

**THE PROCESS OF REINVENTING NEW WOMEN IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S  
*DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS***

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**ABSTRACT:** *Bharati Mukherjee is a Third World Feminist writer whose preoccupation is to deal with the problems and issues related with the South Asian Women in general and India in particular. Like her contemporary feminist writers she also raises her voice for the cause of freedom and emancipation of women from the rotten traditional norms. Her present novel Desirable Daughters also champions the same cause of the author.*

**KEYWORDS:** New Women, Feminist, Patriarchal, Daughters.

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## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary time is the most suitable time for the full fledged development of the marginalized sections of the society such as the woman and the disadvantaged class. She has been at the bottom of social hierarchy in Indian patriarchal set up for a long time; she has been considered as a powerless and weak creature. But, now the scenario has changed her roles and the emerging class of New Woman has questioned her traditional roles and aspires to go beyond the forbidden territory. The present paper analyses the challenges and the future prospects for the New Woman, who is independent and assertive, as the protagonist, Tara is seen in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*. In the novel, it is observed that Tara ventures to widen her horizons in matters of marriage, love and sex. Her strong character redefines her roles as wife and mother.

## Analysis

The title of the novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) is significant and ironical in treatment of gender issue. It suggests that daughters are the object of family prestige, so their behaviour should be desirable, that is to stay, 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 said border. The three daughter of Bhattacharjee 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.

Our father could not let either of my sisters out on the street; our car was equipped with window shades. (Desirable Daughters,p.29)

Tara reports about her early life in Calcutta,

Our bodies changed, but our behaviour never did. Rebellion sounded like a lot of fun....My life was one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage. (Desirable Daughters.p.27-28)

Tara, female protagonist, was born and raised in Calcutta but moved to San Francisco at the age of nineteen when her parents arranged a marriage with Bishwapriya Chatterjee, a young Indian man studying computer science at Stanford University. Tara immediately embraces American culture, taking advantage of the opportunities it affords her and assimilating as best she can to the new society around her. Tara and Bish have one son, Rabindrinath, before they eventually divorced, maintaining a close friendship. Tara also preserves close relationships with her two older sisters, Padma (referred to as *Didi*) and Parvati (the former married and living in Montclair, New Jersey and the latter residing in Bombay with her husband and two children). Despite the distance between them, the sisters are deeply attached with each other.

The mystery begins when a young man by the name of Christopher Dey, a literal manifestation of the past, visits Tara at her home in San Francisco, claiming to be the illegitimate son of her sister *Didi's* love affair with a Bengali Christian named Ronald Dey. Tara is shocked at this assertion, for she cannot believe that her sister would have even had a child during her teenage years in India. Christopher is insistent, however, and provides Tara with information that only a real son of *Didi's* would in fact know. When Tara confronts both of her sisters with her suspicions, she is met with denial from Padma and discomfort from *Didi*. Eventually, Tara's concern prompts her to go to the police to ascertain the true identity of Christopher Dey. At first, both Tara and her boyfriend Andy are concerned about the consequences of investigating the past, for it often has the power to dominate one's entire present:

Andy worried that I would only hurt myself, trying to lift every rock and throw to open every door. It's good to rediscover my roots, but not if they rise up and strangle me. (*Desirable Daughters*, 11)

But Tara nevertheless proceeds with her quest, and as the mystery unfolds.

Tara went to Manhattan to meet her eldest sister Padma, and sent Rabi to join his father in Australia. During Tara's vacation, sergeant Jack Sidhu, a SFPD officer, who was investigating Chris Dey's case, revealed some astonishing facts to Tara. He revealed that the real name of Christopher Dey was Abbas Sattar Hai. He was a member of Dawood's gang in Bombay. They were wanted criminals for murder, extortion, kidnapping and arson. In doing his job he always hides his identity. Jack asked Tara to intimate Bish and Rabi about it and asked them to be careful because probably they were the target. He also said that Dr. Dey died in an automobile accident:

Ronald Dey is dead, they say an automobile accident, but I doubt it. The Christopher Dey we met has been identified as Abbas Sattar Hai. He probably murdered the real Christopher sometime in the last couple of weeks, in San

Francisco. He's a member of Dawood's gang and there are international warrants against him for murder and arson. (*Desirable Daughters*, 225)

This incident reunited Tara, Rabi and Bish as a family again. One day a shocking incident happened, Tara's house was set on fire and Bish was badly injured in the mishap. The mastermind behind the fire incident was Abbas Sattar Hai and his gang. After that Tara undergoes a number of horrible incidents and she eventually realized that the identity of Chris Dey was used to blackmail Bish and had nothing to do with Padma and Dr. Dey.

In the end of the story Tara and Bish are together, the situations have united them. Tara goes back to India with Rabi to visit her parents and refresh her mind, where something new is waiting for her. 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.

Of the characters in the text it is examined that Tara is the most assertive by nature. While the women in Arranged Marriage battled with the division between the private and public spheres and the subsequent divisions within themselves, Tara does not fight her multiplicity but rather embraces it as a part of her progressing identity. Tara's identity evolves, it is a continued progression that she does not escapes from fight, but rather welcomes it.

Mukherjee opens the text with a Sanskrit epigraph symbolizing the ambiguity of the diasporic experience.:

No one behind, no one ahead. The path the ancients cleared has closed.  
And the other path, easy and wide, goes nowhere. I am alone and find my way. (*Desirable Daughters*, 1)

Mukherjee is setting the novel in the familiar interstitial space of immigration, where time and space lose their linear and geographic meanings. The epigraph suggests with the concept of "no one behind" and "no one ahead", and it also portrays identity as a continuous journey rather than a fixed construction. The notion of going nowhere yet somewhere and having to choose among multiple paths contributes to the sense of contradiction that epitomizes the diasporic consciousness..

The structure of Tara's story moves from past to present with such fluidity that all the changes in her personality are visible that is from a docile wife to an assertive American, while the boundaries between India and America and California and New York disappear. It is within this chaotic world that Tara writes both her history and herself into being, uncovering her multiple consciousnesses as she unearths the secrets of her past.

When Tara first arrives in America, she exhibits the behavior of the paradigmatic Indian wife.. She is subservient to her husband and well-versed in domestic duties, such as serving *pakor*s and freshening drinks, while Bish and his friends watch

A Sunday football game ... (*Desirable Daughters* 24 )

Bish takes great pride in showing his parents that

How well-trained this upper-class ... girl had become, what a good cook, what an attentive wife and daughter-in-law. What a bright and obedient boy she was raising. (*Desirable Daughters* 82)

Tara wanted to study at the community college, but instead stays at home to take care of her son, just like all of the other young Indian wives in Atherton, California. Believing in the liberating promise of marriage, Tara devotes her entire life in supporting Bish and raising their family, for the importance of fulfilling the domestic responsibilities has been ingrained in her since birth.

Tara comes to California expecting to fulfill the role of the traditional Indian wife, but instead realizes that she does not desire to play the typical part in the Indian family drama.

When I left Bish after a decade of marriage, it was because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled. I wanted to drive, but where would I go? I wanted to work, but would people think that Bish Chatterjee couldn't support his wife? In his Atherton years, as he became better known on the American scene ... he also became, at home, more of a traditional Indian. (*Desirable Daughters* 82)

Tara's frustration at her assimilation and Bish' slack thereof leads her to make the most drastic of personal moves in Indian culture: divorce. As Kaplan writes of Indian culture,

Marriages are considered permanent and should not be altered by either partners' free choice ... Divorce was taboo, and considered a sure sign of Americanization. (Kaplan caren. 119-132.)

Through this novel the novelist depicts the curses 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 Bish 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* 26)

According to the feminist 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 novelists advocates for freedom to choose one's life partner and cautions us against the disasters caused by imposed marriages. Tara's decision to divorce Bish represents a definitive step toward a new consciousness in which the traditions of Indian culture no longer advocates Tara's actions.

As Tara becomes more familiar with American culture, she moves from seeing herself as a "good Hindu wife-to-be" to an independent, progressive Californian, and one of the most clear manifestations of this transformation of identity is the manner in which Tara's perception of her sexuality changes over the years. During her first few years of marriage with Bish, Tara and her friends (other Indian wives and mothers living in Atherton) often perused American magazines, intrigued by how different the media's expectations of sexuality were from their own.

Meena read the American magazines, and she would quiz us as we ate: *Does your husband know how to satisfy you?* ("First time I have heard 'husband' and 'satisfy' in the same sentence," giggled one of us.) *Are you his breakfast, his snack, the main course- or the dessert?* ("Definitely his Alka-Seltzer!" we giggled. (*Desirable Daughters* p.83)

Now Tara has realized what she likes and what not and wants to fulfill all her desires. Tara views American culture as something distant from her own personal experience; it is an entity that she has been warned against for its selfishness and self-involvement. When Tara leaves Bish, however, she soon learns that her sexuality is an aspect of her identity that she can possess and embrace, but without succumbing to the Indian stereotype of sexually liberal women. As she is propositioned by many of Bish's old friends, Tara begins to see that Indian males living in America do not have to hide their sexuality, in fact they appear to flaunt it. Kaplan recognizes this sexual double standard as historical and based on a culture of shame for women:

Men's deviations from expectations seldom brought penalties and were easily forgiven, whereas women who strayed from prescribed gender behavior risked ruining the reputations of their natal and marital families. (Kaplan, Caren. P.138)

The unfair distinction between male and female sexuality in Indian culture prompts Tara to leave Atherton to completely escape the patriarchal cultural restraints placed upon her.

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* 188-89)

Tara's view of both Indian culture and American culture is slowly changing, thereby influencing her perception of her sexuality and her coming to view herself as a more sexually liberated woman. Rangaswamy is one such critic, claiming,

The only way for many of Mukherjee's heroines is to discard the past, totally and irrevocably, become independent, assertive and embrace total Americanization. (*Rangaswamy, p.138*)

Tara could easily fit into this controversial categorization of Mukherjee's heroine, for she appears to distance herself from all that is Indian, including her past.

Reinventing herself with aplomb is a special aspect of Tara's persona. Each protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee reinvents herself, but Tara Bhattacharjee is opulent and applaudable. Acceptance of a son who is gay, and her unconditional love, allows her to accept this different sexuality and reinvent herself. In this way Bharati Mukherjee has always concentrated on how the immigrants and exiles have transformed themselves, shedding their husbands and lovers like a snake's skin undergoing metamorphosis, and their reincarnated selves celebrating the freedom and rootlessness in American culture. Tara enjoys the best of both the cultures. She had lead her life like that of a queen and possesses everything. She is a constant featured person on magazine covers. Leading her life on her own terms, she is at peace with her own self.

So the derived fact is that 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. (*Myles, Anita, p.118*)

In *Desirable Daughters*, all the three sisters, Padma Parvati and Tara, take a break from the traditional and clichéd roles in one way or the other to live life in their own way. They try to adjust with the changed scenario. The three Bengali sisters represent the three different aspects of female experiences. Parvati lives a complacent confined domestic life with her husband Auro, while Tara lives an ultramodern free life as a divorcee where she is provided with every opportunity to enjoy progress and liberty. Both the sisters exist on two extremes whereas Padma seeks a fine balance between the two; she lives an independent life with her husband Harish Mehta and does not altogether discard her cultural values. Through the three female characters the novelist provides the three choices for an Indian woman to follow. Padma and Parvati stick to the safer zones, but Tara moves to risky and challenging role of life, so she is given more importance than other two sisters. Her other sisters Padma and Parvati lead a complacent and passive life, adopt a middle path, remain suspicious about their new identity, do not feel the need to widen their horizons and are less assertive, Tara emerges as a powerful figure to meet every adverse situation; to march ahead with all her limitations to an unknown and unfathomed path of realizing her full potential as an independent human being. Padma lives in America, but she clings to Indian ways, friends, clothes and food. Padma calls Tara 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. The revelation of her son's different sexual orientation leaves her shell shocked for a moment, but the maturity and readiness with which she accepts the above relation speaks of her modern consciousness and sensibility.

## CONCLUSION

Tara faces the enigma of modern women after her settlement in America. She undergoes transformation from an Indian desirable daughter to an advanced American lady. Like the New Woman she is caught in the struggle between tradition and modernity. As a protean heroine she braves the New World to seek her individual identity. She makes adventure in dress, food and fashion. She began to address her husband as Bishu while in India; she could not utter his name. She also enjoys sexual freedom with Andy. She gives divorce to her husband because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled while she knew that divorce was a stigma for woman in Indian society. She wanted to drive and to work, to be economically independent. Husband in Indian conservative society is treated as god, sheltering tree, provider and protector, but Tara breaks this myth and chooses another man who suits her temperament and who satisfies her sexual desires. 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 and form a new life for herself.

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