



**REDEFINING FEMININE SPACE AND CULTURAL METAPHORS IN BHARATI
MUKHERJEE'S *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS* AND *THE TREE BRIDE***



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Mukherjee's novel Desirable Daughters (2002) is first in her second trilogy. Critic Amanda Fields views the novel as "taking on the elements of a mystery thriller while confronting the quickly changing cultures in both the United States and India, as well as the dynamics of cross-culturalism and globalisation" (Fields 339). Mukherjee begins the novel with the story of a small girl, "dressed in her bridal sari, her little hands painted with red lac dye, her hair oiled and set. Her arms are heavy with dowry gold; bangles, ring, tiny arms from wrist to shoulder" (Desirable Daughters 3-4). The bride Tara Lata is five years old and is headed deep inside the forest to marry a tree. "A Bengali girl's happiest night is about to become her life time imprisonment". (4) Tara's father Jai Krishna Gangooly had prepared to marry her to Satindranath, a boy of 13 and fifth son of Surendranath Lahiri a renowned land owner. Unfortunately the boy died of snake bite on the very day of marriage. The groom's relatives and his father blamed it all due to ill luck of the bride.

The poor child had no idea that already she had been transformed from being envied bride about to be married to a suitable husband into the second- worst thing in her society. She was now not quite a widow, which for a Bengali Hindu woman, would be the most cursed state, but also a woman who brings her family misfortune and death. She was a person to be avoided. In a community intolerant of unmarried women, his Tara Lata had become an unmarriageable woman. (12)

The elegantly dressed men enraged, “You westernized types think you are stronger than our Hindu deities”, (13) accusing Jai Krishna Babu of omitting some rituals or not appeasing the goddess sufficiently, referring to Manasha, the goddess who causes or prevents snakebites. Jai Krishna Gangooly a lawyer and pleader who could deceive judges could not convince the groom’s family as they left in anger. Gangooly, who had defied Hindu tradition and scorned it, now began looking for the lesson implanted in the Hindu myths. “The snake bite had occurred to remind Jai Krishna and Surendranath how precarious social order and fatherly self-confidence are” (13). It is when the groom’s family demands for dowry cash and gifts and leave the bride to be taken care of by her father, Gangooly Babu’s wounded consciousness begins to heel, at this point; he rebukes them of being greedy and asks them to leave. Immediately he announces, “I will see my daughter married to a crocodile, to a tree, before you get a single piece! I give dowry only to one who does not demand it. There will be a wedding tonight, the auspicious hour will be honoured” (14).

Next arrangements are made to carry out the wedding in the forest, prompting the father to marry his daughter to the god of the forest, to help her avoid the shame of being a widow. The child decorated and heavily loaded with jewels is then carried to the forest. Tara Lata is inquisitive about why her wedding ceremony is taking place in the dark forest and not in the lighted wedding canopy in her house in Mishtigunj. The ladies urge her to be quiet as she was ‘paying for the sins of a past life’ (15). They tell her she is being ‘saved from the fate of a despised ‘ghar-jalani’, a woman-who-brings- misfortune-and-death-to-her-family, by the quick thinking of their wise, god-fearing patriarch’ (15). So that she could remain married and wear vermilion powder in her hair all throughout her life. The priest speeds through prayers and rituals, hustling Jai Krishna through the ‘*gauri-daan*’, the rite of ‘giving-of-virgin-bride-as-a-gift’ (15). When all the marriage rituals are done ceremoniously it is time for the *shubha-drishti* an auspicious occasion when a bride gets the maiden glimpse of her husband. Tara could not disguise her

curiosity while waiting for the first glance, her being five years old did not stop her from behaving like a typical bride.

The whispered lamentations were wrong. She is not a woman cursed by a goddess and shunned like an outcaste by her community. She takes her greedy fill of the auspicious initial glimpse. And now she recognises her bridegroom. He is the god of *Shoondar Bon*, the Beautiful Forest, come down to earth as a tree to save her from a lifetime of disgrace and misery. (16)

In Hinduism the number and popularity of goddesses are remarkable. At the onset the author introduces us to Hindu religious tradition and importance of goddess. These traditions also provide a rich source of mythology, theology and worship. India largely being a village culture with majority of Hindus living in villages it is in this context that the presence of gods and goddesses those are specifically identified with the village and towards whom the villagers have a special belief and affection is significant. There are many village deities of whom each has a specialised function and a diverse character. Many times the deity's names suggests their characteristics and functions, also some have their regional reputation, the village goddess Manasa being an example of the same. There are certain characteristics of the village deities; firstly they are generally females with very few exceptions as males. Secondly there are no anthropomorphic images for the village deities and are generally represented by trees, uncarved stones etc. They are worshipped with more intensity than the Great Gods. The Great Gods are incharge of the distant cosmic matter which is of less interest to the villagers as many of the villagers were not even allowed inside the premises of their temples. Therefore to them the village goddess is 'their' goddess who is concerned with their well-being.

Lastly the village deities are mostly associated with some disease, sudden death or a catastrophe. When the village has a threat from some disaster, any epidemic, it is said to be the manifestation of the local goddess. In the words of David Kinsley, "one of the most persistent themes found in the myth, cult, and worship of village goddesses is their being rooted in specific, local villages. The village is the special place of the deity" (198).

For these goddesses are not usually peaceful, benign, and calm presences. Rather, they tend to be wild, rambunctious, independent, demanding and destructive in their habits. This is evident in both their mythology and ceremonies. (Kinsley 200)

The similar and contradictory attitude of these goddesses emphasizes effectiveness of their role. They too like the disease they are often related with, are unpredictable in their mood. They emerge to the scene suddenly in their complete might, form, and power which are generally dangerous, and strike causing death, resulting in terrifying chaos into the lives of those who are affected by it. ‘Suddenly, unmistakably, the fragility of existence is underlined, and the normality of ordered, civilized village life is called into question’ (Kinsley 211). Therefore obeisance to these goddesses would be an attempt to appease them so that they withhold their wrath from people.

It was in 1879 when Tara Lata was married to a tree, the time when Bengal had become the seat of British power and Calcutta the cultural and economic center. The city was flooded with Western knowledge, architecture, education etc. It was when the Hindu Bengalis became the first Indians to learn and master the English language and English ways. “A tradition of leadership, of sensitivity, of achievement, refinement, and beauty that was the envy of the world. That is the legacy of the last generation of Calcutta high society, a world into which we three sisters were born, and from which we have made our separate exits”. (Desirable Daughter 22)

Readers discover that Tara Lata is a relative of the novels’ narrator Tara who is from high caste Indian family married to Bishwapriya Chatterjee a genius in the Silicon Valley. Tara is the youngest of the three daughters, all of who were extraordinarily beautiful as well as intelligent. The three sisters were born exactly three years from each other. Tara mentions, “Yes, we did our calculations and privately celebrated the same October night as our collective inception day. And just as our mother hoped in naming us after goddesses, we have survived, even prospered” (21). Padma the eldest, lives in New Jersey maintains a traditional way of dressing and works with a television show run by an Indian. Her second sibling Parvati being traditional of all lives in India. Her husband is a rich man; she does not work and maintains the rules of a joint family by allowing relatives to stay in her house for weeks at length. The youngest Tara is, “yielded to the most American of impulses, or compulsions, “a root search” (17). Her family, friends and sisters question about her search, and she answers, “I am exploring the making of a consciousness” (5).

Tara was 19, B.A (Hons), M.A 1st class from Calcutta University committed of taking up more scholarships and honours when her father announced, “There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks” (23). She says:

(there are always “boys” when fathers choose them for their daughters) who was selected to jump start my life, to be worshipped as a god according to scripture, was (and is) Bishwapriya Chatterjee, a first son from an outstanding family”... the grooms dak-nam, that is, his house-name is Bishu. His American friends call him Bish, not-quite-appropriate nick name, since it means “poison”. I, of course, as a good Hindu wife-to-be, could not utter any of his names to his face. But we’re progressive people; after crossing the dark waters to California I called him Bishu, then Bish, and he didn’t flinch. (23)

They both had a son Rabindranath, his friends call him Rob and they called him Rabi. At the point where the novel begins Tara has been separated from her husband, she has gone against the parameters of her Indian societal status, by divorcing the multi millionaire husband and stays with their son and her boy friend Andy former biker, former bad-boy, Hungarian Buddhist contractor, also yoga instructor and her carpenter. Bish her ex husband is aware of it and has been hiring Andy to work on his house. “He considers the fact that Andy sleeping with his ex-wife is the best possible guarantee of quality work. It’s one of those San Francisco things I can’t begin to explain in India, just like I can’t explain my Indian life to the women I know in California” (26). Though Tara has tried to mention her stories from Calcutta which the Americans found amusing and she feels perplexed as she puts forth:

I’d never really understood what I was revealing or what I was suppressing... 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. It is amusing and appalling (26).

For her American counterparts it was very difficult to understand how manipulative the marital market can be that it makes ‘any girl with confidence and sense of style’ to surrender to fate. They came up with questions like what do your parents know about the need of a modern woman? For them it was really amusing because they could not understand the system of arranged marriage. Tara’s friends those who knew her well now look at her as, ‘old Tara, thirty-six-year-old divorced kindergarten teacher- and ask, how could any woman, even a nineteen-year-old, submit to someone else’ choice, even a loving parent?’ ‘Obviously, a recipe for disaster. And we’re thrown into the middle of a modern enigma. My enigma and yours’. (26)

While Tara is coming to terms with major changes in her life that are more than scandalous for an Indian woman, a young man Chris comes at her door claiming to be her nephew, the abandoned and illegitimate son of her eldest sister Padma through a secret alliance between her sister and a Bengali Christian Ron Dey. She is thoroughly convinced he is a bluff and dismisses the possibility of his being a relative. Amidst investigation and confusion regarding his identity, she discovers that her son is a gay. She looks back and forth at her family's past and their future and realises that much of her family is unknown to her; their real identity is and was hidden from her all these years. Gradually she grows and matures as a character and assesses the two different worlds between being an Indian and becoming American: physically, sociologically and psychologically.

The novel begins with a search for one's lineage, self and identity. Tara fascinated by her namesake ancestor Tara Lata, a child victimised first by child marriage and later to serve her widowhood becomes a 'Tree-bride'. She is retreated to her father's house where she "grows up to offer her home and assistance to poor, sick, and those who struggle for Indian independence. She is eventually taken from her home by British colonists. Despite Tara's lack of marital choice, which is thrust upon her at the age of five, she manages to empower herself in other ways as an adult" (Fields 339). The narrator's great grand aunt through her freedom fighting activities makes herself an idol, an emblem of the female. She achieved an unbelievable status being martyred she "gradually changed the world" (17).

According to critic Florence D' Souza the entire novel is an attempt by the protagonist to delve into her own individuality and recognizing her difference. It is an amazing reversal of what initially appeared to be a tragic destiny. Not only was Tara able to rise above her family and community, but also left an inspiring mark among people of religions other than her own, in a nation that become partitioned from what had been her nation. It is in this reaching out across boundaries that can be understood to have "changed the world" (204).

The novel deals with the immigrant life and cultural assimilation, written by a female author, presenting a female central character, having a feminist thought but not propagating feminism. What becomes the recurrent theme is the conflict between native and foreign cultures. Tara is faced with the challenge of accepting the American feminist culture to her traditional Indian culture where both the concepts are thoroughly incompatible. The traditional role of woman in India is completely opposite to what the American feminism stands for. E.g. Tara Lata's

marriage to a tree to save her from becoming widow, concepts like this are mere superstitions from the feminist point of view. Moreover the American feminist movement that was endowed by sociological, historical, scientific knowledge would by no chance approve of such orthodox practices.

There was difference in the way societies were organised for both India and America. In India individual happiness is always subordinate to the collective. Of supreme importance is the role of a woman which is to be supportive of her husband under all situations. The women's needs and aspirations are not given due share in an essentially patriarchal society. Whereas in the novel the three sisters belonging to Calcutta do not seem to be bound up by the native traditional culture as they are in liberated American society, the land of freedom and expression which is far beyond the realities at their homeland.

The three sisters struggle between what to choose, the Indian traditions which are known but oppressive or the feminist way of life which is still unknown. In this process of discovery it is necessary that some part of their self has to be done away with and new faces of their identity get developed. Therefore in the process of destruction and construction of self and identity, an Indian American woman presented by Bharati Mukherjee gets evolved as feminists. Critics Amanda Field opines, "With Desirable Daughter Bharati Mukherjee continues to analyze the effects on the individual of conflicting cultural influences" (340).

Tara the main character is both modern and traditional she is easily assimilative, can accommodate and adapt to life in India and her new home America. She does not restrict herself to one way of life but exists in two planes. Mukherjee has provided her an individuality that has mobility, events or parts that add an element of nostalgia, and identity with a cross cultural impact on her identity i.e. partially Indian and in some part American. Mukherjee through Tara portrays an identity that is invented, reinvented and relocated- the protagonist as our Tara, Tara Lata, "the Tree Bride" and also Tara Banerjee Cartwright of The Tiger's Daughter goes through a sense of deep connection with her lineage. In her attempt to find out her ancestral link and the changes in her life abroad she ends up redefining her culture.

Through Padma, Mukherjee presents a character whose identity undergoes sea change through crossing of borders. In her case the change of place 'plays a crucial role in restructuring individual identities and cultural attitudes and perceptions' (Swain 58-59). She becomes a new person who has made New York her home but simultaneously dealing with attachment towards

her home turns her into a preserver of her traditions. The new culture is unable to subvert her traditional self which can be summed up Susheila Nasta's observation:

Diaspora does not create an unrequited desire for a lost home land but also a 'homing desire', a desire to re-invent and rewrite home as much as a desire to come to terms with an exile from it. (136)

The three Gangooly sisters born and brought up in the same house of the same parents, having the same background go on to become altogether different identities. Tara falls a victim to identity crisis though less acute than Parvati. Parvati is immobile, Tara on the contrary is mobile, dynamic, and at continuous change. Being divorced Tara's life is totally different from the rest of her sisters. "Dislocated as she is, she lives in San Francisco, still cherishing the American Dream possibilities and promises but to her utter dismay she finds that life fails to deliver these promises" (Swain 60). Therefore she feels frustrated and lonely, dissatisfied, disappointed and longs for past.

The case of Tara is different she is assimilated to the alien locale of America though partially. She is attached to the exotic culture which critic Jopi Nyman calls, an 'ambiguous relationship with Americanness' (59). She becomes a different identity which she puts forth as, " I felt as though I were lost inside a Salman Rushdie novel, a once firm identity smashed by hammer blows, melted down and re emerging as something wondrous or grotesque" (Desirable Daughters 195-96). She oscillates between the two lands commenting "may be I really was between two lives" (251). In order to find her root and belonging to one of these places she exemplifies the "existential dilemma" of diaspora and the problem as immigrant who has a fluid identity associated with mobility and plurality rather than stasis and singularity. (Swain 62)

To sum up Bharati Mukherjee through the portrayal of Tara has maintained a balance between past and present, traditional much rooted in her culture but simultaneously belonging to the modern era. Critic S.P Swain opines:

Tara is thus the alienated self, languishing in the angst and ennui of the diasporic experience, yet to carve out a niche for her. She is the "nowhere woman" oscillating between the nostalgic fascinations of a traditional past and the romantic and adventurous allurements of the present. Like the other diasporic characters of Bharati Mukherjee, she "stands in the shaky ground where East meets West and the sound of cultures clashing could shatter glass" (63).

Mukherjee's next novel The Tree Bride (2004) a sequel to Desirable Daughters is a historical novel and has the story of Tara Lata Chatterjee in continuation. The protagonist is forced to take up a journey to find traces of the story of her great-grand aunt. Whom we know from the previous novel, at the age of five was married to a tree in Mishtigunj and eventually emerged as a freedom fighter. For her the arrangement of marriage came handy as it freed her from the bounds of a human husband. She is set free to live her life as a married woman in her father's house, confining by the societal norms and not going out of the house till she is forcefully drawn by the police.

The novel commences after bombing of Tara's home in San Francisco and her coincidental meeting with a gynecologist, Victoria Khanna in California. Khanna was very impressive yet thorough professional whose achievements were framed and hung up on the wall. Tara at this time is pregnant with her second child and she ignores the calling till the baby is born. She engages herself as a dutiful wife in the service of her ex husband who is crippled from the bomb attack that was primarily aimed at her. "Ah, distracted from duty to me by pati-seva, the Tree Bride sneers. The selfless Hindu wife dedicated herself to her husbands' welfares. Even a divorced one. Even in America" (Tree Bride 279-280).

Mukherjee opens this tale of revenge and violence by first bringing about the reunion of Tara and her husband Bish, who becomes a victim of the bomb attack carried out by Abbas Sattar Hai whose purpose is unknown. She discovers the motive of Hai's attacks in the history of her Indian family and in the story of the Tree Bride. Tara's root search takes her to the core of her family history, the ancestral village, result of which does not only surprise but shock her. As the layers unfold she comes to know that her present life is being affected by certain major events that have already taken place in the past.

Gradually Tara puts together the Tree Bride's story with other stories along with the details furnished by her gynecologist Victoria Khanna. 'John Mist' story brings in the adventure of a sailor on board ship travelling to India being overtaken by pirates forcing him to face dangers and live on to become the maker of Mishtigunj. Another story that goes parallel with the narrative is that of Virgil Treadwell, Victoria Khanna's grandfather, British national and officer who becomes dissatisfied with his upbringing and is attracted to the beauty of India.

Elegant, evocative and brilliant work of Mukherjee takes the reader off and on with time and place. Through the narrative light is thrown on the long done away with British rule which finds mention through the life of Tree Bride, John Mist and others. The novel also discusses Indo-British relationship during the colonial period providing a fascinating look at India, along with the Indian Brahmins set in present day San Francisco and India during the British rule. Tara's encounter with Dr. V. Khanna leads her to the family tree of Treadwells, also the British Raj and their connection with Calcutta.

On Tara's expedition to Mishtigunj, the 'mission of discovery' (17), she visits a Muslim house. There people call her "American-memsahib", they offer her tea, feed her and also tell her the stories of Tara Lata. While questioning about the details of the life tree bride lived and the kind of hardships she had to face, she too in return is questioned by an old man, "As another Tara Lata, did I ever talk to her? Did we speak in dreams?" (18). All were eager to know if she was aware as to where or under which tree the dowry gold of the tree bride was buried. To which Tara enthusiastically answered in affirmation, where as she was rather taken aback. Later on it is revealed by the protagonist herself that "the Tree Bride visits me in the rented house on Beulah Street. I feel her presence; I hear her urgent whispers. I am trapped in your world of mortals, she pleads. Perform the rites... set me free, Tara" (The Tree Bride 279).

The tree bride being an unhappy spirit hovered upon Tara as she was her only namesake and also a habitant of Mishtigunj. For Tara mentions from the tales of her great grandmother that during twilight the evil spirits assumed potency and those ghosts who were unhappy were the most eager ones to take over the living beings. In order to keep them away she used to light sacred oil lamps. "What was sanctified rite for my great-grand mother is for me an unbreakable habit. As night falls, I flick every light switch on in whatever apartment or house in whichever city I happen to be banished". (280)

In a very mysterious manner the Tree Bride tells Tara the true story of her death. What was known to the rest was that she was dragged out of her house by the police and later she died of heart attack in jail whereas the truth was something else. For the fear that Tara Lata's funeral would turn into an anti-Raj rally, the then District Commissioner Dominick Mackenzie ordered that her body should be cremated by the police. He wanted her to die and vanish but not like a martyr, rather under controlled circumstances.

They tossed my body over the prison wall into the sewage ditch. I hovered above my corpse. It lay submerged in filth. Vultures ripped chunks off with their beaks. Starving dogs chewed my bones. I had no body but I felt the pain, and the same. Help me Tara. (281)

She learns that it is the release of the soul that the Tree Bride is seeking for she is a restless spirit who would not be liberated until the proper rites of cremations are performed. The Tree bride says, "I have waited half a century to be liberated... Your son is there, he can perform my rites. Please! He can send me on way to the Abode of Ancestors. I am ready for the journey" (281). Tara's husband, a scientist, does not object to Tara's association with the dead, instead he says, "When we're fit enough, we'll make a trip to Kashi (282). For it is the holiest cremation according to the Hindu religion. It does not matter to Bish whether Tara had a dream about the tree bride's yearning for 'Abode of Ancestors' or whether it is a ghost of Tara Lata who visits his ex wife, but all he wishes is that he would take Tara along to India as a married couple. "And so we were married in a fifteen-minutes ceremony in a lawyer's office above a bar on Haight Street exactly seven days and twenty-one minutes before Victoria Kallie, our daughter was born" (285). Mukherjee in the novel depicts a society of flux, which is in a constant flow, flow of migrants, crossing of geographical boundaries, root search etc where Tara is trying to create her identity through her diasporic experiences. Her kind of attitude and behaviour is American which is due to the influence of the west on an Indian identity. Critic Rochelle Almeida is of the opinion:

At every stage, Tara's perception and understanding of the complexity of pan-American life is clearly evident. Unlike her predecessors, Dimple or Jasmine, whose cultural myopia blinded and perplexed them, through Tara's sometimes-cynical narrative voice, Mukherjee sheds light on the manner in which a state of psychological composure could be acquired by Indian women uprooted from India to the west following arranged marriage. (86)

She further mentions that this behaviour does not just come by aping the western attitudes but it is the result of "accepting one's own upbringing and cultural identity with dignity and allowing time to act as a natural catalyst in engineering a transnational amalgamation" (86).

Mukherjee in her present work has brought together a fusion of history and myth, creating an element of magic and mystery in a balanced manner. It is therefore suggested for a better

understanding of Tara's experiences both the works Desirable Daughters and The Tree Bride must be read in succession. According to Rochelle Almeida:

Readers of Mukherjee's novels have grown to expect fanciful adventures as the fearless heroine encounters her past and the colourful characters that comprise her genealogy, before she arrives at a cathartic discovery. Those expectations are not disappointed, for Mukherjee provides all this and more, bringing Tara and the reader to the conclusion that no matter how far away from home South Asian transactions might drift, there is always some individual lurking around the bend that brings us back to one origins and ties us to our pasts. (87)

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