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FISSURES AND FAULTLINES IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S THE TIGER'S
DAUGHTER AND DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS

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ABSTRACT

The far-reaching changes in the traditional patterns of life require a better understanding of other people and the world at large. The protagonists of Bharathi Mukherjee are living in a world where the hopes and the inbuilt confidence harnessed in them are unleashed after moments of crisis and cultural shocks they face in life. The ambivalent choices which are polarized by the mess in the minds of the victims leads them to combat the existing structure and revolt against all odds. The lack of harmony and peace existing in the community stems out of the fault lines and fissures that have been stereotypically created in the society. The degradation of values and social norms, rootlessness and loss of identity are just man-made calamities of the society. The normal response of sympathy and empathy are replaced by selfishness and materialism in this era. The select novels exhibit the counter actions and energy that radiates as a response to such crises.

Keywords: victimization, lack of harmony, rootlessness, loss of identity, degradation of values, identity crisis

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Discussion

We live in a society of victimization, where people are much more comfortable being victimized than actually standing up for themselves-Marilyn Manson

Modern man confronts the problem of alienation of himself from the people around him and Indo-
Anglian writers have shown a strong leaning towards projecting this alienation from nature and society in their works. The purpose of life, or the relevance of existence for the human race, has lost its basic value due to the overwhelming stress and strain humankind is forced to live with. Scientific and technological developments have not only complemented humans with pleasures and comforts, but have also led them into the tragic mess of alienation. Having abdicated the right to choose a life for one's own and with no will to identify oneself with society, one feels estranged from oneself and from one's fellow men. Subsequently the irremediable exile deprives one of an identity in society. Bharathi Mukerjee's protagonists live in a society which polarizes their ambivalent choices and their 'will' becomes the focus of her novels.

In the twenty first century, woman/man, threatened by the fact that they are no longer the master of their own life, find themselves victimized by the social norms and values. Mithilesh Pandey's observation on Atwood holds good for Mukherjee as well:

Atwood's conflict in her fiction, however, is not only to expose woman's complicity in the processes that lead to her victimization. She wants, rather to explore the possible ties of combating patriarchal structures of power and domination that refuses female's equal claims as an individual in society. (78)

Contemporary man is doomed to a tragic mess due to the fast changing value system and the rapid modernization of life that engenders a vast change in the existing ethos of the society. What is significantly lacking in the world today is harmony, for which mutual understanding and peaceful interchange among people is necessary. It is therefore imperative that one strives to live without compromising on one's identity, values and heritage. Insensitive handling of cultural identities creates an atmosphere of mistrust that disturbs the psyche and effects self-alienation and loss of identity. The degradation of values, altered often by the ever-changing social norms induces a sense of rootlessness in the human mind. Dr. M.Rajeshwar in his article, "Fictional Treatment of the Neurotic Phenomenon" observes that "the women novelists bring home this point by subtly indicating that the society is often indifferent and vindictive towards sensitive and suffering people while actually it should be rushing to their help" (107). The three main factors in society which inhibits an individual from enhancing his/her personality are:

- loss of cultural identity ignited by the dislocation of an individual either due to marriage or otherwise
- loss of individual identity due to culture shock and non-acceptance of his/her own culture resulting in alienation
- rootlessness because of the loss of sense of belonging which instigates a desire to trace their roots

When an individual is incompatible with any or all of these sociological factors in his/her new life, he/she becomes a victim of society, since all these factors are repercussions of social norms and values. Even Mukherjee had faced a similar experience when she relocated to Canada for higher studies. But she could identify the problem at the right time, which forced her to shift. Mukherjee's struggle with identity first as an exile from India, then as an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as an immigrant in the United States led to the contentment of being an immigrant in a country of immigrants.

In Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara Cartwright, the protagonist, belongs to an educated family, which no longer believes in the tradition that women should keep themselves to the kitchen. She is sent to America at the age of fifteen, for higher studies. Tara, the daughter of the renowned Bengal Tiger of Calcutta marries David Cartwright, whom she almost knocked down in her anxiety to find a cab in the Grey Hound bus station before she came to know that she would be marrying him. Having spent seven years in another country with a 'mleccha' (Barbarian in the vedic language) as her husband and holding a foreign passport, she returns to an indifferent social world of India. The immediate reactions to her of Mr. Tuntunwalla the Marwari, and Mr. Ratan the Nepali during the train journey are awkward to say the least, and she feels "desecrated of her shrine of nostalgia" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 26). She is a case of divided self, who "suffered fainting spells, headaches and nightmares" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 13). The Calcutta that she remembers and cherishes stands demolished in her sight, and she finds it difficult to relate herself meaningfully to her surroundings.

She had believed that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could just return home to Calcutta. But so far the return had brought only wounds.... She was an embittered woman, she now thought, old and cynical at twenty-two and quick to take offense. (*The Tiger's Daughter*, 25)

Tara, in search of identity and belonging, represents the predicament of one in the modern day society. She feels uprooted and suffers from a continued crisis of culture and "she was frightened by the capacity for

anger over trivial encounters”(The Tiger's Daughter, 21). Her aunt, Jharna dismisses her sympathy towards her ailing cousin as one of contempt:

“You think you are too educated for this, don't you?” Aunt Jharna laughed with a quiet violence. “You have come back to make fun of us, haven't you? What gives you the right? Your American money? Your mlecccha husband?” Tara heard the embarrassed jingle of her mother's gold bracelets. (*The Tiger's Daughter*, 36)

When Tara is misunderstood and her relatives attribute her impulsiveness to the arrogance of American society, she is tossed between the two cultures, of her past and present. The conflict between the requirements of the self and the demands of the society becomes the central issue in Tara's life. Her chance meeting with Joyonto Roy Chowdhury on the roof of Catelli Continental, “the navel of the universe” (The Tiger's Daughter, 3), who “knew Calcutta would not be as kind to them as it had been to him”(The Tiger's Daughter, 41) adds to her apprehensions of the everchanging culture and the resultant identity crisis in her native place, “Calcutta has changed, my girl; it's not safe to talk to any strangers not even at a place as decent as the Continental”(The Tiger's Daughter, 110). Mukherjee has emphatically exposed “the horrors of the city's changes” (The Tiger's Daughter 67) through Sanjay, an assistant in a newspaper who,

...begged everyone to remember their traditions, their conscience, their English if they wished to save themselves from lawless ruin. With passion and intensity he urged them to hold on to a Calcutta that was disappearing like mist. (*The Tiger's Daughter*, 67)

It becomes true when she takes a chance walk with Roy Chowdhury after a long drive through the Kali temples and finally the quiet hour walk in the funerary banks with only a faint chanting from the burning pyre. A wild man, a tantric begins to read Joyonto Roy Chowdhury's palm and her faith in Joyonto slowly starts breaking because “she had hoped he could guide her through the new Calcutta, but his face seemed sinister”(The Tiger's Daughter,82) and he is given to spells as well. Her trip to the funeral ghats creates a terrible depression and her friends call her “a bloody bore” and “a silly billy”. According to Bengalis, sanity is “being light-hearted and casual in difficult situations”(The Tiger's Daughter, 84) and Tara's depression is akin to boredom, the affliction of her class and society. Tara loses her faith in her culture and feels alienated in her own society. Tara, who is seen oscillating between detachment and involvement is disillusioned with the social and cultural values of her own native land and ends in rejecting her nostalgia.

Mukherjee uses Tara to project the destabilizing and reversing hierarchy of cultural paradigms in Calcutta. A picnic organized to ease Tara's boredom fails miserably and she undertakes another trip to a ‘bustee’, a slum area accompanied by Reena, led by Joyonto again. Perhaps it is this adventure which jeopardizes her ultimate hope in the society and makes her accept the harsh reality of the degrading society of which she is a disintegrating member,

Perhaps it (trip) confirmed to her that Joyonto was prodigal and a danger to her class. Perhaps she saw in that decaying machinery the end of her own dreams of technological progress. “It's criminal,” she said. “If we start giving in to these people once there'll be no way to stop them.”(*The Tiger's Daughter*, 121)

During Tara's visit to the ‘bustee’, a small girl suffering from leprosy, with sores on her legs and sores that oozed bloody pus blocked her way and screamed that she wanted her saree. Tara, who has been trained to discipline her mind and body by the nuns at St.Blaise's, loses her composure totally and like a maniac screams and claws at the spot the girl has soiled her saree with her bandages. Later she realizes, “It is harder to damage others than to damage oneself” (The Tiger's Daughter 122). Krishnan while foregrounding the experiences of Tara, opines that Mukherjee “engages in a revisionism that inverts the basic assumptions of cultural encounters” (251). It is a wonder that Tara, instead of feeling alienated in an adopted country with an American husband, feels alienated in her own country after witnessing the paradigmatic changes in her native place, Calcutta. This is the revision that Mukherjee attempts to highlight in the deteriorating value system and cultural norms in the present day Bengali society. Tara in the early days in America had been homesick and had a faint longing for her hometown. She felt that India was the only place where she could really belong. But the longing that nudged

her to return to India is not persistent anymore and ironically, she begins to long for the company of her husband David, both morally and spiritually. She discards the nostalgia, relegates the pleasant memories of her past about Calcutta to the recesses of her rejected memory, which is a clear image of the loss of sense of belonging, a subtle form of victimization by the society.

Tara mourns the decline of Calcutta in the face of communist-inspired populist uprising; there is no place in this world for the likes of her. The weariness of the world and her angst culminates in the violent metaphor of rape: Tara is raped by a brutal, unscrupulous and evil politician - who is also in the process of 'raping' the peasants and the land in the name of industrial progress. Needless to say, towards the end of the novel Tara's passionate statement of attachment to her American husband who had remained at home in the United States, and her desperate wish to 'get out of Calcutta' (The Tiger's Daughter, 210) and the riots in Catelli Continental, turns out to be a kind of epiphany for Tara. She then comes to terms with reality and seeks for a new identity in the wake of the cultural conflict in her. Tara tries to emerge out of this predicament by realizing her ardent love for her husband, David, in her journey towards victory.

In Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* the young protagonist is Tara Banerjee who belongs to a noble Bengali Brahmin family renowned for its wealth, and social status. After her marriage to Bishwapriya Chatterjee, the couple immigrated to the U.S. (Silicon Valley) where Bish graduated from Stanford and went on to develop a brilliant bandwidth concept which revolutionized the computer world. The story continues in modern day San Francisco where Tara, the namesake of the mythical Tree-bride, Tara Lata Gangooly, is divorced from her billionaire husband, Bish, and is raising her fifteen-year-old son, Rabi. Tara has an independent spirit and openly flouts the traditions and customs to break away from her custom oriented husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee and is secretive about it. Though Nagendra kumar observes that "Indian society is a patriarchal society and it hardly permits a woman to talk of liberation and equality. Her male members decide the fate of their female counterpart"(51), in this novel of Mukherjee's, men like Bishwapriya Chatterjee and Rabi have also been victimized by the norms of society. Under the pretext of liberation, Tara lives the life of an immigrant lavishly, much more than an American woman. Mukherjee reveals an undeniable projection of the love of her family and Bengal through the character of Tara. The experiences of Tara in a Bengali village of the past are juxtaposed with those of the modern-day Tara, a sophisticated Indian woman in a cosmopolitan America of the present. The contemporary Tara imagines the child bride:

A Bengali girl's happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrow of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her. (*Desirable Daughters* 4)

She has a white American lover, Andy, who is a typical former hippie-type who always spouts pseudo-enlightened Buddhist maxims. The divorce between Tara and Bish is amicable, but for the East Indian community, the divorce is kind of an open secret, understood but not really acknowledged.

Tara has two sisters. Parvati, the eldest in the family lives in India and although her marriage was a love-match, she seems to have stayed within her cultural norms. The other sister, Padma, lives in New Jersey and is well known in East Indian creative circles. She is a kind of Americanized Indian princess. It is Padma's past that fuels Tara's realization that she knows very little about life, its dangers and complications. When a young stranger appears claiming to be one Christopher Dey, Padma's long-lost son, questions arise about family secrets, the implication of community and being an Indian in a foreign country. The search for information about Christopher leads to themes like parental love, the love of siblings and family.

When the intrusion of the sinister bachelor boy, the dubious son of Padma, devastates Tara, she is drowned in a crisis of conscience and values. Social customs and her upbringing in a traditional Bengali family prevent her from voicing her suspicions about her sister. The comfortable feeling about her family and status is jolted ransacked and her faith in family collapses forever. Shubha Tiwari observes in *Critical Responses to Anita Desai*, "Crisis of conscience and values leads to a gradual decline in loss of faith which obviously means a total collapse of culture and civilization" (45). Tara faces a similar predicament after the revelation of Christopher Dey about her sister. Tara is thrown into turmoil. She must confront and get answers from her sisters about the family's shady past. The sisters, it turns out, are not as close as they think they are. They know their careers but

their love lives may have been thwarted by parental expectations. They know they hide secrets from each other and are also aware that family peace is preserved through silence, even to the point of emotional self-destruction. But, of course, when secrets tumble out, trouble follows, and in this case, a vast conspiracy! The exploration of mendacity, social shame and the confusion involved in acculturation are different forms of subtle victimization by society. Many an immigrant would probably identify with this but only some have the ability to overcome and live courageously in an alien culture. Along with Tara, Padma too faces an identity crisis. Though it is not as acute as Tara's, the sense of migration and the determination to make New York her home, restructures her identity.

Asha Susan Jacob in one of her articles asserts, "Contemporary literature dealing with the emotional problems of the modern man reflects the injuries, frustrations and the identity crisis that an uprooted individual undergoes"(168). Christopher Dey also befriends Tara's son Rabi to reinforce his bonding with the family. Tara feels injured by the attack of Christopher Dey and finds herself engulfed in mistrust. She loses her sense of security and seeks the help of a detective agency to investigate the authenticity of Dey's claim. It is discovered that Chris Dey is not who he says he is, and actually belongs to a large Indian organized crime ring that is after Tara's ex-husband's money. As Chris's involvement in her life becomes more sinister, Tara struggles to unravel the secrecy surrounding her past, to discover the truth behind her sisters' prevarications and fragmented stories.

To retrieve family and cultural roots is a very non-American impulse. In her moment of crisis, Tara who is an Indo-American, feels compelled to undertake a roots search. In trying to find herself, Tara discovers more and more secrets about her family and about her ancestral village's betrayal by administrators of the British Raj.

When Tara discusses the Bengali culture she is describing an essential dilemma of cultures. Her desh, her home, which is her father's birthplace, is a sight unseen, she envies the Americans and pronounces

When I tell them they should be thankful for their identity crises and feelings of alienation, I of course am right. When everyone knows your business and every name declares your identity, where no landscape fails to contain a plethora of human figures, even a damaged consciousness, even loneliness, become privileged commodities. (*Desirable Daughters* 33-34)

Through this novel that speaks volumes of the cultural differences between the Indian and American way of life, Mukherjee gives us a vivid picture of the India of her childhood - a world though, that no longer exists - and probes the effect of the upbringing on the three sisters. The structure on which the Indian social milieu is built appears hypocritical, which may tend to make the two older sisters seem superficial, although they are both fairly complex characters. What it reveals to Tara is the huge contradictions in her outlook and she agrees with her son that she should call her sisters to talk about Chris Dey. It is her Calcutta upbringing that makes the approach impossible at first. She is not a jolly character; she carries around a huge weight, being pulled in two different directions. It may be said though, that there is some self-knowledge gained at the end.

After numerous ramifications, the story ends with Tara finally yielding to the most American of impulses - a search for her roots back in India. As she ambles along with her son through the jungle pathway in rural Bengal where the Tree-Bride once walked, she has a vision of what lies ahead, "lighted by kerosene and naphtha lamps held by the children of fruit and vegetable vendors" (*Desirable Daughters*, 310). The experience promises the redemption of self-knowledge. Feeling suffocated and overwhelmed by her rootlessness and alienation, Tara is radically dispersed(?) and her decision to stay in India proves the statement of the author as observed by Zeenab Ali, 'While changing citizenship is easy, swapping cultures is not'(1)

Tara Cartwright of *The Tiger's Daughter* and Tara Chatterjee of *The Desirable Daughters* share a similar predicament, in the sense, they are expatriates geographically and spiritually. Both feel ill at ease in their native culture and in their respective places. There seems to be a deep sense of alienation in them, which is manifested, in different forms, the most likely being, and self-estrangement. Fissures in the social system and the fault lines in the familial system are much too strong for the victims to break or negotiate easily to bring about a change in the society. But the protagonists of these novels of Bharati Mukherjee challenge this stronghold of society to overcome and survive in this world. Tara Cartwright's struggle to accept the harsh reality of the degrading

modern day Bengali society in *The Tiger's Daughter*, and Tara Chatterjee life falling apart by the fault line in her family, of the secretive existence of a sinister boy in the *Desirable Daughters*, reveal the victimization by the society. The protagonists are caught in the matrix of fissures and fault lines that are universal. The socio-cultural milieu from which they come determines the difference.

In a pluralistic, multicultural society, the easing up of internal social and cultural conflicts has become mandatory. As Tiwari Shubha suggests, "it is a question of human survival, of noble existence and of dignified adjustment in the society, and in the married life"(45). Social acceptance develops a sense of identity and the consequent purpose in life while cultural uprooting, geographical dislocation and failure to communicate with the society, afflicts the psyche and leads to alienation.

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