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THE PORTRAYAL OF INDIAN AND AMERICAN CULTURE THROUGH THE EYES OF
BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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ABSTRACT

Different authors have different style of writing defined by the genre of work in which they are specialised. Writers of business editorials / technical writers, poets and marketing content writers follow Expository, Descriptive and Persuasive writing styles respectively. But the most appealing ones are those with Narrative writing styles are often the authors of best sellers in the bookstands. Bharati Mukherjee (1940-2017) is one such novelist who gives a flawless portrayal of a society. Mukherjee derived her exemplarity writing skills from her experience from higher education and her long teaching stint in India, Canada and the United States. Mukherjee's view about Indian and American cultures have been analysed in this paper through her prominent novels - *Desirable Daughters* and *Wife*. Bharathi presents her viewpoint on how different people face and handle cross culture experience differently and establishes that positive approach to cultural change can only lead to peace and prosperity.

Key Words: Cross-culture, Handling issues in cross-cultural understanding, Early marriage in Indian culture, Individual liberty and comforts in American culture.

Science and History are the two eyes of a civilization. While History keeps a period wise account of where a society has evolved from, Science gives a guideline to the society as to where it should be heading towards. Literature can be seen as the third eye that bridges both History and Science in an artistic and engaging manner. Literature on the one hand keeps track of social evolution and achievements of the past. While on the other hand, it guides Science with the present-day necessity and the progressing travel that is left ahead for a society.

Bharati Mukherjee (1940-2017) - an Indian-born American writer is one such novelist who gives a flawless portrayal of a society that is pegged into a definite timeframe and landscape on earth. She achieves to tuck a society's viewpoint in a reader's mind through her elegant narrating style. The nuances of her chronicle are fortified with easy to understand situations, incidents, direct and indirect hints, dialogues and first-person observations. Bharati Mukherjee's acclaimed novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) deals with both American and

Indian cultures with defined lines of demarcation and distinction between them. The novel opens with the depiction of Indian culture. The author takes the reader through a journey to the cultural heartland of undivided India's Bengal. In line with her writing flair, the novel hosts an array of narratives of the customary practises and beliefs of Indian Bengali rural society of that time. According to the narration in the novel, a Hindu woman can attain salvation only through selfless devotion to her husband. Thus, a woman who remains unwed beyond a certain age earns the wrath of the society. She is looked upon as an outcast and is deemed to have lost the noble rights to earn eternal salvation or reincarnation. This social pressure should have put a sense of urgency for the parents of those times. This would have eventually urged them to marry off their daughters much before talks of these natures fill the air of their social circle. Thus born is the practice of child marriage, where girls are hurriedly wedded off to teen-aged boys as early as their post toddler age. As a no surprise, the protagonist of the novel *Desirable Daughters* – Tara Lata, is prepared to get married at the age of five. Though not as early, her elder sisters Padma and Parvati too were wedded at a very young age of nine and seven respectively. Tara was all set to tie the knots with Satindranath Lahiri. The groom's astrology and star signified good health and dynasty, by the virtue of which he was qualified as the right groom for Tara. Tara's father Jai Krishna Gangooly was a well-balanced person. Though graduated from India's first law school and a successful barrister of his times, he held on to the traditions, beliefs and customs of his society. Much ahead of the wedding ceremony he predicted through astrology the danger of snake bite for the groom. Both the bride and groom's families performed rituals and offerings to Goddess Manasha to gain her blessings and protection. But to the dismay of everyone, both coincidentally and unfortunately the groom was bitten to death by a snake before the wedding. The acclaimed novelist Bharati cleverly gives a hint to the readers, the timing of the snakebite which picks relevance in the very next chapter, i.e the groom had died before the wedding – "when we were transferring from carriage to bajra." (*Desirable Daughters* 12) When the news of the snakebite was gradually spreading out, someone from the crowd was heard of accusing the parents – "Manasha, the Goddess who causes or prevents snakebites must not have sufficiently appeased." (*Desirable Daughters* 13)

Bharati Mukherjee as a novelist locates and brings to life such common scenes seen in a social environment, which at the first glance may seem trivial. But this happens to be her unique style of detailing the mind-set, tradition and practice of a society predefined by its geography and era. The child-bride had by then transformed to the utmost derogatory stature a girl can attain – widowhood. A widow of that time in the novel's viewpoint is not at all a pleasing title.

which for a Bengali Hindu woman, would be the most cursed state, but a woman 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. (*Desirable Daughters* 12)

The groom's father Surendranath demanded dowry from Jaikrishna though the wedding didn't take place. This showed his naked greediness, which enraged and awakened the lawyer inside Jaikrishna.

The marriage did not take place, he said his voice lawyerly, loud, authoritative. Therefore, there is no question of dowry giving. (*Desirable Daughters* 14)

Tara Lata was susceptible for the rest of her life of being seen by the society as an unlucky kid for remaining unwed even after getting to the wedding dais. To protect her from the disgustful view her father decided to get her married to a tree. This was a belief prevailing and acceptable in those times where marrying a tree is seen as a remedy for the mishappenings in a girl's marriage. The innocence of that five-year old girl is beautifully depicted by Bharati Mukherjee here:

Why must be ceremony be held in this dark, dangerous jungle, and not in the lamplit, torch-brightened wedding pavilion in the big house in Mishtigunj village? (*Desirable Daughters* 15)

The reply from the elders represents their staunch beliefs in their culture. "Older aunts hush her. She is paying for the sins of a past life, they explain." (Mukherjee 15) Though she is called "the cursed girl, the unlucky

child" (Mukherjee 15), she is unable to accept them. The wedding of the young girl, Tara Lata, happened with a tree. From then, she has been called a Tree-bride. When her veil lifted,

...she recognises her bridegroom. He is the god of Shoondar Ban, the Beautiful Forest, came down to earth as a tree to save her from a lifetime of disgrace and misery. (*Desirable Daughters* 16)

The story gradually moves on to American culture. Tara Lata completed her B.A. and M.A with Honours and First class, respectively. Bishwapriya Chatterjee was chosen to be married to Tara Lata. They both travelled to California to earn a living. Back home in Tara Lata's village, a wife was not supposed to utter the name of her husband as it is considered an ill-respect. But when Tara moved to California, she called her husband by his first name or house-name, Bishu and Bish, as his friends used to address him. Her husband who held a modern outlook did not object to this. When the days were rolling smoothly, "the unthinkable occurred, Bish kept the large house behind the gates in Atherton." (*Desirable Daughters* 23). Tara divorced Bish, taking her son Rabi @ Rabindranath with her. Here too, one can visualise the different perspectives the author presents on divorce in Indian culture and American culture. Tara had never heard of divorce in Indian culture, whereas in the other it is not very uncommon. Tara gets accustomed to Western culture and she started her life with her only son, Rabi in a new house with her boy-friend, Andy. Andy was a carpenter and yoga instructor by occupation. Tara Lata was happy with Andy. The protagonist distinguishes the word and meaning of 'Love' as seen from Indian and American society perspectives, which were fairly in contrast with each other. Bharati used the characters Bish and Andy to present this very aspect. She shows the Indian outlook held by Bish through his approach towards love while Andy represented the American way of life. For Bish: "Love is the residue of providing for parents and family...love is indistinguishable from status and honours." (*Desirable Daughters* 27). But, according to Andy, Love is to have fun. "He has refined the art of keeping things simple. It's a Buddhist thing, he says." (*Desirable Daughters* 27) Later, she introduces her elder sisters Padma and Parvati, both of them who had got married before her. The former settled in New York and the latter was waiting for Green card.

Parvati loved Aurobindo Banerji, a bank teller and declared her decision through a letter to her father: "Daddy, I have found a boy and we have fallen in love." (*Desirable Daughters* 50) Aurobindo had a typical Bengali outfit and knowledge, but he was considered to be pathetic as he was not selected by Tara's father. In Indian culture, the daughters are expected abide but their parent's choices and they ought to strictly adhere to the wishes laid by them, particularly in decisions related to marriage. They are not allowed to choose their grooms by themselves, whereas in America, the girls have the freedom to choose their boyfriends and groom. Often for a girl in the Western society, the decision making comes as an obligation rather than a right to exercise choice. Tara, to her shock came to know of a piece of news concerning Padma, her elder sister. Padma had allegedly given birth to an illegitimate son by the name Christopher Dey through her teen-aged lover Ronald Dey, a Christian. In India, a girl getting pregnant in her teenage, having a child from father of a different caste or religion and giving birth to a child before marriage are all considered taboo. When Tara came to know that each of these sins was committed by her own sister Padma, she was dazed. Tara recollected her past in which she and her sisters were raised by her parents strictly by the social codes that ought to be followed before marriage. The codes for parents included protecting their daughter's virginities and grooming them to make a good wife. Here, the author clearly indicates the culture and beliefs of Indian parents and how they strive to mould their children to a moral path of life. On the other hand, there in America prevails no restriction in loving, carrying a baby in womb or giving birth before marriage, as long the boy and girl are of legal age. The American society prefers individual liberty and comforts over strict parenting. Between two cultures, one can find over indulgence vis-a-vis a lack of bond among family members. At the end of the novel, Andy gets separated from Tara and she decides to move back to India with her son, Rabi. She realized that she felt very much home only after returning to her country. In the novel *Desirable Daughters*, the protagonist reminiscences her past culture and faces the strict rituals of Indian culture and she gradually gets accustomed to American culture. On the other hand, in the novel *Wife* (1975), the protagonist, Dimple is in stark contrast. She is portrayed as one who wants to violate Indian culture and taboos. She was a young Bengali girl with full

of dreams and illusions about her marriage. According to her, after marriage life will be filled with parties, love and luxury.

Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love. (*Wife 3*)

In her fantasy, there was no place for day to day hurdles like power shutdown or water scarcity. She even missed to anticipate the presence of in-laws and sharing love and life with them. She aspired to marry a neurosurgeon but ended up marrying an engineer, Amit Basu. He was also a man of liberty akin Dimple who also wished to go to America. In India, Dimple faced all the difficulties that a woman or a wife meets out normally. She was self-sympathetic of herself to have been destined to put up with the customs and restrictions of Indian culture. She waited for her wedding for long and she saw it as her only saviour from the clutches of the restrictive society she belonged. She had a dark complexion much against her desires and she laid much efforts to make her look lighter and more beautiful. When Amit Basu's family went to see Dimple, Amit's mother objected her citing that Dimple's name sounded quite unbengali. To add to Dimple's wound, Mrs. Ghose, Amit's sister sarcastically commented that she looks darker than in the photograph. Anyhow, she got married to Amit.

This explains in detail the customary Indian way of arranged marriage, where a girl needs to wait for long years until a groom's family gives a nod to the marriage proposal. The decision making of the groom's family involves everything under the roof, namely the bride's name, caste, colour, education, income, property owned by her parents, background of the family and horoscope match. According to Dimple, American culture was easy and she wished to be in America to live her much fancied life happily. She felt that she will be happy with the comforts offered by machines, money and physical amenities there. On the contrary, Dimple faced unanticipated troubles in the U.S. Amit was hunting job as the sole breadwinner of his family. Though he tried to keep Dimple happy by every means at his disposal, Dimple felt left alone at home most of the day as Amit went out in search of a job. She never felt satisfied in her life. She often felt herself to be ignored and picked fight with Amit over petty issues. She accused him, "I feel sort of dead inside you never listen, you've never listened to me. You hate me. Don't deny it." (*Wife 110*)

When she stayed in Amit's friend, Jyoti Sen's house, Dimple was shocked to see the violence prevailing there. Dimple passed her time by watching TV serials and movies crammed with gore scenes like murder. Muggings, rape, murder: they were remote and exotic, even a little exciting on TV, but when Jyoti described them they became ugly and accessible. (*Wife 75*) As she was recurrently watching violence and murder, her mind was fully obsessed with ferocity. Much was she influenced by it, to the extent that she even got ready to kill her own child in her womb. She had acquired a dislike towards motherhood as she hated to carry a baby of the Basu's family in her womb. So, she decided to abort it and slipped herself to pave the way for miscarriage. Here, the author imparts knowledge on American law concerning abortion and child birth. Abortion is illegal in the United States and they pursue to make counselling for the future parents to let the baby take birth. After killing her baby in womb she had become worse and started becoming unstable in her thoughts and actions. Though Amit insisted her to socialize with people around, she was unable to mingle with anyone because of her inferiority complex. She locked herself in her house and gradually developed insomnia and restlessness. She saw an enormous gap between the reality and her fantasy of a happy married life, that she always longed for. She tried to escape from her social and domestic responsibilities and was unable to accept the reality life was slapping her with, hard on her face. At last, she was mentally upset and stabbed Amit with the kitchen knife to free her from her intrinsic conflicts and committed suicide. Totally violating the culture and custom of India costed Dimple with great tragedy. She was unable to accustom with American culture too which eventually put her in fatal crisis.

Everyone faces cultural shock in his/her own way. Bharati Mukherjee depicted Indian and American cultural values through her characters and dialogues. Tara of *Desirable Daughters* took life as it comes. She was able to cherish her past Indian culture and fathom American culture. Expectation is the root cause to distress, as well as a measure and metric for the mind to see even a positive event in life as failure. While

expectation can call an uninvited guest – failure, over-expectation can invite a much-dreaded one, disaster. For this illustration, Dimple from the novel *Wife* is shown as a bad example by Mukherjee. Dimple was unable to cope up with either of the two diverse cultures as she was living in her own fantasy world throughout her existence. In the journey of life, the protagonists in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee struggled to face the changes and to adapt to the cultures of which they were a part and parcel. The optimistic view on life would make a person's living an admirable and adorable one, regardless of which culture and circumstances they might belong.

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