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ISSN (Online) : 2455 - 3662
SJIF Impact Factor :3.967

EPRA International Journal of
**Multidisciplinary
Research**

Monthly Peer Reviewed & Indexed
International Online Journal

Volume: 3 Issue: 9 september 2017



Published By :
EPRA Journals

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IDENTITY CRISIS IN BARATI MUKHERJEE'S 'DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS'

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ABSTRACT

Globalization seems to have brought a sea change in many post-colonial nations. Cultural hybridity is a positive consequence of globalization. Consequently there is a conflict in the diasporic communities between the majority and minority cultures. It is difficult to be estranged from one's native culture. A desire to establish an identity in a new culture appears to be desirable and difficult. Bharathi Mukharji focuses on the quest for identity of the diasporic women and shows the varied concept of identity among the sisters of the same family. The fact that disassociation from culture is not necessary to resolve identity crisis, and a woman can establish an identity of her own within the cultural framework is highlighted.

KEY WORDS: Culture, Identity Crisis. Diaspora.

DISCUSSION

Indian writing in English has been successful in establishing an identity of its own in the international literary scenario. The focus and concern of the post colonial Indian women writers has been the quest for identity of the Indian Women in India and in the western socio-cultural milieu. Diasporic experience, globalization and cultural hybridity lead to conflict of the women in relation to their tradition and self identity. The women characters question the traditional Indian values but at the same time feel that the majority culture to which they belong to has become intertwined with and inseparable from their lives.

Culture is generally understood and accepted as the customs, civilization, arts and intellectual achievement of a particular people. In the course of time culture is likely to be absorbed as a part of the life of individuals. Consequently it becomes difficult for individuals to become estranged from the culture to which they belong. Individual is bound by certain

taboos of the culture and an ardent desire to be relieved from certain cultural shackles makes that individual an alien in his own culture. It is nothing but a craving for emancipation and a search for recognition of a place for oneself in the family or in the society at large. This is referred to by the writers as an identity crisis or a search for identity – self identity or cultural identity. It is but natural for a human being to crave for some recognition in society. It becomes more intense in individuals who belong to tradition bound families. In the process of acquiring self identity they tend to face the conflict between tradition and modernity. Especially this has been the problem of Indian Women in immigrant culture. This problem has been dealt with by Bharati Mukherjee in 'Desirable Daughters', which is aptly suggested in the epigraph of the novel, which also suggests that the concept of identity varies from individual to individual.

No One behind, no one ahead
The path the ancients cleared has closed.

And the other path, everyone's path,
Easy and wide, goes nowhere.
I am above and find my way.

The novel probes and studies the penetrable truth that lies behind this epigraph by taking the lives of three sisters born in an affluent traditional, Bengali – Brahmin family. The concept of identity and self – acknowledge is found in the three sisters in varying degrees.

Padma, Parvathi and Taralata are the three desirable daughters of the novel – good looking, educated, born and brought up in a traditional post independence westernized Indian family. They are the representatives of both Indian as well as western cultures. The story is presented through the perspective of Tara. According to Tara “Sisters three are we As like blossoms on a tree” (P.21). In her view, the three sisters had a long childhood but no adolescence. “.... Although we didn't have an adolescence and we were never teenagers”. (P.27)

“Our bodies changed but our behavior never did” (PP 27-28)

“My life was one long childhood while I was thrown into marriage” (P.28)

The only comfort they were allowed to enjoy was convent education since it guaranteed poise, proficiency in English etc.

The three sisters enjoy a tradition bound western life and receive education in their parental home in Calcutta. They prove themselves to be desirable by their good looks and behavior and by gracing the cover of popular magazines. The eldest of them, Padma, even had the opportunity of being selected by Satyajit Ray for one of his films but was not allowed to act. Though they seemed to have liberty it was confined to the four walls of the house and to the parties organized by their father in the house. They were more like decorated dolls moving around to attract the attention of the guests and to prove how beautiful are the Bhattacharjee daughters. It is evident from the fact that their “Car was equipped with window shades. They had a driver, and the driver had a guard” (P.29). Into such an atmosphere entered a Christian friend Poppey Dey and her brother, Ronald Dey. Padma, the eldest had an affair with Ronald, the heartthrob of most of the teenage Bengali girls of the time and becomes pregnant. To suppress the matter she was sent to Switzerland by her parents in the guise of pursuit of higher studies. After giving birth to a child Padma moves to London and from there to New York seeking a new life. When her father sends a proposal of marriage and expects her to come back to Calcutta. Padma thought

“.... a suitable boy by Daddy's standards was the last thing in the world I wanted. Can you imagine me running a house in Ballygunge and bowing my head to some mother-in-law who found fault with

everything I wore and everything I cooked and everything I said? (P.230)

At an early age in her life she has decided to break the tradition and culture into which she was born and brought up. She even considers the mishap (of giving birth to a child) as a “little mishap” and thinks “No one will ever know about my little mishap.” She even declares proudly “we were perfect little innocent even with a ... mishap” (P.237). After a ten year struggle for existence in the U.K. and the U.S. Padma turns out to be a “multicultural performance artist for local schools and community centres, staging Indian mythological evenings, with readings, slide shows recitations and musical accompaniment’ in New Jersey. (P.94). She marries Harish Mehta, a non-Bengali businessman, who was married and has grown up children. Harish has an admiration for the Bhattacharjee family and remains a mere shadow and follower of Padma without interfering in her active life. She becomes Padma Mehta only because no one in the U.S. can pronounce Bhattacharjee. Padma finally makes New York her home and enjoys the privilege of participating in the activities related to the visits of Indian dignitaries and film stars. Ironically she assumes the role of a promoter of Indian culture, and civilization, in the U.S. “Her inalienable attachment to her home makes her the sustainer and preserver of Bengali tradition in America” (1). Thus Padma establishes a niche for herself by reconstructing her cultural identity and seems to face no identity crisis.

Paravathi, the second sister is neither confronting nor complaining. She too was sent abroad for higher studies, fell in love with Aurabindo, a middle class Bengali student, and married him without much approval from her parents. Later, she leads a luxurious life in Bombay as a normal well settled Indian housewife. She never even thinks of an identity crisis since she is completely engrossed in caring for her husband, two teen age sons and relatives.

“In her Bombay flat each object has its rightful place.... No piled up dirty dishes in her Kitchen sink... No beds left unmade, though she has three to four nuclear family members as house guests almost every day of the year.”(P.53)

1. [https:// www.ukessays.com](https://www.ukessays.com), 11/04/2017

“Parvathi jokes that she manages a hotel not a home.” (P.54)

Yet she is not complaining. She wholeheartedly welcomes the middle class relatives of Auro. Despite, the Bhattacharjee family's disapproval, “Auro had managed to climb pretty close to the top of the corporate ladder...without neglecting his

family.”(P.55). Hence, Parvathi’s concept of identity varies from that of her sisters. She feels contented and completely involved in Indian culture and never seems to face an identity crisis.

Taralatha, known as Tara, is the third sister and narrator. All the events in the novel are portrayed from her perspective. She oscillates between nostalgic past and alluring present. (2) She is married to Bishwapriya Chatterjee, a successful engineer from a traditional Bengali Brahmin family. It was an arranged marriage since the fathers of the groom and the bride thought “they were the best boy and the best girl.”(P.44)

Everything Bish did was the best: “Best grades, best school, and best wife” (P.44) Unfortunately, Bish a Silicon Valley multimillionaire, proved to be not the “best husband” in Tara’s view. She feels a loss of identity in the presence of a very intelligent but not devoted and loving husband. For Tara, in her childhood and adolescence, love was indistinguishable from duty and obedience. Whereas, love to Bish is the residue of providing for parents and family. During the decade of her marital life with Bish, Tara feels a loss of identity.

“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 could not support his wife?” (P.82)

“My world was Atherton, and two weeks we spent each winter in Calcutta visiting his parents-with a few side visits to mine...”(P.82)

2. <https://www.ukessays.com>, 11.04.2017

Consequently, Tara leads a life that is unthinkable for her-she divorces Bish, settles to live with Andy – a Hungarian Buddhist carpenter / Yoga instructor, the man Bish calls “Tara’s mistri, my carpenter” (P.25) But Tara constantly thinks about childhood experiences at Ballygunge and becomes nostalgic. She craves for independence and identity but remains a typical Indian mother depriving her son of them. She works as a school teacher and wants to be known as Tara and not as Mrs. Chatterjee. Tara seems to assume an identity of her own by breaking the tradition and culture from which she has come. Though she craves for self-identity like Padma, Tara proves to be unsuccessful in her attempts. She is criticized, by Padma for divorcing Bish and bringing shame to the Bhattacharjee family.

Thus the three sisters – Padma, Parvai and Tara – have a varied concept of identity. Padma, “who hated the traditional family and the city of Calcutta, now tries to lead a traditional Bengali life in New Jersey”. (P.181) Not only Padma, but many Bengali families are introduced by the novelist and are presented as upholding and promoting their culture in an alien

society. Parvati acculturizes herself whereas Tara fails to assimilate both the cultures.

In contrast Bharati Mukherjee begins and ends the novel with the eventful life of Taralata Gangooly – the tree bride and great grandmother of the three sisters. Taralata Gangooly at the age of five in 1879 was married to a tree since the groom to whom she was to be married died of snake-bite. It was customary in the traditional Bengali Brahmin family for two reasons: to avoid the payment of dowry; to avoid widowhood to the girl. Taralata became the victim of this practice and she obeyed it without any dissent. She did not step out of the house in Mishtigunj throughout her life.

“It’s said she’s not ventured beyond the walls of her compound in over sixty years.” (P.309) In fact the act of getting married to a tree freed her rather than binding her to a human husband’s demands. (3)

She took active part in the freedom movement and partition movement of Bengal by giving shelter to freedom fighters and refugees.

“Taralata the virgin, the untouched, who opened the house to beggars, then to the sick then to the young soldiers fighting”. (P.17) she is known as “Taralata the saint, the freedom fighter”. (P.17)

3. <https://www.ukessaya.com>, 11/04/2017

“She lived there seventy years and gradually changed the world.” (P.17)

Taralata Bhattacharjee contrasts her life and situation with that of Taralata Gangooly. Born and brought up in Calcutta, “well educated and well travelled” (P.18), the thirty-six year old Californian Taralata Bhattacharjee admits that she will never be able to change the world. In fact, the novel appears to be a comparison and contrast between both the Taras-Taralata Gangooly vs. Taralata Bhattacharjee.

“Taralata Gangooly had turned the tragedy of her husband’s death and a lifetime’s virginity into a model of selfless saintliness” (P.280). Whereas Taralata Bhattacharjee had turned the fortune of a brilliant and promising life with a successful husband and son into a useless search for an aimless identity. Thus, Bharati Mukherjee seems to prove the last line of the epigraph: ‘I am alone and find my way’ justifies that the cultural matrix may provide a base but ultimately one is alone and has to find his/her own way. The success or failure of an individual in search of an identity ultimately depends on the path that is chosen by him/her but not on the culture, tradition and education he/she possess and acquires. One need not dissociate oneself from the culture to resolve the identity crisis.

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