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**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S DESIRABLE
DAUGHTERS AND V.S. NAIPAUL'S HALF A LIFE**

Abstract

The diaspora and their experiences of being an immigrant form a major theme in the vast body of immigrant literature. This paper explores the various causes and effects of immigration by a comparative study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* and V.S Naipaul's *Half a Life*. The issues of pain, agony, alienation, uprootedness, existentialism and identity crisis find expression through the characters Tara in *Desirable Daughters* and Willie in *Half a Life*. A comparative study of both these characters and their responses to immigration provides enough scope of criticism to understand the various nuances of the diaspora.

Keywords: Immigration, displacement, nostalgia, assimilation, alienation.

Diasporic works are created by writers who either have the first hand experience of being an immigrant or those who project the diasporic issues through their keen observation. These works are in majority autobiographical accounts of the writers who personally suffered the pain, agony and challenges of being an immigrant. They understand as to what it means to be on the periphery of the society. The Diasporic writers evoke themes of nostalgia, alienation, uprootedness, identity crisis, assimilation and a longing for the past. For an expatriate, when he is displaced from his native land and transplanted to an alien one, he is thrown into a state of "Cultural ambivalence" as Bhabha calls it. The immigrant's past culture is replaced by the new culture that

he now experiences in his new environment. It leads to a clash between the culture of the past and that of the present:

Curious accretion of a homing desire and a state of homelessness; a state of belonging and the awareness of not being able to belong; the contradictory pulls, the nostalgic longing for the home left behind and the desire to feel at home in the new dwelling; and the discrepant centrifugal pull of staying at the margins of the centre to maintain cultural difference and the centripetal seduction of assimilation in the adopted culture. (Raj 17)

Bharati Mukherjee and V.S Naipaul, both give real depictions of Indian society in their works. Their experiences of immigration offer them a keen observation into the major issues of their societies. Bharati Mukherjee's heroines have tremendous capacity to change for the better. They can remake themselves for the good. In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara Chatterjee's transformation in the novel confirms this. In the novel, Mukherjee depicts the patriarchal society of India where women are at complete disposal of men. Tara and her sisters, Padma and Parvati are ruled by their father. They are never allowed to express their feelings in what so ever matter. Our father couldn't let either of my sisters out on the street. Our car was equipped with window shades. We had a driver, and the driver had a guard. (29)

Tara's marriage to Bishwapriya Chatterjee is her father's decision that is thrust upon her: "There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks" (23). He becomes the creator of her destiny. Tara is uprooted from her motherland and transplanted to America. In Atherton too, Tara is supposed to remain Bish's ideal wife and later a good mother to Rabi.

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? (82)

Tara's understanding of her situation demands that she must end living according to others. The modern American society surrounding her becomes an encouraging factor in Tara's transformation. She divorces Bish, much to the criticism of her sisters and other Indian immigrants: As sisters we were close, certainly closer than either of us was to Didi, but we didn't have a language for divorce and depression...We couldn't talk about why a young woman with everything she could ever want would decide to leave her protector and provider. (66)

Tara embarks on a life in relationship with the Hungarian Andy, wears western clothes, drives car, becomes a single parent to Rabi and even shifts to Upper Haight, San Francisco. In short, she declares herself as a completely independent Americanized Tara. She becomes aware of her sexuality, her wants and desires. Tara's restrictive life in India and the continuous male domination over her life and its decisions propel Tara to remake her identity and shed her former identity as a docile, weak, submissive woman.

Her assimilation doesn't promise unlimited joy rather, she even goes through bouts of depression, loneliness, alienation. Her feelings of fulfillment and hollowness go hand in hand. At moments she finds herself crushed under the over bearing responsibility as a single parent of Rabi, her relationship with Andy also is based on sexual needs that ends with his departure. Tara feels disgusted by her situation. She is divided between the pulls of tradition and modernity: "Loneliness had made me a little wanton; wantonness had made me very lonely. In these five years, I think I have changed beyond recognition, but Bish had not changed at all." (262)

Finally, her strength lies in the fact that she realizes she can never belong completely to any one particular culture. She must pick the best of both the cultures. She must retain her Indian morals, ethics as well as remain independent and free from the restrictive patriarchal authority. Tara exemplifies a perfect combination of tradition and modernity. Ambika Sharma and Dr. Tanu Gupta observe: "Tara has become the New World Woman who is caught in the struggle between her traditions and the modernity to which she is exposed in America". Her final reconciliation with Bish is her reward from Mukherjee as she learns to make a balance between both the cultures like Mukherjee herself. Tara's visit to India emphasizes that she still retains her Indian roots within her.

They are people who are as multi-cultural as they are multi-lingual. They do not regard themselves as fully belonging in either culture, and have practically evolved a subculture peculiar to themselves. They try to take the best from both worlds, but suffer the sense of hybridity and cultural entanglement. (Lau 241)

V.S Naipaul on the other hand, remains a nomad in his life. He couldn't settle anywhere, neither at his birthplace, Trinidad, nor at his ancestral Land, India and not even in England. His dark, meaningless life and his futile journeys to find his location in the world mirror in the life of Willie in *Half a Life*. He remains alienated to his surroundings throughout his life. His travels from India to London and then to Africa and Germany signify the state of modern man and his existential living:

Willie thought, 'I don't know where I am. I don't think I can pick my way back. I don't ever want this view to become familiar. I must not unpack. I must never behave as though I am staying.(135)

Nevertheless, Naipaul through his journeys, becomes a learned man of society who can see through the evils present in Post-Colonial India. He exposes India as a caste based society, deeply influenced by the western thought & learning. The Englishmen dominated every aspect of life in India. Willie's mother belongs to a lower caste and this fact eats up his conscience for the rest of his life: "At home his life had been ruled by his mixed inheritance. It spoilt everything. Even the love he felt for his mother, which should have been pure, was full of the pain he felt for their circumstances."(125) Simultaneously, he is caught up by his father's sick attempts to make him an Englishman. He tries to make Willie an Englishman by giving him an English name "Somerset". Willie finds his surrounding suffocating and packs his bags for London. He fulfils his father's wish too in going to the west.

And that was ho, when he was twenty, Willie Chandran, the mission-school student who had not completed his education, with no idea of what he wanted to do, except to get away from what he knew, and yet very little idea of what lay outside what he knew, only with the fantasies of the Hollywood films of the thirties and forties that he had seen at the mission school, went to London. (51)

Willie is intensely alienated and dispossessed in London. He gets involved in several relationships with women. Although he manages to become a writer but he fails to set a sense of belonging there. Again with Ana, eighteen years of long married life makes him feel suffocated and that he must leave her too. His diasporic existence makes his life's meaninglessness as an essential condition. He must continue his journeys to continue his half and half position in the world. He must never achieve fulfillment in his life. Towards the end of the novel, Willie leaves for Germany to meet his sister Surojini. Leon Gottfried observes:

The writings of V.S. Naipaul draw upon an experience so totally based on layered levels of alienation and exile that his works become paradigmatic of the whole genre, and hence of a major current in twentieth-century life, thought, and art'' (Modern Fiction Studies: 1984).

Tara and Willie give different responses to immigration. Tara assimilates into the American culture whereas Willie remains alienated to whichever place he goes. Both of them highlights the evils of the Indian society i.e patriarchy and caste system as well as the pitfalls of the western

culture like riots, racism and sexual transgression. Mukherjee and Naipaul make an attempt to enlighten the masses and bring transformation in the society.

To conclude, both the novels *Desirable Daughters* and *Half a Life* give real accounts of the diaspora. The diasporic conscience represents the past culture as well as the present simultaneously. As immigrants both Tara and Willie expresses the evils of their past culture as well as that of their present. While Tara comes out as a winner in extracting the good from both, Willie is lost forever, he doesn't achieve any sense of belongingness.

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