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Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*: A Diasporic Novel



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Abstract : *The novel is deeply rooted in the age-old legacy of the legendary woman named Tara-The Tree Bride. The narrator is given her name and has two elder sisters just as Tara Lata had. The novel portrays much of homeland memory, immigrant experience, displacement, cultural differences and cultural conflicts making it a diasporic novel.*

The paper illustrates the contexts from the novel portraying the above-mentioned elements. The novel seems to be a more real one and less fictional.

Key words : *Cultural difference, diasporic, alienation, immigrant.*

RESEARCH PAPER

The novel begins with the narration of an age-old legendary tale of Tara Lata, the Tree Bride. Four servants of a rich man are carrying a palanquin, the youngest daughter of the rich man is seated in Palanquin. This story is from a small town called Mishtigunj.

“The bride is named Tara Lata, a name we almost share. The name of the father is Jai Krishna Gangooly. Tara Lata is five years old and headed deep into the forest to marry a tree” (Mukherjee 5)

The narrator is narrating her history which “begins with a family wedding on the coldest, darkest night in the Bengali month of Paush – December / January – in a district of the Bengal Presidency that lies east of Calcutta – now Kolkatta – and South of Dacca – now Dhaka–” (Mukherjee 5)

While narrating the story of Tara Lata, the narrator narrates her present life that she has a graduation photo of Bishwapriya Chatterjee, her husband, a graduate from IIT, Kharagpur. He is the “last icon before falling asleep, first worshipful image in the morning” (Mukherjee 7). Countries, her apartments, her houses changed but the portrait of her husband remained same.

Tara Lata was supposed to marry the 13 years old youth, a Kulin Brahmin. The name of Tara Lata’s groom was Satindranath Lahiri, fifth son of Surendranath Lahiri.

Hindu Bengalis were the first among Indians to master the English language and to master English man’s ways. The paradox with Jaikrishna was he was the student of Darwin and Bentham and Comte, he also practiced icy logic and he was the reader of the Upanishads and believer in Vedic wisdom.

The bajra when sailed to Mishtigunj. No one come out of it and groom’s father and uncles sent a cruel message which their servant delivered and called Jai Krishna to the cabin in Bajra. There is found the body of lifeless boy who was none other than groom. The groom died of Snake bite. Jai Krishna assured the groom’s father that all the rites of the wedding were observed faithfully. Even then the marriage did not take place. Jai Krishna denied giving dowry when groom’s father demanded for it.

The palanquins and people returned back to home and set out once again to find a suitable bridegroom. Tara Lata in her palanquin was leaning outside, the forest was dense, monsoon rains never seemed to leave.

In the dark, dangerous jungle Jai Krishna performs the rite of gauri-daan. During Shubho – drishti when bride puts her auspicious gaze of groom, she sees that her groom is brave and strong. “He has waited for her alone, unflinching, though deadly snakes slither out of flooded holes at his feet, and leeches crawl across his toes, and crabs scuttle up his shins and predatory beasts gouge his solid stomach” (Mukherjee 16). The bridegroom is the god of Shoondar Bon.

The narrator’s mother told her the story of Tara Lata-the Tree Bride and she was named after her. The narrator had two sisters as Tara Lata had. The line “We are sisters three/as alike as three blossoms on one flowering tree” (Mukherjee 16) is reciprocated again and again in the novel.

Tara Lata never left her father’s house. She lived a legendary life, unburdened by marriage and children, she grew old in the same house for seventy years and changed the world with her good deeds. She opened the house for beggars, for sick people, for the young soldiers fighting the British Raj. Tara Lata became a legendary figure, a saint, a freedom fighter.

Until the six years ago of her narration, the narrator was married women with “vermillion in her hair, living in a gated community in Atherton, California” (Mukherjee 18). She had a son. Tara’s oldest sister was Padma born after 80 years of the marriage ceremony in the Shoondar Bon. Her second sister is Parvati, three years younger to Padma and Tara-the narrator was three years younger to Parvati.

When Tara was 19, she held a BA Honours and M.A First class from the university of Calcutta. Her father found a suitable boy for her. “There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks” (Mukherjee 23). Her both elder sisters were married by then. Padma was settled in New York and Parvati’s husband was waiting for his green card. The boy selected for her was Bishwapriya Chatterjee. His American name was Bish. After crossing the dark waters, she called him Bishu and then Bish. They had a son Rabindranath called as Robin. He was called Rob by his school friends. His parents called him Rabi. The Indian names were modified largely after the foreign encounter. The change in name signifies the transformation each character undergoes.

Bish developed immensely in California with the help of his friend Chester Yee. The narrator after describing about her marriage with Bish and her stay in California talks about her present status “Now I live in a part of San Francisco called upper Haight, or Cole valley, with Rabi, and do volunteer work in a preschool two blocks away (Mukherjee 24).

She was not living only with her son. She had Andy, “my balding, red – bearded, former biker, former bad boy, Hungarian Buddhist contractor/yoga instructor, the man Bish calls ‘Tara’s mistri’, my carpenter” (Mukherjee 25).

Her house where she lived with Bish was called as Atherton house. The narrator Tara clearly demarcates American things and Indian things. To sleep with Andy is a San Francisco thing for her.

Tara is again rooted in her native land. She is a traditional Bengali woman. She says “I have told my Calcutta stories many times, and Americans seem to find them endlessly amusing, and appalling” (Mukherjee 26). The way she married Bish without seeing the picture and knowing the biography is an Indian thing. Bish Chatterjee became the poster boy of Indian entrepreneurship. He was a well-known media figure; people knew him very well. They know Tara as well as “36-year-old divorced kindergarten teacher” (Mukherjee 26). The definition of love was different for Bish and Tara which might have led to their divorce.

The narrator called Parvati as ‘Parvati-di’, the older sister but for Padma she simply called ‘Didi’. The narrator and Padma had six years of gap. When the narrator was six Padma was reading movie magazines, listening American songs, knowing juicy scandals. She narrates in detail how her father brought up all the three sisters. Narrator also describes Poppy Dey-the friend of Padma, “Poppy had a brother, a brilliant and handsome boy named Ronald Dey. He was a presidency college student, an all-rounder, debater and cricketer, frequently in the papers”. (Mukherjee 30)

Tara narrates intimate relationship between Ron Day and Didi. She even discusses about how rigid their father was in not allowing Padma marry Ron Dey. Second chapter is the most important one, because it narrates all the sub-plots of the novel.

One day when she returned home from teaching, she found Rabi sitting in the living room. The man looked Indian and was smoking cigarette. He approached her to embrace and asked “How are you, Tara – mashi?” When asked about identity he told her that he already met Parvati mashi.

Rabi told his name to be Chris Dey. He said that he got her address from Parvati. He told her that he was looking for her mother. She scolds Rabi for falling for this man's stories and believing him to be his cousins. She makes clear that his only cousins are Parvati's sons. His full name was Christopher Dey. Rabi was taking his sides completely. She was surprised to see this stranger calling her mashi-maa. She believed it to be a threat and conspiracy. Rabi asked his mother, "how come you never told me Padma-mashi had a son?" (Mukherjee 38) She answers him that she never had any kid.

A stranger suddenly coming out of nowhere and calling himself to be her nephew and child of her oldest sister whom she believed to be virgin until her marriage and childless after marriage was shocking. When she asks him what he wants. He wanted a mother, a family, Aunties, cousins and belongingness was his reply. Rabi suggests his mother to call Padma or Parvati.

The boy carried a letter from his father Ron Dey addressing Tara. He mentions clearly in the letter that "The bearer of this letter is my son and your nephew, Mr. Christopher Dey. His mother is your sister, Padma" (Mukherjee 41). Ron Dey confesses the guilt of bearing a kid from an unmarried girl. He requests Tara to arrange a meeting of Chris Dey with this mother. Tara also narrates the difference in upbringing of daughters in India and in America. "In India, we didn't have outside influences like the media, or lax schooling, or cars and dating and drugs (Mukherjee 43).

Parvati lives with her husband Aurobindo Banerji on the fifth floor, of the residential building facing marine Drive. The rent of the flat was paid into a Dubai account. It was 25 thousand US dollars. Aurobindo's company paid it. Parvati's was a love marriage. But she married a Bengali Brahmin. When Tara was 16 and living at home at her sister was 22 living in New York. At present, her Didi was married to a non-Bengali businessman named Harish Mehta and lived in Montclair, New Jersey.

Tara is so intimate with her sister Parvati that she often called India to talk to her and her parents. Her parents settled in Rishikesh to live the life of retirement.

When Tara calls Parvati she narrates the entire story about the robbery- murder in that building. After listening to her entire story Tara didn't narrate about Chis Dey's visit. Though diversified Rabi spent enough time with his father. He went to Amsterdam for a week with his father. The chapter also discussed about the wooden deck as "an unlawful extension of the landing of the

wooden fire escape” (Mukherjee 57). In her second phone call to Tara within a week she discloses about Chris Dey and questions her sister about giving her address to Chris Dey.

Parvati knew about Ron Dey as a cancer doctor in Bombay. Both sisters discussed in detail about the boy. Her sister asks Tara to stay alert and their conversation became pleasant after that.

Tara narrates the cheerfulness Rabi had on his face after coming from Amsterdam. After her divorce with Bish she visited Parvati in Bombay, five years before her narration. She describes her stay with Rabi in Bombay. Both shared more intimacy than they had with their Didi. She discloses her desire to come back to India. But she feared discussing it with Rabi. Because she felt he would never fit in. This shows the generation gap with difference in experience. In the Atherton house Rabi lived happily with finest-generation Silicon Valley kids. Parvati and Auro both said to her, “Come back to India, our parents are getting old and weak and your child isn’t American or Indian and if you stay there any longer you won’t be either” (Mukherjee 66).

Tara describes about Andy’s being Hungarian and his brief history. Tara compared Bish’s lone with that of Andy’s. Andy was a different man. “The two long term lovers in my life are such opposites there are no points of comparison. Whatever one is, the other isn’t. Andy isn’t rushed, he isn’t methodical, but sometimes his presence is a kind of absence. Sometimes I feel I should call him back. I never had to do that with Bish. Thousands of years of arranged marriages had somehow habituated us then before laying eyes on each other, there would be nothing in our sexuality that was, finally, exotic” (Mukherjee 77).

Tara handled the “multicultural” acquisitions as a school volunteer. She donated time and money. She couldn’t teach because she lacked certificate. Talking about her Ballygunge Park Road identity she says “That dusty identity is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist’s glass case, confidently labeled by father’s religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), sub-caste (Kulin), mother-tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta), formative region of ancestral origin (Mishtigunj, East Bengal), education (post graduate and professional), and social altitudes (conservative)” (Mukherjee 78). First when she arrived at Stanford as a young married woman, Bish wanted her to work in library, join him at student pub. She says “Bless Daddy and Mummy, they found me the only man in the world who could transport me from the enchanted garden of Ballygunge to Stanford university in the early 1980s, which has to count as one of the intellectual wonders of the modern world” (Mukherjee 81).

The reason for her divorce is mentioned in this chapter. “When I left Bish (let us be clear on this) 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 – a player, an adviser, a pundit – he also became, at home, more of a traditional Indian. He was spending fifteen hours a day in the office, sometimes longer” (Mukherjee 82).

He was speaker with so much demand in Boston, New York, Tokyo, Taiwan, Malaysia, Manila. She could not travel with him because of the infant Rabi. Atherton was her world. They visited each winter to Bish’s parents with arrival and departure nights with Parvati in Bombay. Tara’s was a perfect life with Bish. She was a popular figural because of Bish.

When she found Rabi with Chris Day at Haight, she called the school authorities to enquire. Soon after reaching home, she found 4 messages in the answer machine. One of the messages by Beth Young from school was about a parent who was Nafisa’s mother. The woman dropped her daughter in the morning to school. She had bruises on her face. Beth Young wanted Tara to enquire about it and talk to Nafisa so that they can contact right agencies and save her. Tara was outraged at it “Nafisa’s mother and I don’t speak the same dialect. We don’t even speak the same language. I am tired of explaining India to Americans. I am sick of feeling an alien” (Mukherjee 87). This shows the frustration of an immigrant because of identity crisis. Tara was expecting a message from Rabi but there was none.

Until Rabi questioned Tara about her talk to Padma masi regarding Chris Dey she never felt encouraged to talk to her about this so private affair/secret. It was easy for her to call India than New York. Rabi promises his mother that he will write a play about two Indian sisters on the telephone. Tara never visited Padma in New jersey nor her sister visited her in California. Her sister lined in upper Montclair, New Jersey. Padma and Harish socialized almost exclusively with Indians. “In the nearly twenty-five years that she had been in the United States, she had become more Indian than when she left Calcutta. She is “multicultural performance artist” for local schools and community centers, staging Indian mythological evenings, with readings, slide shows, recitations and musical accompaniment. Tara called her Didi in the past midnight. As she was not around, she dropped a message.

After the divorce Tara felt lonely, her friends drifted apart. Loneliness and alienation are much felt experiences of an immigrant. The Atherton wives treated her as a pariah. She was no longer part of 'Silicon Valley Smug Indian Wives' group any more. Parvati was only one who was so close to her more than a sister. She calls Parvati and tells her that "First of all, Andras is Hungarian, not Polish, and he is a live-in lower, not a 'flirtation'" (Mukherjee 110). They discuss about Ron Dey's family and his encounter with Parvati on the last night. Parvati asks Ron Dey about his bastard son, he denies. Parvati alerts Tara that boy was an absolute fraud and asks her to call the police.

Shifting the narration, Tara says her father loved Hollywood. She says "Hollywood values were Bhattacharjee family values, as opposed to the standards of Europe, and especially, those of Bombay" (Mukherjee 112). This illustrates Cultural contrast.

Tara couriered a letter to Dr. R. Swarup Dey at his Worli address. She begins the letter with his acquaintance to Bhattacharjee family of Ballygunge Park road. She also talks about her sister Mrs. Aurobindo Banerji who met him in Bombay at the benefit dinner for spastic children. She talked about Chris Dey and the letter he carried with him. She begs him to communicate about anything he knows in this matter.

Chapter 8 begins with a letter from Dr. Dey. He acknowledges that if not publicly, that he had a son whom persons other than him christened Christopher in his infancy. He also says that birth- mother's identity is restricted to birth-mother and her parents. He said that the boy grew up in Christian orphanage. He knew Dr. Dey as only his benefactor. As a benefactor he sent 1st of each month money order until the boy turned 18. For his study in California, to pursue diploma in computer science he left on Christmas morning from orphanage. Dr. Dey said about him that he is a sort of child "of which mother preen and fathers crow" (Mukherjee 131). About the letter he confirms that he is not the author. Tara starts wondering about the boy that the Chris she met is not tall and knows Bengali whereas Dr. Dey made it clear that Chris is tall and doesn't know Bengali language and culture at all.

Tara walked down to the police station at the base of Stanyan by Golden Gate Park. The person asks about the issue whether related to law or language. She answered 'cultural'. She wants ethnic officer. Her case was assigned to Sgt. Jasbir "Jack" Singh Sidhu, a tall Sikh, an officer of the SFPD. She complains and discuss in detail about Christopher Dey to Jack. Then she says

“You’ll have to tell me I’m worried that the boy who calls himself Christopher Dey might not be the real Christopher Dey” (Mukherjee 141).

The proof she had was Chris Dey was actually tall, well-educated, accomplished, and totally non-Bengali speaking. The boy who met her was absolute opposite. She wanted to know whether this boy was a real Christopher. Off record Sidhu takes her inquiry very seriously and alerts her.

Bish was a genius man with perfection in everything. But his son was not. Rabi was a kid with artistic talent. In her recent conversation with Rabi, she was surprised to know that Rabi suspected Chris Dey’s identity.

Rabi had passion for art. When Tara visited his school, his teacher showed her all the sketches he did. Tara was surprised to know from Joe Corrigan that Rob’s play about two Indian sisters on the telephone was finished and it would be performed in the spring semester. Two teachers gave the best reports about Rabi. Now it was Dr. Miguel Salvidar the counselor she wanted to meet.

The counselor talks to her about the activity where students are asked to write self-evaluations. If something seems to be serious in the student’s writing, they inform his/her parent. His letter which he wanted it to be read by Mike reveals about his sexual orientation. He says, “Ma, I am gay”. (Mukherjee 164). It is the name of his play as well. While returning home with Rabi from school she receives a call from Jack Sidhu, he has some information about Chris Dey. By the time they return home Andy stood by his truck loaded. He said “Good-bye, Tara. Have a happy life” (Mukherjee 168). He was moving out of Tara’s life because she broke his trust by taking the matter to Sidhu.

Tara visits Newark to meet her Padma Didi and find out the story of Ron Dey. The chapter discusses in detail of Padma’s life in Newark, Padma and Harish’s routine. Padma worked for a major tycoon in Queens. This tycoon was planning to start a TV show. He had a community channel of his own. In all her talk and discussion with Padma Didi, she was looking forward to listen the name of Ron Dey, but it never appeared.

Padma is so disappointed to see Tara’s physical appearance. “You’re worn out and skinny, Tara, what kind of life are you leading out there? Are you starving yourself? (Mukherjee 185) Her sister

had stupendous figure with tight skin. In order to introduce Tara to the Bengali society of New Jersey, Padma grooms her younger sister so well.

Padma talks about all the Bengalis on the guest list for the first night's party in Jackson Heights. The party was held at Dr. Mrinal and Dr. Kajol Ghosal's mansion in Basking Ridge. The Tycoon for whom her sister worked was Danny Jagtiani. Few Bengalis were investors in his new cable channel as well. The discussion on divorced desirable wives went long between Padma and Tara. Tara reveals that how after her divorce, Bish's oldest friends like Pradod Sengupta, Mahesh Trivedi, Ranjit Shah visited her new apartment often to take a free shot. She left the peninsula because of them and moved to the city.

Her feeling of alienness can be seen when she says, "we rode four flights of narrow escalators down to the basement of the Port Authority, then pushed through a long and crowded, incredibly filthy connecting tunnel to the lower level of the Times Square Station. I was already exhausted. Wrapped in a sari for the first time in years, I was taking twice the number of steps and still falling behind my sister. I was jostled, I heard curses, and I felt hostile eyes assessing me. In a city of foreigners, I was feeling the most alien. A commute like this twice a day, would press the life out of me. If nothing else came of this trip, at least I would know belonged in California (Mukherjee 194).

Jackson heights had everything Indian. Tara is taken to Mei, the hair dresser. Tara describes nails Mahal. The marriage emporium. At party, Tara was all in her world thinking about loss of Andy, complications with Rabi, multiple identities of Christopher Dey, thinking about Jack Sindhu.

Jack calls Padma and informs her about two people for identification. Tara gave Danny's fax number to Jack. One is Gopal Kishore Sinha and other photo is of Abbas Sattar Hai. Jack soon informs her that Dr. Ronald Dey was killed in an automobile accident the previous day.

After all the enquiry that Tara initiated, Padma told her story which was with the gay man Sohrab Batliwalla. Padma revealed Danny was also a gay. Tara informs her about Rabi.

At party Tara met Dr. Ghosal. They had discussion about their husbands. The discussion with Mrs. Ghosal went long. She also met many Bengalis.

Rabi, Bish and Tara for the first time after their divorce would stay together in Tara's home. Bish wanted to return to Atherton and Tara wanted to delay him. It was 3 years, she didn't see Bish so

closely. She describes him vividly. Though divorced, she updated Bish on all the progress she made in her life. She asked him whether he was happy. He replied “I can’t complain” (Mukherjee 261). For Bish happiness meant new initiatives, new markets, new applications and etc. “He’d started an assembly plant in Bangalore, a marketing arm in Bombay and he was in discussion with the World Bank over a start up in Bangladesh. She wanted to talk about tree bride and her trip to Bangladesh and many things but she enjoyed his little visit as happiness for him was something different than that of hers. It’s been five years for their divorce. Both moved in their own ways.

In these five years Tara says “loneliness had made me a little wanton; wantonness had made me very lovely” (Mukherjee 262). But there was no change in Bish. Tara loved Bish a lot. Her love for him was same as it was before divorce. She watched him carefully when he was asleep. They both spent a quality time with each other after a long time.

At midnight Bish went to the deck. Tara joined him and then Rabi. They started their chat on the deck. Bish talked about the girl he met in Calcutta for an alliance. But she met with an accident in Bombay.

When all three turned back Tara felt a slight trembling through her feet on the deck, followed by an explosive roar. The magnitude with which it burst sounded like tornado or an air plane taking off. Bish was heavily injured. “The front half of the house sloughed to the street, sucking the fire ball in its wake” (Mukherjee 271).

Bish called Jack, once out of the home. Jack’s wife received the call he informed her that Tara’s house was attacked by powerful explosive. After the call Bish fell down and lost his consciousness.

The bomb was placed on any home electronics device. A suspect was hauled and it was Andy. All stories were on media Bish was fighting for life on a sterile ward. Along with this story there was a news in the paper reporting the dead body of an unidentified Asian male washed up in the delta. After a day the SFPD sergeant Sidhu announced Andy’s release. The body found was that of Christopher Dey-the India national from Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh India.

Bish was making improvement. He started walking. Rabi told him about everything that happened. Tara called her two sisters. There was no difference in Didi’s talk or thought. Parvati insisted Tara to come home.

The Part III of the novel is about the Indian setting. Chapter 18 begins with the description of Bombay apartment. The chapter is all about Tara and Rabi's stay in Parvati's apartment. It discusses much about Tara-the Tree Bride.

Tara and Rabi visit Rishikesh to meet Tara's parents. The life in the mountains is beautiful and serene. Then, she explains what made her daddy to settle in Rishikesh. The chapter deals with the story of Swami, spirituality, purpose of birth and life etc.

The last chapter of the novel is about Mishtigunj and Tree-Bride's home known as Rajbari place house. The chapter describes in detail about Tara-Tree bride's home. The number of patriots killed; the number of atrocities perpetrated on women was written in a book by Tree-Bride.

Conclusion: Tara the narrator though tries to become an American, remains an Indian in her ways. Bish can be called as American because of his American way of thinking and transformation that he undergoes and expects from Tara as well. Rabi is more an American in his lifestyle and thought. Chris Dey comes like a storm challenging the conventional Indian values held by Tara. The experience of being an immigrant is much more visible in the character of Tara.

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