Dimension of women in the novel “Desirable Daughters” by Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract: Bharathi Mukherjee is a Third World Feminist writer whose preoccupation is to deal with the problems and issues related with the South Asian Women particularly India. Like her contemporary feminist writers she upholds the cause of women, but she differs from them because her basic concern is to delineate the problems of cross cultural conflicts faced by Indian women immigrants. This is evident by three sisters- Padma, Parvathi and Tara in ‘Desirable Daughters’. Bharathi Mukherjee’s heroines are bold an assertive. They have the strong potentiality for adaptability; they live in the firm ground of reality and accept the bitter truth of their live.

Keywords: Feminist writer, delineate, immigrant, adaptability, female protagonist

Introduction:

The Indian born writer Bharathi Mukherjee is one of the most widely known immigrant writers of America. The immigrant writers in America can be divided into two categories. Firstly, the Willing Immigrant Writers” who settled in America from Europe and Asia and who have made it their home. The second category consists of the „Unwilling Immigrant Writers“ with American origin whose forefathers were brought to America in some slave trips. But Bharati Mukherjee considers herself different from other European writers for a variety of reasons. Bharathi Mukherjee’s female protagonists are immigrants and suffer cultural shock but they are potential women and are anxious to establish their identity by undertaking their heroic journeys. That is why; Bharathi Mukherjee has received considerable critical attention from almost all the quarters of the globe in a relatively short period of just twenty five years. Even though she has been acknowledged as a „voice of expatriate-immigrants“ sensibility.

Female protagonist observation of her novels reveals that she has written all the novels with predominantly feminist views. Since Bharathi 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 the women characters fight for their rights as a woman and then as an individual. Bharathi 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 center of woman’s gravitation. The woman is preparing now to be her own gravitational force, beyond the fullness of patriarchy. Let examine, the novels of Bharathi Mukherjee basing on their concept.

Her female characters suffer from double colonization once by patriarchy and second by expatriation. Being herself a immigrant woman she has been pre occupied with women and their problems of adjustment in America and Canada. Her novels and short stories TheTiger’sDaughter (1971), Wife (1975), Jasmine (1989), The Tree Bride (2004), Darkness (1985) and The Middleman and Other Stories(1988)- are centred on female protagonists who are none but the autobiographical projections of her own self. Born in Indian society, She has been a direct witness to the restrictions and atrocities inflicted upon women in Indian patriarchy. She was well aware of limited future prospect for Indian women as they are governed by Indian mythological values. In such a background, She could realize the problems and dilemma for the emerging class of new woman who is decked with western education and whose conscience is simultaneously formed and nourished by conservative norms and values.

Dr N. D. R Chandra writes: "Like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya(Suraiya), Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Prawar Jhabwalla and Githa Hariharan Mukherjee exposes many facets of feminism, encompassing agitation for equal opportunity, sexual autonomy and right to self-determination." We find the same in the novel Desirable Daughters where the heroine Tara
ventures to widen her horizons in matters of marriage, love and sex; redefines her roles as wife and mother. The title of the novel Desirable Daughters (2002) is significant and ironical. It suggests that daughters are the object of family prestige, so their behaviour 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.

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 lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrows of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled 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 Tara Lata. The story of Tara Lata who is cursed and disgraced for the death of her husband is one of the most cursed state… “The poor child had no idea that already she had been transferred from envied bride…into the second worst-thing in her society… the most cursed state.” (Desirable Daughters, p.12). The Tree Bride is symbol of self-sacrifice. The story serves as antithesis to the life of Tara, the heroine who transgresses the boundaries laid for her. At one place, Tara says that the Tree Bride has become the “model of selfless saintliness” while “My story was different, perhaps an inversion.” (Desirable Daughters, p.280). This statement consolidates Padma’s address to Tara as American, self-engrossed being. The novelist shows the contrast between the traditional woman and the modern woman; one lives for the society and sacrifices her life while the other lives a selfish life. The Tree Bride also serves as a symbol to celebrate the liberation and independence of woman from the male domination and male support because the Tree Bride proves that a woman need not be safeguarded and supported by man; she can live even without man. 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, p.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. We perceive irony in the failure of Tara's arranged marriage with Bish and success of love marriage of Parvati with Auro. The issue of imposed marriage upon girls is also raised in Bharati Mukherjee’s other novel Wife in which the protagonist Dimple gets neurotic on shattering the dreams and illusions of married life and aborts her baby and kills her husband. 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. 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, to take initiations on an unknown path which may lead her to ruin.

While her other sisters Padma and Parvati lead a complacent and passive life, adopt a middle path, remain suspicious about their new identity, do not want only to be provided and protected by her husband as is desired in the case of 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.

The instruction of Padma represents the perspective of male chauvinism and by defying it Tara establishes the feminist perspective over phallocentrism. 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. In spite of moving towards complete freedom from traditional roles, Tara cannot be separated from her roots. She nurtures Indian family norms and feels isolated and incomplete after being divorced. Presence of Bish gives her inner solace which she lacks in Andy's company. She feels emptiness after separation from Bish because in her mind Bish is still her husband, 'the sheltering tree'. The need for a husband in form of Bish shows that it is not easy for an Indian woman to be completely free from 'dependence syndrome'. She can also not avoid her motherly duties towards Rabi, her son. Like Virmati of Desirable Daughters Tara, too, is unable to realize complete emancipation.

Conclusion:
The novel is all about the psychological journey of the protagonist Tara from America to her cultural roots, that is, India. We visualize America and India from her perspective. The most avoided topic, that is, sex and Tara's desire for the size of organ and sexual experience with Andy, her lover and Bish have been frankly expressed. The primary issues discussed in the novel are marriage, love, sex, dowry and woman subjugation. 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. 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."3 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.

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