

## Violence, the Leitmotif in Bharati Mukherjee's Novel *Desirable Daughters*

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### Abstract

In Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Desirable Daughters* danger lurks on all sides, ready to attack families, marriages and social life. Paradoxically, the institutions like family, social position, wealth, secrets and the gods, which provide protection, safety and security tragically, prove to be the pitfalls of the characters. The novel, which begins on a serious, tragic note, describes the death of a thirteen year-old boy from snake bite on his wedding day. It continues with a real current of danger running through the narrative that explodes in violence and irrevocable change. In the course of the novel, a murder is uncovered, and a near fatal bombing occurs. It also brings to light the activities of the terrorists and the underworld gangs.

**KEYWORDS:** Violence, Crime, Trauma

Cultural crossovers pave way for a hybrid culture. The writings of Bharati Mukherjee bear the stamp of the cross-cultural confrontation, violent happenings and displacement spurred by migration. Bharati's multi-dimensional characters do not neglect the alien identity. At the same time, they do not make strenuous efforts to distance themselves from their homeland. In their efforts to negotiate between the two cultures they experience violent happenings, both physical and psychological. In the diasporic context, violence is a manifestation of power.

All cultures of the world have their own strengths and weaknesses. The natives are unaware of the psychological trauma the immigrants undergo while they try to strike a balance between the native culture and the culture of their adopted land. Mukherjee attempts to "expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers" (qtd. in Inamdar 72). Besides the culture shock, the immigrants also have to follow the social protocol. They have to make discoveries on their own in order to comprehend the systems of the new land.

*Desirable Daughters* narrates the story of three sisters after the arrival of a 'mystery man' Christopher Dey, who claims to be the son of Padma. The plot begins with Tara's quest to trace her ancestry. Tara is fascinated by her ancestor, an almost-namesake Tara Lata, who was the victim of the custom of child marriage. The story shifts to modern day San Francisco where Tara Lata, the protagonist is divorced from her billionaire husband Bish and she has a fifteen year old son, Rabi. She has a white American lover Andy, who has embraced Buddhism. Her divorce from Bish was quite amicable and she leads a peaceful life. A strange intruder disturbs Tara's peace. One afternoon when she returns from Kinder-garden class she sees a young man sitting in her living room with her son Rabi. The handsome young man who has recently arrived from India claims kinship. His clothes and moustache show that he is not an Indo-American. He approaches as though to embrace her and addresses her "Tara-mashi." Tara steps back in confusion and startled by the stranger's behaviour and asks, "Who are you?" (

34). He claims himself to be Christopher Dey, Padma's long-lost son. He also reveals that he had already met Parvathi-mashi from whom he got Tara's address. Tara refuses to believe him.

Christopher Dey's presence disturbs her because she has completely no idea about the birth of a nephew. Tara is rather angry at her son Rabi for believing a stranger's words and letting him inside the living room. Mukherjee brings out the turmoil in her in these words:

But my mind was reeling: Cousin? Parvathi-mashi? Tara-mashi? I wanted to cry out, how dare you call us your mashi, your maternal aunts, how dare you go to my sister or come to me, how dare you – an imposter in laughable clothes – demand anything of us. How dare you invade our homes with your sinister lies about being a part of our family! (35)

Mukherjee brilliantly weaves the mystery around the newly popped up nephew of a secret alliance between her elder sister Padma and Bengali Christian, Ron Dey. Tara's search for the truth about her sister's past is subtly portrayed through suspense and mystery.

Tara is disillusioned about her family and her own life. The secrets her sisters hide from her raise questions in Tara's mind. Lazure opines, "Mukherjee portrays the contours of the character's identity that are in constant negotiation and transformation because of the interaction between the past and the present" (10). Through unraveling the past story of the three sisters Mukherjee succeeds in giving her readers an insight into the Indian culture.

Bharathi Mukherjee in *Desirable Daughters* portrays anger in various forms. Tara is angry that a stranger tries to become her nephew. She is haunted by the stranger's demeanour because he dresses like an Indian and speaks Bengali. To her utter dismay he has Dey as his surname and claims Dr. Ronald Rey, ex-lover of Padma to be his father. Moreover he gives correct information about his Poppy-Pishi (paternal aunt) and he says: "I don't have to prove anything" (38). Tara does not respond to all the claims made by the 'mystery man' and wants to deny him because of her family honour but the evidence is mounting. He badly needs a family to belong to and gives a letter as proof to Tara, so that she could accept him in the family.

Tara is caught in a dilemma and she collapses when her son blames her about the secretiveness and hypocrisy in the family. He also accuses Tara's sister and questions her: "Why do you guys hate each other so much?" (40). When she hears the word hate she is distressed as shown in the following lines: "Hate" I felt myself collapsing suddenly, like a balloon hitting the ceiling and darting out of control all over the room I love my sisters. It's the purest love I've ever known. Hate is the last thing I could feel for them, it's the only emotion that never entered our little sisterhood" (40).

Violent feelings of anger, shock and shame overpower Tara when she comes to know that her son has been keeping secret company with Chris Dey without her knowledge. She rushes out of the bookstore to confront Rabi, but he disappears. Tara is rather angry with her sister Parvati for giving her phone number to a total stranger. In her frustration, she picks up the phone and dials Parvati, her sister. However, Parvati who is in the midst of violence begins to explain a robbery in her neighbouring house in the apartment. When Tara accuses Parvati, she begins to weep. Parvati is hurt because Tara has believed a stranger's words. She advises Tara to be careful, and says:

Finding an address on the web is child's play. You know that, Tara. Even our Bombay bandits use computers to come up with names, addresses, financial info, you name it. They are so organized, it's scary. The cops knew their M.O. They bribe a servant, get inside the flat, clean you out, and kill you if you get in the way. That's what happened in the poor Sen's case. The big gangs keep some policemen in their pay. The papers have hinted at it. (62)

After they explain matters to each other, they relax and laugh again and Tara loses her paranoia.

Intertwining the family drama there is a complex picture of vastly different cultures, and the danger that comes from unprecedented means and people. Crime and violence run through the narrative. Tara admits that she is being stalked. Tara reads about Vietnamese gangs in San Jose invading the homes of Vietnamese, restaurant owners, killing their children, and Chinese chip-stealing gangs invading Chinese-owned factories. Tara feels that she is under the threat of international crime. She comes to know of a criminal Abbas Sattar Hai. His target will be wealthy members of the society. Kidnapping is another way of doing their business and Mr. Jack warns, "I would say your husband and your son and you, Tara, are potential targets" (224).

Mukherjee presents violent actions in the novel. As Dayal opines, "There is something spectacular and sensationalist about the violence associated with Mukherjee's characters"(82). Moreover there are discussions on violent actions. Tara's house is bombed. The bomb explosion is followed by investigation. The sergeants appointed by the government investigate the tragedy and the ATF determines that Tara's house has been bombed by persons using signature device on the Indian subcontinent. The investigators suspect Andy, the insanely jealous live-in-lover of the exotically beautiful Tara Chatterjee the divorced wife of the seriously injured "Icon of Silicon Valley, Bishwapriya Chatterjee" (274). Andy refuses to cooperate with investigators. Tara says that Andy is deeply religious and sincerely peaceful.

Tara hears about Ron Dey's fatal death at a party. Ron was "killed in a head-on crash near Sion" (248). She warns Rabi because Christopher Dey whom they met is identified as Abbas Sattar Hai. He might have murdered the real Christopher in San Francisco and "He's a member of Dawood's gang and there are international warrants against him for murder and arson" (255). The language of Mukherjee presents images of violence, crime, hatred and killing.

Tara is deeply traumatized by the terrorist attack and returns to India. She visits her parents in their home on the banks of the sacred River Ganga at Rishikesh. Her mother has Parkinson's disease, but refuses to be treated in the U.S, preferring to stay with her husband. Violence brings her back to her native soil. Tara discovers that her bohemian life, with multiple love affairs and the past life of Padma has only led to dangerous consequences, as in the case of Chris Dey. Chris Dey, the abandoned child of Padma is murdered and his identity is used by a notorious criminal gang member Abbas Sattar Hai. Bish sympathizes over the appearance of Chris in Tara's life and comes to her rescue.

The bomb blast destroys not only Tara's house but it also signifies the end of her California free-spirited lifestyle. Violence manifests itself in the form of fear too. She constantly fears for the safety of her son and ex-husband. Tara Bish faces violence head

on. The violent happenings are not the reason for her re-union with her husband; it is rather the re-assurance of love and warmth she experiences during the violent times. Violence offers her the possibility of a happy life. Bharathi Mukherjee is especially interested in violence that erupts in India and worldwide. Violence is a frequent feature of Mukherjee's fiction and she uses it as a metaphor for cultural conflict.

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