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QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS AND LEAVE IT TO ME*

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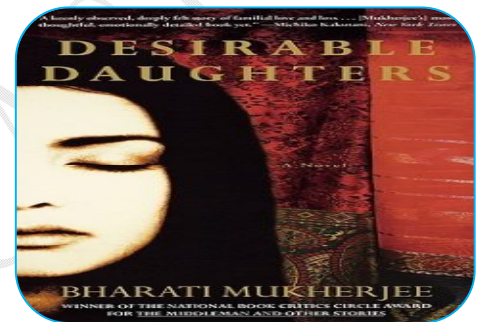
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ABSTRACT:

Among the diasporic writers, Bharati Mukherjee occupies a very important place. The circumstances of her birth, education, education in India, marriage to a North American and her education and career on the American continent are the indispensable contexts for her fiction to be understood. She is a prominent immigrant novelist from India.

KEYWORDS: diasporic writers, education in India, marriage, novelist.



INTRODUCTION

This research article seeks to study how Bharati Mukherjee novels *Desirable Daughters* and *Leaves It to Me* deals with woman's quest for identity. She presents the different situation in which an Indian woman faces individuality crisis as a daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, and as a mother in India and in America after immigration and how she deals with it.

The Desirable Daughters novel by Mukherjee is a story of Tara's search for her identity. Tara is worried about her "wife-of-Bish-Chatterjee" identity's fetters in this novel. She focuses on pursuing individual happiness in the very American

way. As you go through this novel to see an emerging transition in the process of assimilation, simultaneous reactive patterns can be observed manifesting in a parallel transformation of gender. Aware of the modern female immigrant, awakened to ideal notions and rights of gender. So Tara adapts rapidly yet is intensely sensitive to her gender's plight back home.

For a traditional Indian woman, permission from her parents is compulsory in all matters concerning her life. Even without her consent, she cannot choose a career of her own choice:

"She (Tara's eldest sister Padma) confided a career ambition to be, somehow, a performer, to act or

to dance. She was beautiful enough, and perhaps even talented enough, although of course our father would never have permitted any form of exhibitionism (*The Desirable Daughters*, p. 29)."

Even the husband of Tara, Bish, chose his job and wedded according to the decision of his father. In India, children are not free to practice their individual will. They must respect and fulfill the wishes of their parents:

"Bish became an electrical engineering student in India because his father told him he would be an engineer, and he excelled at it because that is what Chatterjees did..... When he expressed a desire to get married, his father and mine

(Tara's) cut the deal. Bestboy, best girl. Why waste money or time and energy on dating or getting to know each other (DD, p. 224)?"

The fate of the Indian woman is determined by the decision of her father that she is expected to obey and abide by:

"I was nineteen years old, when my father said the magic words : "There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks (DD, p. 23)."

The eldest sister of Tara, Padma, couldn't even think of going against the decision of her father to marry a Christian, not a Hindu-Brahmin:

"But Ronald Dey was not possible. Daddy had not yet sanctioned someone for Didi to marry. And whenever that time did come, it would not be with a Christian, no matter what his social status and brilliant prospects (DD, p. 32)."

Tara's middle sister Parvati's love-marriage is considered awful and not allowed by Tara's father:

"Aurobindo Banerji had not been selected by my father. He could have embodied every strain of Bengali beauty, wit, culture, athleticism and intelligence, but if my father had not selected him, he would forever be seen as wanting and pathetic (DD, p. 51)."

A wife must worship her husband after marriage. As per Indian custom, she is not supposed to call him by his name:

"I, of course, as a good Hindu wife-to-be, could not utter any of his (Tara's husband's) names to his face (DD, p. 23)."

But as Tara moved to America, she tried to progress and loosen her traditional hold.

"But we're progressive people; after crossing the dark waters to California I called him (her husband Bishwapriya) Bishu, then Bish, and he didn't flinch (DD, p. 23)."

Tara was taken to meet an aunt who was an example of an ideal Indian wife soon after her marriage to Bish:

"My mother-in-law said, "..... she holds the bedpan under him. She cleans him with her own hands. And she has a master's degree from the Delhi School of Economics. How many modern girls are prepared to do that (DD, p. 83)?"

Even though an Indian girl may be educated, she is considered an ideal wife only when she selflessly and unconditionally serves her husband. She must dedicate herself to her husband after marriage and lead a life of stamina, loyalty and self-sacrifice.

Husband is the decision-maker and super-authority:

".....Auro (Parviti's husband) had been furious. How dare she not have checked with him first and ask his permission (DD, p. 66)."

Husband is like a lord—everything needs his informal approval and his know-how. Indian husbands still believe in male domination, however modern they may become superficially.

Tara's unfulfilled American dreams were the reason for Tara's separation from her husband and their divorce. Bish was unable to fulfill her expectations:

"When I left Bish 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? I wanted to take courses in the local community college, but we had a child at home (DD, p. 82)."

Tara has neither a fully Indian nor a fully American identity to struggle with her. She is well aware that there is no smooth mixing between her caste-conscious childhood and modern-day America values. Everybody in India felt that her life in America was over after Tara's separation with Bish, and there was nothing else she could do there.

But she wanted a new life to begin:

"Come back to India, your child isn't American or Indian and if you stay there any longer, you won't be either. They thought my "American adventure" was over. I wondered if it was just beginning (DD, p. 66)."

The sister of Tara (Padma) condemned her for her divorce:

"According to her, I had become "American", meaning self-engrossed (DD, p. 134)."

Although divorce in America is a very common thing, it was still something shocking and hard to digest for an Indian woman. Both American and Indian societies are acknowledged in Tara's life in various ways, yet by and by every hold equivalent significance for her, as prove by her regular idea, "May I really[am] between two lives.... (DD, p. 150).

Mukherjee has created a multifaceted story of identity, values and family in *Desirable Daughters*. It is an examination of one's identity, relationships and values ' search for meaning. Tara has numerous characters at one time, yet with her variety she appears to be open to, enabling her opportunity to absorb while protecting the parts of Indian culture she needs to safeguard. For this generation of South Asian diasporic immigrants, this multiplicity is the new form of assimilation. Instead of transplanting or disposing entirely of Indian culture, the current pattern seems to reinvent the awfully idea of one's society as it bears on one's identity.

One realizes that identity is not so much the act of choosing between cultures, but has the power to redefine the terms of cultural practices and customs in order to fit one's own experience. The diasporic Indian identity thus becomes ambiguous, with self-perception changing as one's outlook on the environment and culture evolves. The conception of individuality appears as a continuous method in *Desirable Daughters*, transforming forever and never really completing. Identity is fluid and constantly changing, subject to experiences that will shape it into something new forever.

Leave it to Me displays the female protagonist's cross cultural transmutation, Devi. She is the adopted daughter of Italian-Americans, but as she grows up, it appears that the distinctive features of her physical character develop suspicions about her birth origins in her mind. The quest is to find her lost identity, understand her psyche, and find her bio-parents. Her expedition is an American for her Asian roots to investigate. Devi isn't infiltrating for another personality, yet her adventure by one way or another focuses to the voyage inside this universe to locate one's own character. Debbie resurrects as Devi, having the profound tinge to her journey. Devi butches the monsters in her universe like the Hindu Goddess and overlays a ridiculous way to accomplish her objective.

According to developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, those who encounter an identity crisis are often seen as having no idea who they are or what they are, where they belong or where they want to go. They may leave normal life, not act or act bizarrely. They can still twist to unenthusiastic actions as a technique to deal with identity crisis, such as crime or drugs. Those who experience this issue will exhibit a confusion of roles in their lives, encountering rootlessness, unbelonging and ambiguity.

Like Devi, when a person is unable to achieve the shared community's preferred individuality, place or sameness, he faces identity crisis resultant in a fractured identity and depression. The split-self of Devi Dee comes to light when she realizes that her sister Angela has different characteristics. Her junior-year spurt of growth ends up leaving her almost confused.

I was a tall girl in a small school, a beautiful girl in a plain family, an exotic girl in a very American town. I'd always had this throaty whisper of a voice, couldn't raise it above a satiny purr, in a family of choir singers and a town of chirpy sopranos. But I wasn't tall beautiful or exotic enough to trust any of it, and so I made up my mind to find out if I was someone special or just another misfit. (*Leave it to Me*, p.16)

In fact, her inquisitiveness about "mugged identities" (Mukherjee, *Leave* 16) activates Devi Dee's hunt for her bio-parents. Her companions like Wyatt Frankie, Ham Cohan and Fred Pointer continually foster such inquisitiveness. Devi Dee ends all her ties to the host culture because of this curiosity and embarks on a search for her bio-parents. She navigates to the host culture under the ploy of revenge on her bio-parents. She eventually discovers her land of adoption. She casts off her foster parents and disregards her involvement in a big U.S. life. She's romanticizing her past. In her contact with people who have been allied with Asia, she gets excessive delight.

The chief instigator behind her search for roots is Francis A. Fong, Debby's first Asian lover. She loves the fictitious narratives of Frankie's childhood in Asia. It is evident that in Debby's mind, Frankie stimulates and nurtures a strong allure to Asia. Frankie is her initial counselor in her quest for identity, ' a salad of Asian genes. ' For Debby, he unbolts a whole continent. Convinced about Asia by Frankie's tales, Debby feels ' connected. 'She wants to emulate an ' immigrant ' sculpt by Frankie. In his case, the host culture does not have ' crippling gratitude ' and ' steering. ' Despite being deceived later by Frankie, Debby burns down the house Frankie had given her and leaves Saratoga Springs.

In her attempt to get "connected" despite this regression, Debby extends her search for her bio-parents. She does not pay attention to the appeals of her foster mother not to leave her and goes to San Francisco. Although she has several roads open to her, she chooses to confront her ' deadbeat mother. ' Debby takes the name Devi from a vanity car plate on the Donner Pass and baptizes Devi Dee herself.

Devi Dee realizes her broken identity when she is claimed by strangers as a lost fellow in China city. Devi Dee even envies both the waiter from China and the student from India as they know who they are and what they have inherited. They cannot pass away like anyone else, while the identity of Debby is ambiguous. She thinks her transformation has made her stronger, faster, sharper, and more rowdier than Devi Dee. She believes that she has acquired her ' real ' heritage.

Ham the filmmaker and her future lover is the next person that is crucial in Devi Dee's quest. She realizes she's dependent on Ham emotionally. Ham introduces Devi Dee to Jess Dee Pree, the hottest media escorting agency, her bio-mom and owner of ' Leave It to Me. 'Her job is to accompany authors on their books ' promotional tours. Ham also arranges a Fred Pointer detective to get more details about the bio-parents of Devi Dee. Rajeev Roy, Fred's Indian contact gives vital clues about Romeo Hawk, a sex guru, a serial killer and his white hippie harem in the 1970s. Under mysterious circumstances, Fred Pointer dies. Romeo Hawk comes in Mr. Varama's guise, an author accompanied by Leave It to Me. He kills Jess Du Pree as well as Ham. Devi, who has so far been a silent spectator, transfigures herself as Devi, the avenging deity, kills her bio-father and merges with Nature's elements.

The novel *Leave it to Me* by Bharati Mukherjee shows the cultural plurality of the adopted land. Through her protagonist Mukherjee tries to break up the complex stratum of cross-cultural reality through a sequence of adventures she undertakes on her adventurous journey. Her struggle indicates a rootless person's impatient quest that suffers from a depressing sense of isolation. She revolts against her destiny and the path drawn for her at every step. Debby in *Leave It to Me*, in the society they live in, persistently flout estrangement and get the answer by rejecting cultural stereotypes. In crossing and re-crossing multiple borders of language, history, race, time and culture, Mukherjee sets the path of the identity of her immigrants. She claims, "The biological identity of one may not be one's only identity in this age of Diasporas. The act of emigration leads to erosions and accretions "(Mukherjee, American 7). Setting the limitations and despotism of nationalist boundaries, her works embody her sense of what, as in her case, it means being a writer born and raised in India, a citizen of Canada and the United States, shaped and transformed by Indian and North American cultures.

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