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Clash of Tradition and Modernity in Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters

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Abstract

Desirable Daughters presents the adventures of Tara Chatterjee, the protagonist and her immigrant experiences. 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. Tara is all the time conscious for the parameters of behavior and morality meant for women in the respectable society of Calcutta. In the hostile conditions, she feels that the separation from her native cultural roots only brings loss and nothingness. The novel begins with the most American of all searches the desire to trace one's ancestry. Tara is fascinated by an ancestor, her almost namesake, Tara Lata, a five year old girl who was a victim of the custom of child marriage, a tradition ever her father a University graduate and lawyer, willingly follows Mukherjee's woman protagonists as immigrants faithfully try to reshape their lives with eastern roots but their American experiences do not let them come into contact with American main stream. In fact an immigrant's life is a series of incarnations. He lives through several lives in a single life-time. Mukherjee comes to the conclusion and sends a message that if one has to assimilate oneself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land, one should forget one's past. In Desirable Daughters the creation of identity emerges as a continuous process, forever transforming and never truly complete. Tara, the female protagonist, was born and raised in Calcutta but moved to San Francisco. Tara immediately embraces American culture, taking advantage of the opportunities, it affords her and assimilating as best she can to the new society around her.

Keywords: *Indian culture, immigrants, patriarchal culture, quest for identity*

Introduction

Mukherjee's woman protagonists as immigrants faithfully try to reshape their lives with eastern roots but their American experiences do not let them come into contact with American main stream. In fact an immigrant's life is a series of incarnations. He lives through several lives in a single life-time. Mukherjee comes to the conclusion and sends a message that if one has to assimilate oneself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land, one should forget one's past. In Desirable Daughters the creation of identity emerges as a continuous process, forever transforming and never truly complete. Tara, the female protagonist, was born and raised in Calcutta but moved to San Francisco. Tara immediately embraces American culture, taking advantage of the opportunities, it affords her and assimilating as best she can to the new society around her. Tara and Bish have one son, Rabindrinath, before they eventually divorce, maintaining a close friendship. Tara also preserves close relationships with her two older sisters, Padma and Parvati. Despite the distance between them, the sisters communicate often and Padma and Parvati remain Tara's links to a past that she has begun to forget. The mystery begins when a young man by the name of Christopher Dey, a literal manifestation of the past, visits Tara at her home in San Francisco, claiming to be the illegitimate son of her sister Padma's love affair with a Bengali Christian named Ronald Dey. Tara is shocked at this assertion, for she cannot believe that her sister would have even had a child during her teenage years in India. Christopher is insistent, however, and provides Tara with information that only a real son of Padma's would in fact know. When Tara confronts both of her sisters with her suspicions, she is met with denial from Padma and discomfort from Padma. Eventually, Tara's concern prompts her to go to the police to ascertain the true identity of Christopher Dey.

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At first, both Tara and her boyfriend Andy are concerned about the consequences of investigating the past, for it often has the power to dominate one's entire present. But Tara nevertheless proceeds with her quest, and as the mystery unfolds, Tara is forced to face her family, her past and a culture that she has distanced herself from, resulting in a conflict between old new forms of consciousness that have been created. As she continues to develop new selves throughout her life, Tara comes to accept that she will never be simply American or Indian. Tara is the most celebratory of her multiplicity. Tara does not fight her multiplicity but rather embraces it as a part of her progressing identity. She accepts her multiplicity from the outset as a consequence of the development of her identity.

Clash of Tradition and Modernity in Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters-

Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters (2002) presents the adventures of Tara Chatterjee, the protagonist and her immigrant experiences. In the novel's foreword; Mukherjee quotes a small verse from an ancient Sanskrit poem, which lays out Tara's mission: "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 alone and find my way." Mukherjee's depiction of women and their difficult relationships portrays the dominance of patriarchal practices in traditional society. India-born Brahmin upper-class sisters are renowned for their beauty, brains, wealth and privileged position in society. In an interview with Bill Mayers, she explains about the title of this book: "Because in Hindu societies especially overprotected patriarchal families like mine, daughters are not at all desirable. They are trouble, and a mother who, as mine did, has three daughters no sons, is supposed to go and hang herself, kill herself because such an unlucky kind of motherhood to have. And I wanted then to play in also the sexy looks of the three sisters in the book. That sex itself is the form of tool for revolution that enables these three sisters in the novel to break out and make their own lives, some of them decide finally not to breakout, and they come back to the fold. But my protagonists, who I am very fond of you, know?"

The novel begins with the most American of all searches the desire to trace one's ancestry. Tara Chatterjee, the narrator of the story, had always treated this family story with a distant dread. Only after her divorce from her Indian husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee,she becomes curious to know about the trauma of the Tree bride. She comments in the begining of the novel, "Until last year when I finally yielded to that most American of impulses, or compulsions, a 'roots search', I had never seen Tara Lata's house in Mishtigunj." The three sisters - Padma, Parvati and Tara are born exactly three years apart from each other and shares the same birthday. Their mother names them after goddess hoping they will survive and prosper which they all do. They have been described as being incredibly beautiful. They were featured on the annual "Miss Brains and Beauty" cover of Eve's Weekly.

The sisters further follow divergent paths when they grow up. Parvati lives in Bombay after her love marriage. She is totally Indian to the point of following her husband's relatives to be houseguests for weeks at their luxurious apartment. The other two move to the modernist society of the West. Padma lives in New Jersey but is completely Indian in her attire. Tara is nineteen years old, holder of a B.A. Honours and M.A. first class from the University of Calcutta. She is married to a software genius, Bishwapriya Chatterjee, an outstanding Bengali family of the same caste. After her arranged marriage Tara is shifted to a segment of American society. As Tara continues to assimilate to American culture, her perceptions of her race and ethnicity begin to change as well. Tara's conception of race was limited to the hierarchical class system of Indian familial lineage, in which she was at the top. Tara perceives race as she was brought up to see it in a manner that makes racial distinctions based on a cultural class system. In discussing the impact of the Indian caste system upon the racial consciousness of diasporic South Asians, Nazli Kibria writes, "Like other minority groups in the United States, South Asian Americans view issues of racial identity in ways that are influenced by conceptions of race that originated in their home countries. Because South Asian American communities are transnational in character-maintaining active relations among multiple countries of origin and settlement, the influence of these 'native' conceptions of race may be particularly sharp for them. For South Asian Americans, these 'native' conceptions of race may provide a frame of reference by which to resist the dominant society's racial thinking. At the same time, these concepts contribute to the group's racial ambiguity."

Tara comes to understand that the distinctions between Indians she was raised with do not hold the same significance in America as they did in India, and she begins to reject the hierarchical scheme through which she once perceived race. Critics of Mukherjee's writing often assert that her characters are simply too Americanized that they choose one identity over another as the only solution to the battle of living in between cultures. Tara possesses many identities at one time. Tara's uncovering of her memories and familial history parallels the revelation of her own identity; as she chronicles the story of her family from Ballygunge Road to the streets of Upper Haight, she also records the development of her very self from Indian immigrant to assimilated American. At the end of the novel, Tara finds that the past that she has uncovered is very much a part of her present, a situation that she has always feared. Tara finds that through her story and her consciousnesses, she has created an inversion of history, for she is living her present life through the structure of an older story from the past.

Conclusion

Desirable Daughters presents the adventures of Tara Chatterjee, the protagonist and her immigrant experiences. 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. Tara is all the time conscious for the parameters of behavior and morality meant for women in the respectable society of Calcutta. In the hostile conditions, she feels that the separation from her native cultural roots only brings loss and nothingness. The novel begins with the most American of all searches the desire to trace one's ancestry. Tara is fascinated by an ancestor, her almost namesake, Tara Lata, a five-year-old girl who was a victim of the custom of child marriage, a tradition ever her father a University graduate and lawyer, willingly follows. A five year old Tara Lata, in her bridal sari, her arms heavy with dowry gold, is being carried in a palanquin borne by four servants to marry a tree. On her wedding day the groom had died from Snakebite. Perhaps Jaikrishna Gangooly, Tara Lata's father, had not sufficiently appeased the goddess Manasa. Therefore Jaikrishna Gangooly decides to marry his daughter to a tree; otherwise she will be a person to be avoided and bring misfortune and death to her family. Married to a tree she will at least; remain a wife, a wearer of vermilion powder in her hair part, and not a widow, well into the age of white hair. They rebel against this socio-cultural setup and chart out their own

cause of action. Moving in different directions and different straining circumstances, each of them tries to carve out a unique identity of their own. Each of them tries to connect her past with the present, memory with desire. Each of them is on the move. Tara belongs to both tradition and modernity. She exemplifies the "existential dilemma" of diaspora and the problems of an immigrant who has a fluid identity. Tara wants to redefine herself, to reconstruct her feminine self with her novel experiences in an alien soil. In spite of her liberated and emergent attitude she fails to transcend the tradition-bound life of an Indian woman. The Indian traditions do not support her at all during her struggle to redefine herself. Tara possesses many identities at one time.

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Conflicts of interest
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