

**SUBALTERN VOICES IN INDIAN FICTION: A STUDY OF MARGINALIZED  
NARRATIVES WITH A FOCUS ON BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE AND  
DESIRABLE DAUGHTER**

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**ABSTRACT**

Indian women Novelist have in their works given an expression to the conflicts that women in general confront in their native locals and also in alien environment. The struggles of the under privileged people, such as, women, Dalit, Adivasis, and other subaltern groups have long been expressed in Indian fiction. This study examines how subaltern voices are portrayed in Indian literature, with a particular reference on Bharati Mukherjee's works Jasmine and Desirable Daughter. The novel criticizes patriarchal oppression, gendered violences, and the complex negotiations women undertake within structures of tradition and modernity.

Bharati Mukherjee has been highlighting the need to accept and adapt to the cultural hybridity of their environs by becoming self-actualized individuals. Hybridity as a term negates the notions associated with homogeneity and centrality, truth, purity and unity though at another level hybridity holds out a new integral unity a fusion that is created from diverse origins. In addition to exposing the silent suffering and subdued struggle of women in Indian society, the novel emphasizes the linkages of cast, class and gender through its female protagonists. The article attempts to identify the cultural conflicts confronted by the women protagonist in the Desirable Daughters and Jasmine the novel by Bharathi Mukherjee. The cultural conflicts are mostly multi-cultural. This paper also attempts to find the novelists way of overcoming such conflicts.

**KEYWORDS:**

Subaltern voices, marginalized voices, hybridity, women's resistance, oppression

Novelists in India, writing in English have always expressed their concern for the women in their works: women working, women domestically employed, women situated in other locales, women in alien or foreign lands, women who have experienced discordant notes in their marital relations, women in distress and abused. Women oppressed by patriarchy and women having conflicts from within and from outside. Notable among such women novelist in India include

Anita Desai, Kamala Margandiah, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai, Duwakarane, Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee besides others.

Writers in the beginning were trying to project and portray the predicaments of the society at large and women writers in particular were attempting to showcase the problems of the subordinated and the subjugated women by the patriarchal society. Women novelist of yester years could link history and individual lives portraying the contest between tradition and modernity in the background of post-colonial modernity and tradition seeking power over the familial and domestic space. The notion of an unbroken tradition is constant and attempts have been made to write this notion of tradition on the body of the women to dictate its movement needs, aspirations and spheres of existence even while the body is moving along time, space and history. Even politically powerful women are conceptualized within the binary of good person or bad person neutralizing their political edge by circumscribing them within a stereotypical role. Women novelist began capturing the stresses of post-Independence India. Bharathi Mukerjee's themes were her concerns with being housed in-housed and rehoused which recurs in her works and is the result of her personal experiences, dependent on the fact that she has geographically originated from India, moved on to the American continent. As a writer Mukherjee has moved from one geographical region to another cultural space to another, from India to the American continent, however, her writings utter the inexorable changes intricate in such transitions. She is concerned with migrations, dislocations and re-locations, the consequences of the displacement, cross cultural encounters and the changes they effect in the identities of those who are part of such movements. Inevitably her works are preoccupied with the notions of belonging, the idea of rootlessness, the feeling of alienations, and the search for a home.

There is also a questioning of biases and prejudices, a deconstruction of social, cultural and national stereo types and revisioning of ideas and concepts that belong to two anticipate antipodal works. Her novels constantly juxtapose symbols and ideas from the two worlds in a bid to explore their validity in the lives of the individuals that people hear stories.

In her early writing, Bharathi Mukerjee begins with cultural encounters between India and the United States and her later works deal with the multicultural encounters that take place in America: the protagonist is not necessarily South Asian, but nearly all of them are new arrivals in America. In almost all her novels, her preoccupation has been her concern for the displaced souls. She has been fascinated by the plight of the Indian expatriate in America, by the female experience the question of identity and other related issues.

The problems of the migrants, the diasporic communities, the communities in exile, also find an expression in the works of Bharathi Mukherjee in general and the problems of the women folk in particular. The existence of diasporic communities as, has been observed by scholars and sociologists, is due mainly to the forced exile from a homeland to which people desire to return eventually. But the term in the recent literature has been used to refer simply to the migration of an ethnic community. Diasporas are characterized by the relationship between the dispersed people and the original homeland to which they hope to return. Diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, though transformation and difference. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subjected to the continuous past, they are subject to continuous play of history, culture and

power. Women in diasporic environment too have problems of a different kind that include accommodation, acceptance, identity crises etc.,

Bharathi Mukerjee, as a writer who has contributed to the “multiethnic” literature of the United States through her protagonist speaks of the inevitable challenges involved in migrating from one place to another and getting displaced and she is concerned with the migrants, or immigrations dislocations and relocations, the consequences of the displacements that the protagonist confront at cross cultural encounters and the changes the effect in the identity of those who are part of such movements. Her works thus can be said to be preoccupied with the notions of belonging, the idea of rootlessness, the feeling of alienations and the search for a home. She also questions the biases and prejudices and she deconstructs social, cultural and national stereo types. The cultural encounters between India and the United States, the multicultural encounters that takes place in the United States.

*Desirable Daughters* published in 2002 is a narration by a 36 years old Indian, American protagonist Tara, and is about how she explores the making of a consciousness. Tara is the youngest of the three beautiful and well cultivated daughters of a wealthy engineer. Tara was raised in a close-knit upper class Bengal family of Orthodox Brahmins living in Calcutta. At the age of 19 she marries Bishwa Priya Chatterjee, the perfect husband selected by her father. In the US, Tara rejects her traditional Indian life. She divorces her multi-millionaire husband of 10 years when she concludes that her marriage does not fulfil the assurance/promise of the life as an American wife. Sacrificing the comfort and privileges of her life prestigious neighbourhood. Tara moves to San Francisco with her 12-year-old son Rabi. Everything in Tara’s life changes. She starts working and after a number of short-term relationships with men, finally welcomes Andy, a Hungarian Buddhist contractor, as her live-in- lover.

As Tara begins to feel comfortable in her newly transformed American life. A young man, Chris Dey unexpectedly enters her life. Claiming to be the illegitimate son of her elder sister, he threatens the safe assumptions on which her new life is partly founded. His mysterious appearance forces her into a period of intense self-examination.

Suddenly, she finds that her happy and glorious past, seemed now the darkest cave and members of her family blinds stumbling creatures. She realizes for the first time the tremendous differences in world view and lifestyle that separate the sisters in spite of their earlier common trading. After Andy moves out of her life, Tara also realizes she has misunderstood her Ex-husband and moves closer to him.

One night Tara and Bishwa Priya Chatterjee are attacked in her house by explosives planted by the person who had falsely identified himself as Christopher Dey. To recover from the traumatic incident, Tara returns with Rabi to her parents in India leaving America with an enhanced understanding of her connection to her Indian roots and to continue the charm of final unity.

Tara desires to get rid of everything in her past that is false and superficial whether of culture, class or caste. This challenging process requires her to reassess her society which is not easy for her given her privileged background. She stumbles and occasionally falls, but she is determined to look squarely at her own weaknesses and those of her family members. Nor does she allow the insights to damper or destroy her ongoing search for identity. Although Tara learns to reconnect with her sisters in new ways, they do not reciprocate and they continue to criticize her brashly and unjustly, while she remains silent. This unwholesome aspect of their relationship produces a sense of incompleteness in Tara’s mission. On the other hand, Tara’s

ability to communicate openly with Rabi, Bishwa and Andy which is a result of her self-expansion in America helps to provide some beautiful moments in the novel. Her renewed understanding of the Hindu concept of Dharma helps her to see Bishwa Chatterjee in a new light and her love for her son helps her to accept his homosexuality.

Her relationship with these three men reflects the peaceful and understanding nature which helps them to reveal the best in themselves.

Bharathi Mukerjee uses America as a transformational stage for her characters. Tara is able to rediscover with herself and potentials and the innate talent in her to accommodate oneself successfully in the new environment. As a tale of immigrant, the novel attempts to portray the attitude of the protagonist and her ways of dealing with the problems of diasporic environment. The novel can be considered as dealing with the theme of adjusting to new culture, the trials and tribulations that afflict immigrants trying to make it in the new land; cultural synthesis is attempted by Bharathi Mukherjee in the novel and making the immigrants accept the different environmental and ecological conflicts that are confronted by the different character with special reference to Tara, the protagonist. The cultural conflicts that Tara faces are many: she suffers from an identity crisis because of familial ties and search for truth and security in both cultures (US and India).

In *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee makes a departure from her earlier novels in significant ways. Unlike her other protagonist, Tara tries to find her identity in the United States without wanting to obliterate her former identity. She desires to combine her past Indian and her present American selves to invent her own new self and succeeds in doing so. Like Mukherjee herself Tara welcomes this painful and difficult process and meets it with poise and strength.

To know herself, Tara traces with pride and affection the story of her ancestors, especially female ancestors. She doesn't ignore the subjugated position of these Indian women. Yet they do not appear as victims but as intelligent and sensitive people struggling to empower themselves within their limited world and opportunities. This theme arises in the story of Tara's ancestors, Tara, Latha and Ganguly, her saint and freedom fighter. Like each generation of women in her family Tara discovers in her something new and uses her story as a source of inspiration for women and the dual identities in the works of writers like Anita Desai, the identities being Indian in one sphere and western on the other side. Women's self-sacrificing role and her identity getting secured through the process of cultural acceptance in context when the colonized nation in itself in a flux also got clearly and vividly portrayed by women novelists. Women's sexuality, body, spirituality, motherhood and family have been the concerns of the post-colonial women writers and also those that they share with feminist writers from the 'first world' native writers. Because of this, there is always a possibility of solidarity among women writers proceeding from their common concerns of women's oppression, what colonial women writers most deal with is 'race' and these concerns. Women novelists have also been dealing with the theme of dislocation, relocation, home and nostalgia with special reference to that women experienced by women. The migrant women and her problems associated with diasporic environment have been captured by many women novelists.

Like in many other novels of Bharathi Mukerjee, in this too, a women's freedom often functions as a measure of her increasing detachment from different sexual mores and

correspondingly of her assimilations into the new world through her westernization or Americanization in this context.

Tara's smooth life turns into a chaos in the entry of a stranger who introduces herself to be her sister's illegitimate son Chris Dey. She tries to discover the truth behind the stranger which becomes Tara's catharsis and novices when she realizes that the stranger is a liar, she complains to the police and he in anger retaliates by bombing her house when her Ex-husband and son were at home. Tara is portrayed as the new women travelling in to the new world with full energy and vitality. Towards the end, we find her absorbing the modern trends and accepting her son's gay relationships, changed sexual relations etc., The protagonists get liberated to accept a new world order in the process the new world order that includes cultural hybridity, and the readiness to belong to this space of enunciation.

Diaspora women are caught between patriarchies and ambiguous pasts and futures. They connect and disconnect forget and remember, in complex strategic ways. Tara, in this novel, exemplifies that, she is caught between the histories of patriarchy in India and in the west.

"The Identity of diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre given. As such all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous contested spaces even though they are implicated in the construction of we", says Avtar Brah

Diasporic experiences and double identification constitute hybrid forms of identity. Such forms of identity differ from the essential notions of national and ethnic identity. There is no dominant culture in a diasporic community culture is individual made and entered in which people create their own space, super structure and super culture that becomes their own cultural programmers. Tara finds herself in getting the self-actualized state of mind by guiding a space both in the Indian and Western mold of life and thus a third space.

Tara, finally is a successful person, in spite of the odds that she meets with, by getting herself occupied in the translational space. This self-actualization help the three sisters realize their dreams and overcome the sense of isolations and disillusionment. They develop a multiple consciousness resulting in a self that is neither unified, nor hybrid, but rather fragmented to some extent. Bharathi Mukherjee is able to make her protagonist as an individual who is capable of living in a world in which the individual exist not as a unified one but rather as many bound by no borders or infinite in the possibilities of creating consciousness and inventing identities.

The three sisters differ in their attitudes and approaches to overcome the diasporic conflicts. Tara comes to terms with her fragmented self; Padma takes the world at her stride according to her won will and Parvathi lives the life of a privileged rich wife in India and she symbolizes the traditional life of an Indian woman with a western orientation. The opening epigraph of the novel evokes tradition both as impossible to follow and as a felt necessity. The epigraph at the end provides an insight into immigrant quest for identity and authenticity. In that the three sisters' one can find the hybrid culture flourishing as a result of their locals.

Jasmin, the protagonist embodies the cultural dissonance and identity fragmentation that often accompany the diasporic experience, particularly for women of postcolonial societies. Born as Jyoti in a small village in Punjab, India, she is indoctrinated into a worldview steeped in patriarchal norms, religious superstition, and rigid gender expectations. Her identity is initially defined by the roles she is expected to play—obedient daughter, devoted wife, and, eventually,

grieving widow. However, with the sudden death of her husband, Prakash, and her subsequent immigration to the United States, Jasmine is thrust into an entirely new cultural and ideological framework. The traditional Indian belief in destiny and karma, as seen in the astrologer's prediction of widowhood and exile, stands in stark contrast to the American ethos of self-making and reinvention. Jasmine's refusal to accept her fate and her conscious decision to travel to the United States reflects her resistance to cultural determinism and her desire to reclaim agency over her life.

The clash between Eastern cultural norms and Western values becomes increasingly evident as Jasmine reinvents herself in various American contexts. Each of her new identities—Jasmine, Jase, and Jane—represents a different cultural adaptation and a response to the expectations of the environments she inhabits. As “Jase,” she embraces the modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle of New York City, finding empowerment in her work and in her romantic relationship with Taylor. In contrast, as “Jane,” she adopts a more domesticated and conventional role in Iowa, becoming a caregiver and partner to the injured banker Bud Ripple Meyer. These shifting identities highlight not only her adaptability but also the internal conflict she experiences in trying to reconcile her Indian past with her American present. Mukherjee's narrative suggests that the immigrant experience, particularly for women, is not a linear progression toward assimilation but a complex and often painful negotiation between conflicting cultural imperatives (Grewal 248).

Jasmine's romantic and sexual relationships further underscore the cultural and gendered tensions she faces. While Prakash encourages her to adopt a more modern outlook and even gives her the name “Jasmine,” his death prevents the realization of that vision within the Indian context. Her relationships in America—first with Taylor and later with Bud—offer her contrasting forms of stability and freedom, but none provide a complete sense of belonging. Taylor represents the liberal, inclusive aspects of American life, yet Jasmine senses that she is still seen as exotic and other. Bud, on the other hand, offers security but is emblematic of rural American conservatism, which subtly pressures her into a more domesticated and dependent role. These relationships expose the limitations of both cultures in fully accommodating her evolving identity. Jasmine's ultimate decision to leave Bud and follow Taylor at the end of the novel is not just a romantic choice but a symbolic assertion of autonomy and self-determination.

The act of violence that marks Jasmine's early experience in America—her rape by Half-Face and her subsequent killing of him—is a crucial turning point in the novel. This moment illustrates the intersection of immigrant vulnerability and emergent empowerment. As an undocumented woman with no protection or support system, Jasmine is brutally victimized; yet, her decision to kill her assaulter is both literal and symbolic, representing the death of her old, passive self and the emergence of a new identity forged through trauma and survival. This act is not just one of self-defence but a radical claim to agency in a world that often renders immigrant women invisible. Mukherjee thus positions Jasmine not as a victim of her circumstances but as a subject who actively reshapes her destiny through acts of courage, reinvention, and resistance (Paranjape 64).

Ultimately, Jasmine's narrative is a powerful exploration of cultural hybridity and identity fluidity in the context of global migration. Mukherjee challenges essentialist notions of national, cultural, and gender identity by portraying a protagonist who is constantly in flux,

refusing to be confined by any singular definition. Jasmine's journey across continents, cultures, and selves exemplifies Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space," where new identities are negotiated and formed through cultural interaction and translation. Rather than presenting assimilation as an endpoint, Mukherjee embraces the ambiguities and contradictions of diasporic existence. Jasmine is neither wholly Indian nor fully American; instead, she exists in a liminal space, a dynamic in-between where cultural conflict becomes a catalyst for personal transformation. Through her, Mukherjee gives voice to the subaltern immigrant woman, highlighting both the struggles and possibilities inherent in crossing boundaries—geographical, cultural, and existential.

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