

EMPOWERMENT AS A TRANSFORMATIVE STRATEGY IN *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS* AND *THE TREE BRIDE* OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

Dr. NEELIMA CHOUDARAJU

Associate Professor of English, RISE Krishna Sai Gandhi Group of Institute, Ongole

Abstract: *This paper focuses on the fictional writings Desirable Daughters and The Tree Bride written by the Indian born US writer Bharati Mukherjee examining the constitution of identity/ies related to women's diaspora in contemporary times. It offers excellent cultural manifestation for the examination of the representation of identity process resulting from transitional displacements. This presents gender studies and its reflection on main characters' trajectories which are illuminated by the central notions of performativity and empowerment. It also analyses protagonist's actions viewing her process of empowerment as a transformative strategy in terms of subjective development marked by gender issues. Mukherjee problematizes the diasporic women subject's identity formation in relation to the India/US movement, revisiting and reweaving Indian traditions from multifaceted and gender-marked perspective. This may act in terms of raising readers' understanding and critical awareness of the women subject's diasporic in the contemporary world.*

Key words: *Diaspora, Cultural identity, Empowerment etc.,*

o one behind, no one ahead.
The path the ancients cleared has closed.
And the other, everyone's path.
Easy and wide, goes nowhere.
I am alone and find my way.

(Sanskrit verse adapted by Octavio Paz and translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The poem excerpt quoted above is the epigraph to *Desirable Daughters* (2002) which along with *The Tree Bride* (2004) from the literary corpus are analyzed in this paper. Part of the poem "The Tradition" is compared with the narratives, and such an analysis is discussed and re-examined from cultural, mythical and gendered perspectives. From this quote we are led to understand that the hero/ine has to go on his/her own to seek his/her truth as does the protagonists in the novels.

Bharati Mukherjee's characters are eager travelers who displace themselves throughout the countries, continents, between the East and West, the old and the new and the past and the future. For her, she constructs the image of a North American writer, who decides to immigrate to the United States to escape imperialism in the UK and in Canada. The United States is deployed as the land of opportunities for immigrants.

Bharati Mukherjee produced considerable number of literary works which consists of 8 novels, two short story collections and three non-fiction books. The first novels are *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and *Wife* (1975). *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993) and *Leave it to Me* (1997) compose her first trilogy. The novels *Desirable Daughters* (2002),

The Tree Bride (2004) and *Miss New India* (2011) compose her second trilogy. The short story collections are *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). Her three non-fiction writings are *The Sorrow and the Terror*, *The Haunting Legacy of Air India Tragedy* (1987), in co-authorship with Clark Blaise, *Political Leadership in Indian Perspective* (1992). *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977) was written in collaboration with Clark Blaise.

This paper analyses the main characters actions and practices in *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* by focusing on the depiction of (em)power(ment) as a transformative strategy for resisting women's oppression. Situated in the convergences of the fields of literary, cultural and gender studies especially regarding the fictional representation of gender as a cultural category, the construction of the protagonist's identity in process, the phenomenon of cultural assimilation due to the influences received from multicultural societies in the novels is studied. Mukherjee's formal education and academic background has a strong international component that has undergone transcontinental displacements, a movement which is thematized in her work. By offering such a perspective in her narratives, Mukherjee discusses the composite of cultural diasporic identities which is central.

Introductory considerations on feminism and literature: reading from a cultural perspective:

The idea of feminism/s itself – which should always be thought of in plural terms – has oscillated according to chronology, geographical and historical contexts. Despite the differences existing within the movement in its plurality of its philosophies, political

orientations and forms of practice, one of the premises underlying such cultural trend is that the very efforts in defining woman “assume a universal connotation in that woman is considered as a product of cultural norms and restraints rather than as a creation of nature”(MYLES, 2005, p.1). Women, who constitute a distinct social group, with specific characteristics and needs, have been neglected throughout the course of history, being only relatively recent recognized as such in given contexts. A woman's life experiences, society's expectation related to age, creed, class, race, etc. The factors that may impose suffering and oppression on women are caste, education and economic conditions. In India these features are reinforced by the still strong patriarchal system. Feminist reading practices have showed that narrative fictions undoubtedly occupy an important role in the (re)enactment of (subversive) gender performances which may help destabilize crystallized practices, thus opening up utopian spaces for thinking about alternatives in order to overcome such historical inequalities.

Sandra Almeida (2006) brings our attention to the importance and implications of a couple of words that have prevailed in the feminist critical debate pluralism and difference. Such terms have led to a wide range of feminisms which emphasize multiplicity, diversity and to the recognition of several different feminist discourses, implying the possibility of questioning universal and essentialist values concerning feminist issues. She emphasizes the growing number of women-authored literary works with stress on female characters who live in boundary territories in displacements and uprooting offering subjective affiliations and mobile identities. This perception may be aligned with the reading of Bharati Mukherjee works proposed in this paper.

Considering the novels studied in the present paper Mukherjee's narrative elements provide the ground for the analyses of the portrayal of women's decent as subjects in constant historical, social and cultural displacements resulting in renewed identity reconfigurations. In considering women as agents who manage to transform and reconfigure reality/ies heeding the community/ies needs, a question arises: why did/do they allow themselves to be subdued? A parallel has been outlined between patriarchal domination over women and the relation between the colonizers and the colonized. According to Bhabha (2006), there is some inaccuracy of colonial regimes to produce stable and fixed identities. Thus, the variations that emerge from the colonial discourse may lead us to the identification of 'an apparatus of power'.

Women achievers in Indian history are often mentioned in a tone of mixed admiration, respect for their strength of character, courage and leadership qualities. These women in real life and in fictional writings have been inspired by real characters who experienced extreme hardship and who had been deprived of house/home leading 'their' lives through the concocting plans of male family members. Another theme is the Indian women's fight and resistance in face of gender-based oppression. Despite having a colonial past in patriarchal contexts, they have tried to achieve visibility by the recognition of their rights. Such are related to Tara Lata's efforts in order to free the Mishtigunj women from the Raj oppression, one of the themes explored by Mukherjee.

Despite the fact that the 'play' in the dynamics of the colonial system may produce interchangeable positions in colonial discourses, configured by oscillations in subject positions and binary oppositions, the overall power structure is usually unshaken. In the examples given by Padma Anagol (2005), in some remote regions of India in which women were/are subdued as slaves due to social/cultural aspects to men's authority, a widower may be seen to hold "all the men in her family 'under her thumb'" by being courageous. Such theoretical and anthropological analysis provides ways of thinking about the reconfiguration or subversion of women's gender roles in patriarchal societies. Such instances of destabilization may provoke a cultural impact that is interesting from a utopian feminist perspective.

Bharati Mukherjee's narratives studied feature two women who, despite living in different times and spaces, do share a common purpose: they make efforts to reconfigure the gender roles imposed upon or expected from them. Tara Lata initially faces oppression and

violence as she is forced to surrender herself to the Indian traditions by getting married at the age of five, and later, due to her fiancée's death by having to receive a tree as a groom – the belief this would ward off the curse of bearing a widow's life. This turns by living an isolated life in the East Bengal jungle, reaches the freedom she needs in order to assume control of her fate, to fight oppression and to defend her political ideals. The imagery 'treelike' is important and has a key role in the construction of the meaning of collectivity, interconnectedness and support, the qualities she finds and maintains as her major political action.

According to Avtar Brah, "discourses of 'racial difference' are saturated with metaphors of origin, common ancestry, blood, kith and kin." She argues that discourses on racism are constructed in relation to discourses on gender differences; and treats racism and patriarchal discourses as being similar, once the former codifies "inherent and immutable difference", mapping "this imputed difference on to social collectivities"; whereas the latter "invoke(s) sex as a pre-given 'fact' that represents men and women as 'naturally' different, such that women's subordinate position is legitimized as deriving from innate differences between men and women" (p.157).

Gender is not a fixed category, but an anthropological construction, that is to say, it appears in the intersections of different fields produced by culture(s) and originated from human relations. Regarding gender as a cultural construct, Mukherjee's works offer a privileged locus in which the issue surfaces as recurrent theme, being problematized in the characters' actions and relationships. Tara Lata, born into a traditional Hindu family receives the first orientations concerning the way a Brahmin Indian girl should be raised, becomes something else, different from what was expected from her to be. In the process she tries to save India's sovereignty by defending the idea of freedom, an uncommon position for a woman of her upbringing in patriarchal India's cultural system, especially at that time. Her path causes a great impact on her descendants' lives, mainly her great-great-niece, Tara Chatterjee. Both *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* the protagonists' courage leads them to combat the barriers imposed by ancestors, the brutalities of British Raj and the colonial police. Their struggle spreads the seeds of revolution and freedom, mixed and adapted to social and historical changes.

2. The Western literary representation of women:

Women have been profusely depicted throughout the course of history. However, one of the issues which has been the recurrent concern of feminists is how women are depicted in Western culture. They criticize the monolithic, racist, often unreachable standards of beauty, forced into cultural constructs and imposed by the media. A question remains to be asked: have women been portrayed in similar ways in the West and the East? Francoise Lionner's thought is welcome here. She observes:

The experience of academic feminist criticism since the 1970s has created almost insurmountable differences between 'Western' modes of analysis of the concrete status of women in various non-Western cultures on the one hand, and non-Western women's subjective experience of their own position on the other. (1995, p.1)

Women's experience in non-Western contexts have been portrayed by contemporary women writers, many of those from Asian cultural background, resulting in contributions to the expansion of feminist criticism examined by western standards. The apparent opposition of being a US, American or an Indian subject, of being a first or a third world woman, requires a reflection. The illusion of the predominant unitary subject is deconstructed by questioning the concept of 'otherness', with the Other being identified as 'different'. Considering the fragmentation of the national identities fictionalized in Bharati Mukerjee's novels, I argue that not only do they offer a privileged locus for looking at such issues, but they also present connections between the fictions and women's subjectivity-otherness-demonstrated by such identity unfolding.

Lionnet's idea of *metissage*, the anthropological mixing, which is claimed by her to exist in different geographical contexts, which should be "understood as a dynamic model of relationality", is "universal". In this I emphasize the interconnectedness of different traditions, and the contributions to a wider understanding of composition of complex identities and to the "metissage" of cultures observed in Bharati Mukherjee's narrations. Tara Chatterjee, presents an example of a dialogue in which the subject participates in the branding of distinct traditions and in the composition of a new anthropological fabric: her transcontinental displacements impact on the dynamic process of identity transformation. Against all the probabilities of continuing the preservation of Hindu traditions, Tara marries her chosen husband, but does not lead a traditional Hindu wife life as she is expected to. Tara Chatterjee epitomizes the picture of a hybrid subject. The crucial issues raised by her for study are woman diasporic subject and the relation between women and power, exemplified by the breaking of the bonds of marriage, an instance which proves to be a mainspring to self-discovery and personal liberations. By taking control of her destiny life, Tara explores new alternatives for being in the world. The price she pays to accomplish her moves and actions is relatively small due to her social status, ultimately becomes the agent of her own transformations.

3. A feminist perspective on power:

In Mukherjee's narratives, the dynamics of power is triggered by oppressive systems, to which the individuals, especially, the main women characters – Tara Lata and the daughters: Padma, Parvati and Tara Chatterjee – are subdued. They are oppressed by social and cultural patterns. The observation of the deployment of power relations in Mukherjee's novels from a feminist perspective leads to the idea that one of their merits is that they may play a critical role in the deconstruction of the male oriented power prevalence in the gender relationships. According to the feminist critic Susan Moller Okin's assumptions, power should be '(re)distributed' equally among men and women and understood as a positive social good. The unjust distribution of power is perceptible in the narratives in the descriptions of men's benefits on one hand and women's underprivileged positions. From the perception of power as a resource, and also bearing in mind the idea of conquest, by the relations developed between the conqueror and the conquered, an association of inequalities concerning the patriarchal system may be established.

In her view, power is “widely dispersed and diffused”. She proceeds by stating that “social relations are tightly defined by domination and oppression”(1990, p 31-33).

The image of Indian women in North American society, associated to social and cultural values are examined by the interconnections controlled by the geopolitical

localities in which these women live. The representation of the woman is initially examined by looking at the family context, the first cosmos this woman learns to exist in the world. In the protagonist’s case, she is taught to insert herself in the patriarchal system when she is still a child and lives under such a cultural pattern. When she moves to the North America, and related herself to different cultural patterns and reconfigures her own relationships.

Tara Lata’s precocious marriage, in 1879, at the age of 5 is an example of what was imposed to children at that time in India. The East-West values of tradition and contemporary modernity affect Tara Chatterjee’s idea of love and marriage. When she moves to the USA as an Indian graduated student wife, she lives a traditional life of obedience and faithfulness, but as soon as she starts the assimilation process, the contemporary Tara conflicts herself with the Western life style – free from such impositions and offering plenty of choices. As a result she breaks with the tradition, gets divorced and starts to make her own decisions. Bharati Mukherjee deconstructs the ‘solid’ and ‘sacred’ idea of marriage according to the Indian traditions: obeying parents’ choice, by marrying a groom in an arranged way, of the same caste, belonging to a good family, and marrying in the Indian Territory. Among the three sisters, the one to follow the rituals and honours is Tara Chatterjee, the one who becomes the ‘least Indian’ of the three. Mukherjee’s depiction of woman emphasizes the individuality, self-awareness, absent terms in traditional systems where men’s voice prevails.

Motherhood is given an ideal status in Indian tradition. It must be stressed that the major purpose in a woman’s life is to become a mother, especially a mother of son(s), because they are preferred in the Indian family. Bearing Indian tradition in mind, Bharati Mukherjee deconstructs the ideal motherhood by portraying a woman who wants to be pampered, not even mentioning the circumstances and implications of such a condition. Mukherjee’s sharp criticism over strict regimes, leads her to introduce the figure of a male child that does not represent what is desirable in a son, according to Indian tradition. In spite of being born in the United States and being a Californian resident, Rabi can’t ignore his ascendancy; he is the son of a Bengali Brahmin family. Having recognized his mother being unconventional writes a letter to her revealing his anxieties and his sexual orientation. So Tara and Rabi become outsiders in the eyes of the family traditions.

Tara manages to take control of her own destiny, means she achieves power in dealing with the social, cultural and economical aspects of her life. She intervenes in Indian tradition,

defying the whole patriarchal system. To be free from the oppression caused by the rigid social impositions without the application of the self-immolation or sati, Tara subverts the logic of the colonial discourse, when she abandons the 'subaltern'/'colonized' status to become an individual with a voice to be uttered and heard.

4. Empowerment as a woman subject's transformative strategy:

Empowerment is very often understood as a strategy associated to feminism. It is also used as an assistance strategy: an inclusive process in the social groups, so that the outsiders can reach self-sufficiency, independence. Hannah Arendt argues that people act as free and equal agents who create power collectively through their communicative action and interaction. She believes that "power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual, it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together"(1970, p.44). In this sense, I defend that Tara Chatterjee achieves recognition and respect from her social groups: family and friends, by their acceptance towards her decisions and risks assumed and in her interconnections in human relationships.

The critic Virginia Held states: "The capacity to give birth and to nurture and empower could be the basis for new and more humanly promising conceptions than the ones that now prevail of power, empowerment, and growth"(p.137). Held affirms that "the power of a mothering person to empower others, to foster transformative growth, is a different sort of power from that of a stronger sword or a dominant will" (p.209). His notion of power, one may conclude, is conceived in such a way as to establish its relations in the social and political aspects of society, as being the capacity to transform and empower one and the others. From this perspective, Tara Lata empowers herself by assuming a mother's role when she adopts the unprotected and refugees under her care. Tara Chatterjee is also empowered by her pregnancies. It may be affirmed that motherhood enacts and reinforces a bond of connection and dependence on multiple levels from one being to another.

Bearing in mind the concept of power by Held – as transformative and empowering, according to a feminist perspective, I defend that such notions may work as valid strategies at the refinement and re-adaptation of the ever-changing social, cultural and historical reconfigurations. The issue of power serves as a more feasible resource for feminist theories to discuss the relation between freedom and empowerment. Monique Deveaux (1996) points, "indeed, much feminist literature now stresses the importance of seeing women not as passive victims uniformly dominated but as active agents mediating their experience". This can be analyzed, concerning Tara Lata's attitudes of resistance in relation to the colonial authorities. She must not be seen as a one-sided view: a fragile victim who is oppressed by the colonial regime; but as an agent of change. The same can be applied to the protagonist who reconfigures her life style in order to adapt to the new cultural patterns.

Bharati Mukherjee makes use of power strategies by portraying the protagonist's process of empowerment, which is used as a transformative device for combating oppression, and that may be thought of in terms of the social, cultural, historical interconnections undertaken by Tara Chatterjee due to her displacements. The protagonist's power comes not only from those social

and cultural confrontations, but also from the contributions given by her in the sense of transforming herself and the others, by the acknowledgement of woman's innate power-mothering and nurturing others, reconfiguring human relationships.

Tara Chatterjee starts to deal with the challenges imposed on her path; she surpasses the social and cultural boundaries. She fights against the hegemonic system, the "phallographic order", trying to resist the prevailed establishment by not accepting to become passive and obedient, following Indian traditions. When she marries Bish and goes to the US, then, she resists and refocuses her life breaking – perhaps – tradition. However, she capitulates to the tradition considering that she remarries Bish who is Indian like herself. Her remarriage may be understood as the protagonist's attempt to restart her story, not under the strict Hindu patriarchal system, but under the Western experiences from which she constructs her own cultural patterns. At the end, the protagonist is empowered by some strategies she develops throughout her displacement: she becomes a mobile subject, who cannot be caught in any particular social and cultural standard-she is the result of a rich cultural mixing. Tara Chatterjee assumes the control of the narrative of her ancestor's life. It can be said that she invests herself of power to reconstruct her ancestor's trajectories through the interaction of her personal path and her family, considering them a part of her story as well, it is like a cycle being completed and restarted.

Conclusion:

Both Taras seek freedom, but in their own ways: the ancestor, by trying to get free from the oppressive political regime, and attempting to legitimize the power relationship between men and women, in her turn, the descendant attempts to get free from the strict Indian traditions, identified by the patriarchal structured society, in which she was raised. She pursues her individual identity/ties from a perspective which involves autonomy as a driving force.

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