

# रुन्नीवाद

(दशा आणि दिशा)



संपादक

डॉ. संदीप बी. काळे

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आधार पब्लिकेशन्स, अमरावती

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■ डॉ. संदीप बी. काळे

■ प्रथम आवृत्ती — दि. ०८ मार्च २०२२

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## Multiculturalism and Family Conflict in *Desirable Daughters*

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### Abstract

*Desirable Daughters* is a story of the three daughters of rich Bengali Brahmin family which shifts between history, memory, and the present events as the protagonist searches for the truth and her own identity. The novel aims to disclose the immigrant mindset and the conflict arising thereof. The portrayal of characters by Bharti Mukherjee explores the shifting identities of diaspora women, both in the present day United States, Canada, and India. It has a trace of struggle of balancing between past cultural moorings and to survive in the new alien country. Quest for the definition of self and search for identity are main features of her women who are seen caught in a fluctuation of tradition and modernity. She has played significant role in universalizing the experiences of the expatriates and immigrants through her writings by looking beyond to trace the psychological transformation especially among women. This paper aims to study the theme of conflict in her novel *Desirable Daughters*, which is the first in the trilogy of *Desirable Daughters*, *The Tree Bride* and finally *Miss New India*.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Identity, Feminism, Expatriates, Identity

Bharti Mukherjee's sixth novel, *Desirable Daughters* published in the year 2002, marks a new trend in her writings. Tara the main protagonist is portrayed in different hues whereas her two sisters are also deliberated in the novel. Tara who has moved away and the entire narration is from her perspective. An Indian by birth she has the first hand experience of the restrictions imposed by society on women.

Though considered to be modern by the society yet restrictions for women were innumerable. The protagonist Tara wants to study more but her father says which she calls the magical words, "There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is the picture. The marriage will be in three weeks." Thus marriages are imposed and girls are not allowed to make love or marry a man of their choice especially of other caste. This issue is illustrated in the 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* 12). Tara's

failed marriage is a result of imposed marriage. She had married Bish because her father wanted her to do so. 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" (26). How unjust is it is conveyed by Bharti Mukherjee through, "Surrender... to the whims of fate and the manipulation of the marital marketplace ... What do they know of the needs of modern woman?" (27).

Mukherjee advocates for freedom to choose one's life partner and cautions us against the disasters caused by forced marriages. The three sisters of Calcutta wrestle what to choose: their choice being domineering but known Indian tradition and a liberating but unknown feminist way of life. In this context, it is inevitable that some parts of their identity had to be destroyed and new facets to be created. As these processes of self-destruction and self-construction take place, characters portrayed by Bharti Mukherjee consistently seem to evolve into modern feminists.

The confrontation between tradition and modernity is well justified by Bharti Mukherjee. For, Tara reiterates Indian life, its customs, traditions culture and ethical values of family are bewildering facts and a matter of amusement. She proclaims, "I told my Calcutta stories many times, and Americans seem to find them endlessly amusing and appalling" (26).

Tara narrates from her adopted San Francisco home, where she lives with Andy Karolyi, a strange sort of Hungarian Zen carpenter who makes earthquake proof houses. All this imply a sort of free and easy hippie lifestyle, but nothing could be farther from truth. All these rebellion gestures are merely trappings, or reactions against the gagging restrictions of Tara's girlhood. The novel further highlights that past is not something that stays in a neat frame or album, but one that collides with the influences and the present, and how the present is one that can colour and illuminate the past.

Mukherjee has the affinity with the native soil, but discovers the vapidness and pollutants of the soil yet declining to pay short shrift to its vitality. While writing about the two invariables of the transnational conditions- exile and homeland, Mukherjee in her novels depicts the temporal and spatial dynamics of immigrant sensibility lost in the space between home and location. The estranging consciousness of relocation is haunted by some sense of loss, a strong urge to reclaim or to look back at the transgressive precinct of the past. To quote Maya Manju Sharma in

her fiction Mukherjee handles western themes and settings as well as characters that are westernized or bicultural. Yet she is forced to admit that the very structure of her imagination is essentially Hindu and essentially moral.

In *Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee focuses on the alternative ways to belong, cultural hybridity simultaneity and the 'third space of enunciation' which are markers of the post-colonial condition of existence. Clifford says 'Diaspora women are caught between Patriarchies ambiguous pasts and futures. They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways.' Likewise, Tara in the novel finds herself caught in a struggle between Patriarchal histories of her past home and legends created by her husband in the acquired home. She cuts short the legend by walking out and, in turn, gets stagnant in a relationship of retrofitting with a man who leaves her alone in her time of need. According to Avtar Brah: The identity of diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given[...]As such, all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even though they are implicated in the construction of a common we.

In other words, diasporic experiences and double identification constitute a mixed identity in different forms. Such forms differ from the essential notion of national and ethnic identity. It also explores multiple belongings that enable people to inhabit more than one space at the same time. Under such condition in the absence of a dominant code, culture is becoming an individualistic enterprise, in which people create their own super structure and super culture, taking in a way a role of their own 'cultural programmers.'

Tara is a fictional rendering of such cultural hybridity. Tara's assertion that she is both, being simultaneously an Indian and an American, helps her gaining the same 'third space of enunciation.' Tara says in *Desirable Daughters*: The rhetoric of modern San Francisco makes me invisible. I am not Asian," [...] I am all things [...] yet I'm still too timid to feed my Ballygunge Park Road identity in to the Kitchen carburetor. That dusty identity is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case[...] I am not the only Indian on the block. All the same, I stand out, I am convinced, I don't belong here, and despite my political leaning; worse, and I don't want to belong.

Mukherjee fuses near and far, traditional and modern which reshapes and recodifies the meaning of cultural space. In the novel Tara attempts to reconfigure her meaning as a trans-national and trans-cultural subject and attempts to center the narrative upon her individual

experiences as a diasporadominate. She is a frustrated woman dwindling menacingly in the alternative models of survival between territories, migrations and mediations. Tara, like Mukherjee's diaspora characters, struggles hard to occupy the translational space, after multiple dislocations and ruptures. Most of her fictions evolve from the dichotomy of growing up in two cultures as it is woven in Tara's trajectory from one location to another. The diasporic subjects like Tara experience the recurrence of this dichotomy and constitute the epicenter of the most important demographic dislocations of the modern times. It now represents a significant compelling force in world culture.

Tara, the narrator of the novel, takes the readers deep into the intricacies of the New World and seems to float rootless with time. The fluidity of her identity testifies not only her own but also the fluidity of the immigrants. She values her traditional upbringing but is determined to move ahead in life. Her image of her family values forms a wall of security around her that camouflage the fragile vulnerable self.

Though she sees herself as an American, is constantly aware of the India that is always with her. When a young man, Chris Dey, approaches at her home and proclaims that she is his maternal aunt and he the illicit child of her older sister Padma, Tara must reconsider. She is forced to look at her the relationships she has with her sisters, and their past: three different people within a specific upbringing and rigid cultural context. The conventional patriarchal rule in Indian society is explicit through the instances. A. Sivanandan in *Alien Gods* explains the situation:

On the margin of European culture, and alienated from his own, the 'coloured' [...person] is an artifact of colonial history, marginal man par excellence. He is a creature of two worlds, and of none. Thrown by a specific history, he remains stranded on its shores even as it recedes; and what he comes into is not so much a twilight world, as a world of false shadows and false light. (104-8)

In her narratives she takes into account the spatial and locational subjectivity related to their homeland. Her characters experience the cultural absurdity and the social displacement which they display through mixed *existential* code. Such concept of diasporic space as theoretical construct evolving out of the practical journey from alienation to acceptance seeks to project and design the space of different culture and postcolonial heterogeneity. This space of diasporic experience is potent to become the pulsating contemporary parameter, offering various other new scopes of negotiations on the programmed location of culture.



Tara's multiplicity evolves in a continuous process that she welcomes. She recognizes that living in the past, whether temporally, spatially or both, is dangerous to the development of one's identity. She keeps on changing and evolving but at the same time does not lose the identities she had once possessed. Instead of transplanting Indian culture or disposing it off altogether she tries to assimilate her Indianness through reinventing her identity as experiences forever keep on moulding it into something new. The characters in Mukherjee's novel develop multiple consciousness, resulting in self that is neither unified nor hybrid, but rather fragmented.

As the protagonists perceive both their race and sexuality through new and different lenses throughout the course of the text, they come to realize that the notion of a singular identity is a fallacy and the reality of the diasporic experience is the indeterminacy of multiplicity. This multiplicity at times becomes a significant plight for the characters, for as their different consciousnesses contradict each other the characters are left uncertain as to the nature of their identities, not knowing where they fit in the American society. Finally they become capable of living in a world where individuals exist not as a unified One, but as many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibility of inventing identities.

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