

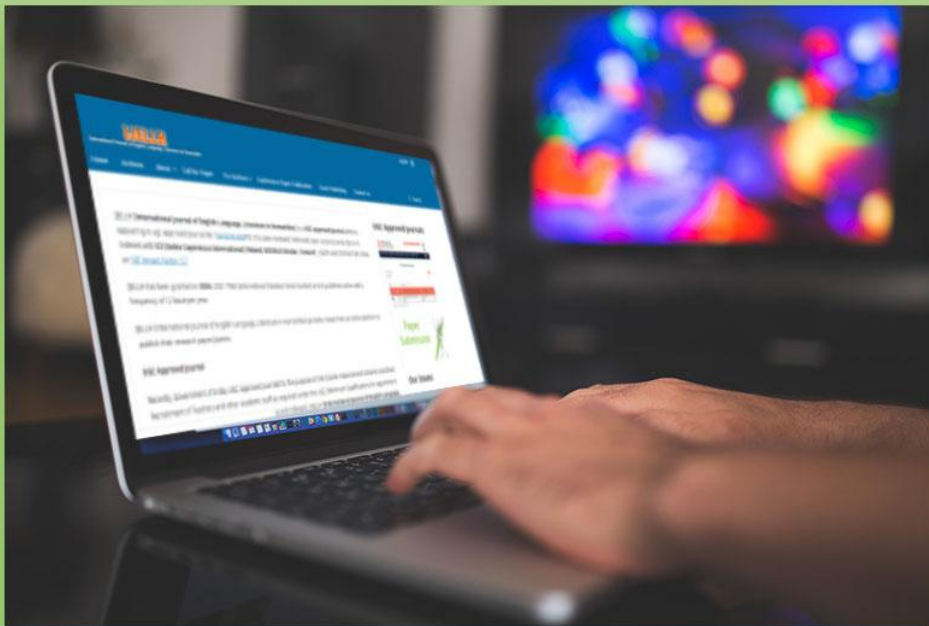
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Gendered Construction of Home in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

Abstract: Mukherjee explores the notion of home from a radical perspective. Her novel *Desirable Daughters* dismantles the conventional notion of home that cements and perpetuates gender roles. Her characters challenge the tradition and she considers it rather a mistake to hold on to the baggage of tradition and live in the past. She envisions the potential of change in imagining a new home of possibilities away from a home that stands for othering and repression. Mukherjee believes that movement and mobility offer an opportunity for the repressed women to escape the bondage of conventional home. *Desirable Daughters* questions the spatial composition of home which promotes segregation and marginalisation on the basis of gender.

Key Words: Home, Gender, Diaspora, Space.

Bharati Mukherjee (1940-2017) was an American writer of Indian origin who wrote a good amount of literature depicting immigrant experiences in the West. She preferred to be called an American writer rather than a hyphenated Indian-American writer. She believed such hyphenated description promoted the binaries of centre and periphery and it amounted to pushing one's self to margin. Her worldview and her theory about immigrant experience emanated from her own life as an immigrant who had had multiple dislocations and relocations

throughout her life. Different locations and spatial milieus animate her fictional world. She highlighted the significance of those places and spaces in her novels that promote and accept heterogeneity instead of places that exclude people on the basis of race, colour, religion or ethnicity. Mukherjee's writings present migration as an opportunity to reinvent and redefine the notions of home and identity:

I see my immigrant story replicated in a dozen American cities, and instead of seeing my Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration (or worse a 'visible' disfigurement to be hidden), I see it now as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated. (Darkness 3)

Desirable Daughters is story of three sisters from Calcutta and the story unfolds against the traditional Indian and modern liberal American backgrounds. The novel presents two contrasting pictures of two different societies that are antithetical to each other and how individuals grapple with the issues faced by them. Tara, who is main character of the novel, stands for a modern assertive woman free from patriarchal bondages of home as against her ancestor Tara Lata who was married to a tree on the suggestions of a Hindu astrologer and confined within four walls of home for life time. Tara and her sisters refuse to be tied down to a primitive culture and rather choose mobility and movement in their lives to transform their identities and make home in new places. They challenge society and its age old stereotypes that restrict women within a limited space and promotes a society divided by gender oriented spatiality.

Role of gender in the construction of home in diaspora is an important dimension of spatial politics which needs to be looked into. Immigrant writings allow us to see how gender relations work continuously in a new land in different ways. Women play a significant role in the making of a home and generally their role in society is already defined in certain ways but in diaspora

it remains to be seen “how space is shaped, subverted, and reshaped within a gendered context” (Dong 2). The new home in diaspora presents an opportunity to reinvent and reimagine one’s life and assert an independent and autonomous self.

Caren Kaplan in her article, ‘Deterritorializations: The rewriting of home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse’ astutely articulates the idea of conventional home,

We must leave home as it were, since our homes are often sites of racism, sexism, and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new. (194)

Mukherjee’s characters substantiate such perspectives about home by exposing gendered constructions of home and its reconstructions in diaspora. Tara, the principal character of *Desirable Daughters* undergoes a unique experience of home as she has had multiple dislocations and relocations. Her idea of home does not constitute what is imposed from outside but it is the idea of home actually that has to conform to her own idea of home. Right from the beginning of the story, Tara describes her home in Calcutta very vividly.

Our nineteenth-century Raj-style fortress of a home on Ballygunge Park Road was set behind a wall topped with glass shards, and the long yard with its landscape garden was the scene of fabulous parties during winter social season. (34)

Though from the description of the house, it looks like royal ancestral house signifying luxury and comfort but a close and critical analysis of the description suggests that this house is like a prison for its inmates especially women whose movement and mobility is strictly controlled and restricted by this heavily built fortress of a home. Women in Tara’s family are supposed to follow a line that has been already drawn for them. This line of discipline includes a strict

adherence to the roles prescribed for them. They are encouraged to acquire those educational degrees which prepare them to get suitable marriage proposal from the men of their caste, class and religion. They have to develop social skills and learn to display their beauty with poise in public parties and functions. All these markers of identity are thoroughly ingrained through a well-designed pattern of upbringing. Any deviation from the norm incurs ire of the family members. In return, the home promises them safety and patronage and also becomes a centre of inscribing gender roles that are to be carried forward. Such an adherence to family norms makes them desirable daughters. “As a space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear, home is charged with meanings, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life” (Alison 1).

The very idea of home in Calcutta is based on the idea of inclusion and exclusion. As Rosemary George in her book *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction* argues that, “the word home immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered, self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection” (1). Tara’s understanding of her home during her early life in Calcutta is very naïve and she does not question its very construction and the control that is exercised through it on its inmates. She says that, “The narrow world of the house city felt as secure to me as it must have to Tara Lata in *Mishtigunj*” (24). The home in Calcutta is one designed to uphold certain sanctity of family and its affairs and a complete secrecy is to be maintained about them. One example is the issue regarding her elder sister Padma which she never came to know in Calcutta and she says that in Calcutta, “we did not know family breakdown. Our families existed inside an impenetrable bubble. Anyone entering or exiting was carefully monitored” (45). Tara and her sisters were brought up to believe in such family stabilities and the revelations about her elder sister come as shock to her. It could never occur to her that one could transgress a line and realize her aspirations. In her early age, Padma receives an offer to act in a movie of famous director

Satyajit Ray, which she is made to turn down by her father. It was believed that they lived inside an “impenetrable bubble”, into which no outsider was allowed. But the movie offer means that bubble was not as impenetrable as it looked. “It meant that someone unknown to us had been watching, or that someone we trusted had reported on us, and someone who respected us had assumed Didi’s interest and availability” (179). Padma’s alleged love affair at that time is also not allowed to blossom and this family scandal is revealed to Tara later in the novel by the arrival of the illegal son of Padma, which jolts her and all that superficial constructions of home as one providing security, a home and family that does not break down.

Tara’s marriage with Bish and her settling down in America as wife of a successful businessman looks like a dream fulfilled. Her husband is revered in whole Indian community in America as very successful person and his advice is sought by one and all, wishing to make a successful career in America. Her first location in America is Atherton, and she calls it a “gated community” (83), because those big houses are protected behind iron gates and looked after by security guards round the clock. The gated community of Atherton reinforces the whole idea of home based on inclusions and exclusions that she had experienced in Calcutta. The gated community is designed in a way to keep the community away from the American influences and also any marginality that is in the area. Here Bish acts like a protector of his family and securing a house behind these iron gates portrays him as a provider and protector of his family. But Tara has a different perspective about her life behind these gates. Initially she thought, her American dream of a wife being fulfilled, but with the passage of time, her life at Atherton seems to be no different from the one in India and she is only reproducing her roles at Atherton. Her life is restricted within the space of ‘gated community’ and she is not allowed to work outside as it could imply that her husband is not able to provide for her.

Marriage, instead of emancipating her from predetermined roles, restricts her space to domestic space barring her from the outer public space. She decides to challenge her confinement within the walls and gates of Atherton and this could happen only by walking away from her husband Bish. She says that, “If I had wanted only to be provided for, stupendously provided for inside gated community, endlessly on display at dinners and openings, I would have stayed in Atherton” (28). Here she is able to discern a similarity between her home at Atherton and at Calcutta. In both the places movement and access was restricted to these social and family functions or gatherings. Walking away from Bish could mean financial insecurity but it also meant freedom to imagine her life independently.

When I left Bish after a decade of marriage, it was because the promise of life as 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)

Doreen Massey in her book *Space, Place and Gender* deconstructs the whole idea of space and place from a feministic perspective and challenges the traditional construction of space for both men and women. She observes that:

The only point I want to make is that space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them (and such related things as our degrees of mobility) are gendered through and through. Moreover they are gendered in a myriad different ways, which vary between cultures and over time. And this gendering of space and place both reflects and has effects back on the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live (186)

Breaking away from Bish means breaking away from her new home that upholds gender roles and restricts her freedom. America provides her the opportunity to exercise more freedom in her affairs and one such affair is asking Bish for divorce. This is an inversion that she enacts and it could not have been possible in India. In her family in Calcutta, divorce is the least of the options and no less than a social stigma and her family would have never allowed her this freedom.

Tara's next location is Upper Height in San Francisco, where she gets her house retrofitted by a Hungarian Buddhist and boyfriend Andy. She claims to be at home in her new home. She says that, "I felt for the first time in my life totally at home, unwilling to leave" (26). The new location, she says makes her feel invisible in the sense that no one looks at her through the prism of any identity marker like ethnicity, race, religion or even gender. She says that, "the rhetoric of San Francisco makes me invisible...when the little kids climb on my lap to be read to, or just listened to, I don't think they see me as anything different from their parents, the school nurse, or their teacher...I thrive on this invisibility. It frees me to make myself over, by the hour" (81). This kind of locale helps her shed all her identity markers and reimagine her identity as an independent person free from patriarchal and gender relationships. The new home allows her to transform herself from something that was determined by others into something that defies and undermines gender. George Rosemary also examines the role of home and how it helps a woman to shape and assert her identity. "Home is a way of establishing difference ... along with gender/sexuality, race, and class, [it] acts as an ideological determinant of the subject" (2). Tara's life is a journey that she continues as a process, never complete. Her decision to leave Bish and relocate to some other location in America, foregrounds her struggle as an immigrant woman who keeps on challenging her life to seek more answers to her quest. While she appreciates the landscape of San Francisco as

something that makes her invisible, she also points out its other aspects that not only show her disappointment with her new home but also show her nostalgia for Calcutta and its culture.

It is a happy landscape, I like to think, reaching from the shallow depression of Golden Gate Park and climbing to the communication towers atop Twin Peaks. The area is given to summer fogs that make conventional gardening impossible, but that remind me, not unhappily, of mountain resorts in India. I almost expect the chattering of monkeys, corn and peanuts smoking on open braziers, the tinkling of women's bangles and Buddhist prayer wheels. From our back porch, I overlook the park and command a view of Berkley, the Oakland hills, and top spires of Golden Gate bridge (24)

A sense of possible dissatisfaction with the present and a nostalgia for the past is very much discernable in the above passage. Her life as an immigrant, even away from the patriarchal household of Bish is not one of satisfaction and freedom. Though she seems to be in command of her surrounding landscape view but her access to those places is rather difficult. Her attempt at graduate work at San Francisco state university ends because of troublesome supervisor. Tara in San Francisco continued to pursue her dream of American possibilities. But she has to go through dissatisfaction and disappointment and the spatial milieu that she is in the midst of, dejects her. Her assimilation in America seems only superficial or at least a partial assimilation. She experiences both invisibility as well as that ethnic visibility and such feelings of marginality are echoed in many places in the novel.

The moment I step outside the bookstore on to the crowded Haight Street, I lose the heady kinship with the world that I felt through me reading. Nobody pays attention to me other than to ask for a spare change or press a handbill into my closed fist. I am not the only blue-jeaned woman with a pashmina shawl around

my shoulders and broken-down running shoes on my feet. I am not the only Indian on the block. All the same, I stand out, I'm convinced. I don't belong here, despite my political leanings; worse, I don't want to belong. (79)

Now in an alien land and culture Tara starts to understand her limitations and her struggle against the firm roots of culture and tradition. She finds herself caught between two communities and cultures; one that she tries to forgo and other that does not understand her. She fails to convey her loneliness and distress to those around her. Like any other immigrant in America, Tara also has to go through alienation and loneliness. At times she feels as if she is not one with her surrounding and those around her are different and she cannot belong to the milieu. She says, "I felt as though I was lost inside a Salman Rushdie novel, a once firm identity smashed by hammer blows, melted down and re-emerging as something wondrous, or grotesque" (195).

Tara is Mukherjee's mouthpiece, and through her character, Mukherjee expresses her belief in the freedom and independence of an individual. She comes forth as an embodiment of resistance against the tradition and patriarchal practices that suppress and stifle dreams and aspirations of women. She firmly believes in the possibility of reimagining and recasting one's identity. "Life was of all a matter of shaping up and hitting one's mark, satisfying expectation, achieving a quota. Repudiations of reality were destined to die a dishonourable death" (153). But amid all these difficulties, she tries to fight the circumstances courageously. She considers even her loneliness a 'privileged commodity' (34). Tara as an immigrant experiences contradictory feelings towards India. She wants to identify with her new homeland by forsaking her original homeland and she says, "We have to stop living in place that's changed on us while we've been away. I don't want to be a perfectly preserved bug trapped in amber, Didi, I can't deal with modern India, it's changed too much and too fast, and I don't want to live in a half-

India kept on life support” (184). Mukherjee views immigrant life and experience from a different perspective than other writers of diaspora. Her characters realize that the India they have left behind must have also changed and they cannot live in nostalgia for ever. Tara also has this realization and instead of identifying herself with India, she believes in a mobile idea of home and identity that is not linked permanently to any particular place or country.

For Tara, Home is something that does not put any limitations and does not become a barrier in the realizations of an individual’s dreams. Though Tara feels comfortable in her home at San Francisco with exception to few hurdles that she faces there, this new home is not recognised by the society and her family, the whole idea of home is fraught with many connotations, something that exists in place of origin, and which is complete only when there is a male patriarch as head and provider of the family. Padma, despite being a modern independent and working woman, who does not depend on her parents or her husband for her living, also conforms to the traditional idea of home unwittingly. She cannot reconcile to the idea that her sister Tara can afford to live an independent life as a divorcee, raising a boy on her own. “They were only worried about me, they said, divorced and alone and raising a boy by myself, so far from the comforts of home” (183). The idea here is that, either home exists only in Calcutta, very much fixed in a place or if it could exist at all outside its territoriality, then it is only possible with Bish, a male patriarch as its head. While she stays at Padma’s home in New Jersey, she terribly misses her own home in San Francisco and she gives a vivid description of her room and its interiors. “Oh I missed my bed and all its pillows and comforter, my son, my funky house, the clutter of half-read books, the small bedside television, the open vista across the park to the lighted spires of St. Ignatius Church” (184). Tara unlike her sister Padma, owns her complications and does not put blame of her present circumstances on what happened in past. She believes in life as one continuous journey that changes and remains in constant flux and she wants to be one with this dynamism of life, rather than remaining stuck in past.

Tara takes us on a journey through her childhood in her hometown Calcutta where she spent her childhood with her two sisters, “sisters three...as like as blossoms on a tree” (21). She uses the metaphor of a tree in order to show how identity is ever linked with a home, community and culture. She says that:

Bengali culture trains one to claim the father’s birthplace, sight unseen, as his or her desh, her home...when I speak of this to my American friends, the ironclad of identifiers of region, language, caste and sub-caste, they call me ‘overdetermined’ and of course they are right. When I tell them they should be thankful for their identity crises and feelings of alienation, I of course am right.
(33)

Modern Tara feels a strange connection and fascination towards the story of her ancestor Tara Lata, the ‘tree bride’. As the novel begins, she gives us an account of her wedding night as, “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. Even constructing it from the merest scraps of family memory fills me with rage” (4). These few lines set the tone of the novel and foreground various issues that are connected to each other. Home and identity are intricately linked to each other and their association is clearly discernible in the lines above. Tara Lata’s identity was tied to her house for ever and people for generations to come remember her for being restrained within the four walls of her house. It also highlights the influence that is wielded on a woman through religion, community and also the impact of history on the construction of identity of women. Modern Tara, is quite opposite to the ancestral Tara Lata in many ways. Tara Lata had no option but yield to the dictates of the society and religion. She could not marry again nor transgress the boundaries of her house. But the modern Tara does all those things. She not only transgresses the boundaries of her home twice by

challenging its gendered construction but also challenges the institution of marriage by walking away from her husband to pursue and construct her own identity and home away from the clutches of patriarchy and tradition. But then again, Tara seems to realise that such a struggle is not very easy and no matter what, people and society continue to know her and relate her to her husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee. When she tried to introduce herself as an independent divorcee, the police officer in San Francisco tells her, “If you are trying to hide your identity, let me tell you it won’t work” (143). Tara is not able to free herself from the clutches of community. She realises that she will always be linked to Bish, her husband. This she learns when the detective tells her that she is under threat because the gang members consider her the wife of the wealthy Bish Chatterjee. The invisibility that Tara aspired in San Francisco as independent rootless woman is thwarted and her markers of identity as a wife, belonging to a particular community, caste and gender continue to hold her back firmly in her roots that look impossible to shun.

It can be concluded that Mukherjee’s fiction depicts the society that is segregated spatially to promote various divisions based on class, ethnicity, gender etc. and which pushes less privileged sections of the society to the margins. She weaves together the narratives about place and patriarchy and her characters more than often choose a path of their own making, challenging tradition and stereotypes. *Desirable Daughters* depicts home as a space that is used as a tool to further a societal setup which marginalises women. Though diaspora presents an opportunity to revisit and redefine such a home yet there are always tendencies which corrupt the idea of home based on inclusion and equality. Tara is Mukherjee’s mouthpiece who challenges the conventional home which served as a prison for her ancestral Tara Lata. Tara walks away from this home to assert her autonomy and freedom, yet the strings that are attached to her roots pull her back. *Desirable Daughters* does not negate the institution of home and does not provide a final definition of home but it presents an opportunity to have a debate on the

concept of home. By placing home in diasporic space, it unshackles home from territoriality and fixed origin. Desirable Daughters exposes the construction of home as a place of inscribing and ingraining gender roles. The deconstruction and reconstruction of home only foregrounds its fluid and temporary nature which is capable of being challenged time and again to upend its idea as a place of othering on the basis of categories such as gender.

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