an object for the patriarchal society. Firstly, Tara was passed on from her father to Bishwapriya, because he thought

it was his duty to marry her to an eligible man. But that wasn't a right decision. Then she was forced into a loveless marriage. After getting married she tried to become a good Hindu wife, but of no use. After divorce, she tries to live on her own, on her own rules and conditions, but every man looked upon her as a sexual object. And after that when she opens herself to everything and becomes sexually liberated and develops an affair and enjoys her sexual relationship, she herself doesn't find solace with her boyfriend, which she had when she was with her husband. That means, the Indian women cannot free themselves completely from the "dependence syndrome". Indian ladies are caught between the demands of feminism and the voice of their inner self, of becoming independent modern women. Still we can come to the conclusion that yes, a woman is an object of prestige but is this willingly or unwillingly, it's impossible to say.

Bharati Mukherjee's heroines are bold and assertive; they have the strong potentiality for adaptability; they live in the firm ground of reality and accept the bitter truth of their life. Prof. Anita Myles opines the same when she writes that Bharati's heroines endure hardships stoically and "emerge stronger providing sustenance and equilibrium to the entire community." In *Desirable Daughters*, all the three sisters, Padma, Parvati and Tara, break with the tradition and clichéd roles in one way or the other to live life in their own way. They try to adjust with the changed scenario and that's the only thing a woman could do.

REFERENCES:

Myles, Anita, "Bharati Mukherjee", *Feminism and the Post modern Indian Women Novelists in English*, New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006. Pg. 118. Print.

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Desirable Daughters*. New Delhi: Rupa.Co. 2004. Print.

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Wife*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990. Print.

Kapoor, Manju. *Difficult Daughters*. Noida: Gopsons Papers Limited, 1998. Print.