

## MUKHERJEE'S NOVELS: A STUDY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCES OF PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY ON INDIVIDUALS

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### Abstract

*This research has been done to explore the psychological effects on the life of female characters of Mukherjee who is living in a patriarchal society. Mukherjee foregrounds the experiences of humans especially a woman who is forced to confront her marginalization within her own (Indian) culture, while attempting to forge an identity within an alien (American) culture. Qualitative research has been adopted and the major works of Mukherjee have been taken as primary resources. Her female protagonist seems to involve in a battle of survival where her own identity is at stake. The paper finds that the psychological effects of male dominated society are very strong and undeniable on the lives of female characters in Mukherjee's works. The study recommends that individual female characters must struggle for recognition of the self no matter how painstaking it is for a female to get identified in a patriarchal society.*

### Key words

#### **Patriarchy:**

*It is a system of society in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it.*

#### **Untouchable:**

*A person that is disagreeable or defiling to the touch.*

#### **Identity:**

*The individual characteristics by which a person or thing is recognized or known.*

#### **Self:**

*A person's essential being that distinguishes him from others.*

#### **Fragmented:**

*Something/someone having been divided or having the unity destroyed.*

### Introduction

*Desirable Daughters* (2002) is one of the most celebrated of Mukherjee's novels that represent Patriarchal hold and influence in the traditional Indian society. Through this novel she depicts the curses of patriarchy and different forms of exploitation upon women. The novelist depicts marriage as a medium of exploitation rather than a desirable heavenly bliss. In Indian patriarchy, marriages are imposed on girls. Girls are not allowed to make love or to marry a man of their own choice. This issue is raised in case of Padma, the elder sister of Tara, the narrator in the novel who established mutual understanding in the form of courtly love with Ronald Dey, but could not marry him. High society girls, even at India do not bother much about traditional rule of virginity protection. They prefer luxurious life style, servants to tend them, free mixing with the boys and girls of their own age. Sometimes shady affairs and friendship with the opposite sex are not considered awkward but when it is the matter of marriages of the daughters, it is only the Patriarchal rules that are valid. This rule is implemented by the elder male member, father or any other guardian in a family. The supporters of this typical Patriarchal rule justify their attitude on many grounds, they regard it a matter of their prestige. They say, their women are their property. Women are considered out of wits, extra sensitive, emotional and weak in Patriarchal Indian culture. In the earlier ages they were treated as slaves and untouchables. They were largely devoid of the fundamental physical, moral and social rights and freedom of expression. Padma's marriage issue is to be viewed and accordingly decided in the same perspective by her father.

“So many eyes were watching, so many precautions were taken, and so much of value was at stake—the marriageability of Motilal Bhattacharjee’s oldest daughter, which, unless properly managed, controlled the prospects of his second and third daughters as well---that any violation of the codes, any breath of scandal, was unthinkable. Where, in Heaven’s name, could anyone even be alone in Calcutta? What hanky-panky business, in my mother’s words, could go on? Everyone knew the rules and the rules stated caste and community narrowed the range of intimate contact.”(*Desirable Daughters*,32)

### Suppression of Fundamental Rights of Women

Erin, a research scholar, writes in his research article, ‘Thoughts on *Miss New India* by Bharati Mukherjee published on May 17, 2011 about Mukherjee’s protagonist in her novel “Miss New India”. Anjali had different thoughts as compared to traditional Indian women. She raised her voice against the patriarchal suppression of fundamental women rights in her society.

“Anjali “Angie” Bose has outgrown her life in small-town Gauripur, India. She’s tired of its backward ways, slow pace, and lack of opportunity. When her father begins the search for a suitable husband, Anjali does her best to be a good daughter and go along; after all, since her older sister’s marriage failed, Anjali knows her father needs a success in the match-making arena. But the role she’s being groomed for—that of a dutiful wife and mother—is all wrong for Anjali.”(*Erin*, 17)

Ram Naresh Patel, Research Scholar, Dept. of English & MEL University of Lucknow, in his research work, “*Re-Inventing the Self: A Reading of Bharati Mukherjee’s Miss New India*” published in October 2013, mentions psychological journey and re-identification of Anjali, the protagonist, in *Miss New India*, outside the world of patriarchy.

“Mukherjee tries to expose the concept of too different India---first one which she has realized in her early childhood life full of social bondage and restrictions and other one which is at present in which a lot of global opportunities are available for a woman to grow and make some space/identity for herself in all walks of life. In ‘old India’ women/girls are restricted to the four walls of houses. Their behaviors are in a desired manner which is encircled by the social/mythological norms of the society. In ‘old India’ women do not cross the border lines or ‘laxman rekha’ of etiquettes and morality linked with the patriarchal society but in the novel *Miss New India* these two facets of old India and new India have been discussed explicitly.”(*Patel*, 34)

### Sub-caste and Linguistic Preferences

The issues of sub caste, linguistic preferences and sameness in political ideology are also brought into consideration while choosing the suitable brides or grooms for their daughters and sons. In no way the traditional parents want to lose the identical values of their family. Their blood, their land and community is very dear to them. They keep on maintaining their typical identity even after their daughters are wed locked and sent to their husband’s home. Parvati in one letter mentions to the preference of her aunt who was searching a suitable girl for her son and keep a very careful and keen eye on each and every suitable girl within her community.

“Aunt says please look only at Mukherjees or Chatterjees, but if the girl is exceptionally pretty and well situated in a pinch (even) Bhattacharjees, Lahiris and Gangulys will do. Remember sometimes Chakravorty is just a title, like chowdhury, and not a caste name. Do not be fooled, because sometimes people don’t even know their own

family origins". (*Desirable Daughters*, 108)

### Female Desires vs Family Values

In India, the happiness of an individual is subordinate to the collective welfare of his/her community. More importantly, the role of women is to be supportive to their husbands in all circumstances. The needs of individuals and aspirations of the women is not given due importance in what is essentially a patriarchal society. Women have to sacrifice their desires and ambitions for the sake of family. Even women sometimes, have to remain a life time virgin, sometimes wedded to a snake, a tree or with a Religious Book. It also involves the financial aspects as sometimes parents of the bride are unable to pay the dowry demanded by the parents of groom. Sometimes when the bride has huge property and wealth of her own, her parents, for not letting their wealth or property go out of their family, get their daughters married to others rather than a human groom. This is an entirely unique identity which becomes symbol for many things in the Indian culture. In the tale of Tara Lata, the same life time sacrifice is made by the bride when she is going to be wedded to a tree:

"But the reborn Hindu knew the working of fate was more complicated than English law and cared nothing about life and death, even of innocent children. His daughter's true fate, the fate behind the horoscope, had now been revealed: a life time's virginity", a life without a husband to worship as god's proxy on earth, and thus, the despairing life of a woman doomed to be reincarnated." The marriage did not take place", he said, his voice lawyerly, loud, authoritative, "Therefore, there is no question of dowry giving." His son is dead! The boy has been murdered". Jai Krishna turned his back on the avaricious man who would have been Tara Lata's father in law if fate hadn't intervened. "I will see my daughter married to a crocodile, to a tree, before you get a single price! I give dowry only to one does not demand it. There will be a wedding tonight, the auspicious hour will be honored." (*Desirable Daughters*, 14)

Mrs. Purnima Gupta, Asstt. Prof. in English, Govt. Degree College, Samthar, Jhansi(U.P.), in her research article, "*Gender Biases and Resistance in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters*" December, 2012, she writes about the curses of patriarchal society and its effects on the females of Mukherjee's world:

"Through this novel the novelist depicts the curses of patriarchy and different forms of exploitation upon women. Tara's unsuccessful marriage is outcome of imposed marriage. She married a man she had never met. She married Bish because her father told her to get married. She says; "I married a man I had never met, whose picture and biography and bloodlines I approved of, because my father told me it was time to get married and this was the best husband on the market." (*Desirable Daughters*, 26)

### Tribal life values in an African clan Umuofia

Life in an African tribe, Umuofia, where the clan is fully organized and led under typical Umuofian patriarchal customs, has been portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* by famous Nigerian writer of the post colonial studies, Chinua Achebe. Social set up in this clan is very strange, women are not treated well. All their decisions are solely in the hands of their men. Important decisions especially are taken by the leader, male member of the clan. Leader of the clan is a dictatorial person; his selection is made by the members of the clan on certain grounds. It is seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English, one of the first to receive global critical acclaim. Okonkwo is a wealthy and respected warrior of the Umuofia clan, a lower Nigerian tribe that is part of a consortium of nine connected villages. He is haunted by the actions of Unoka, his cowardly and spendthrift father, who died in disrepute, leaving many village debts unsettled.

Women, in the novels of Mukherjee develop new understanding of life and try to come out of the drastic influences of patriarchy. These new women, unlike the traditional Indian women don't give much value to divorces,

pangs of separation and family breakdown. Like Tara Lata, a Tree Bride in Indian folklores and often quoted as a symbol of sacrifice and virginity protection, they adjust themselves to live without a husband worship and protection. They face the challenges of being alone in the world of patriarchal beasts of the community who consider it to be a great fun to bait the alone woman. They feel emotional and sexual pleasure in different poses with her at beds.

### Concept of the life of two different India

In her novel *Miss New India* (2011), Mukherjee tries to expose the concept of two different India---first one which she has realized in her early childhood life full of social bondage and restrictions. And the second, where at present global opportunities are available for a woman to grow and make some space and recognition for herself in all walks of life. Anjali (The protagonist of the novel) totally rejects the patriarchal rules and does not accept the decision of her parents in match making for her. Instead, she is ready to face the life of challenges until she gets a life partner of her own taste and choice to live with. She has reasons as well in doing so, she has practical evidence of the stupid matchmaking of her elder sister and then unsuitable match for her own chosen by her parents. As necessity is the mother of invention so Anjali starts the exploration of herself, rejecting the patriarchal norms, she becomes Miss New India. After leaving her home, she writes in a letter to her parents:

“Dearest Ma and Baba,

I will not marry any boy selected by anyone but myself, especially not this one. If this leads to a barren life, so be it. As you should plainly see, the boy you selected has dishonored me. He should be sent straightway to jail. I am leaving this morning for Patna to see my sister, whose name you are reluctant to utter. When I am settled again, I will write, The process may take many months. I am ready to take my place in the world. I beg you not to try to find me.

Your loving daughter, A.”(*Miss New India*,64)

Women had started to question the bondage and oppression implicit in traditional religious institutions and social practices. They tried to recast their identities, create new roles for themselves in accord with the assertion of their identities that often differed from patriarchal cultural constructions of female roles like man to rule and woman to obey. The man, the master, and woman, the slave; man, the god, and woman, the devotee; man in the field and woman for the hearth and so on. They contested the patriarchal discourses on womanhood characterized by virtues like chastity, purity, ability to bear pain and suffering. However, the paradoxical reality is that they cannot completely make themselves free from the chains of the traditional system of social values. Woman is fragmented, with the duality of self, who struggles hard to fight for her rights and assert her individuality. She has to live as a wife subservient to her husband, as a daughter obedient to her father, or as a mother with an infinite amount of self-sacrifice for her children. As mentioned in the folk tale of Tara Lata, a Tree Bride, typical conception of patriarchal Indian society is revealed in the “Desirable Daughters”, where the father of Tara says:

“I consider myself a student of modern science,” Jai Krishna had explained, “and because I am a student of modern science, I cannot reject any theory until I test it.” And so far, the tests had all turned out positive. His two older daughters, seven and nine, were successfully married and would soon be moving to their husband’s houses and living as wives, then as mothers. They were placid and obedient daughters who would make loving and obedient wives. Tara Lata, his favourite, would be no exception.”(*Desirable Daughters*,10)

### Escapism from the harsh life of Calcutta

Tara Banerjee in *The Tiger’s Daughter* is a sheltered daughter of a Patriarch, the Bengal Tiger and her movements are well guarded till she stays in India but her American experience makes her bold enough to commit a cultural transgression by marrying a Christian. However her status of being the daughter of the Bengal Tiger absolves her of the sin which is deemed to be a radical transgression in a patriarchal set up. After bearing the shock,

uneasiness and hazards of an exile in her trip home in search of comfort and shelter, Tara goes to the office of Air India and reserves a seat on a flight to New York. After the reservation, post-colonial Calcutta again appears in front of Tara, with all symptoms of decline and helps Tara decide that she must escape from her dear Calcutta to avoid the poverty, hunger, dirt and violence of this post-colonial city:

“And Tara, still locked in across the street from the Catelli-Continental, wondered whether she would even get out of Calcutta, and if she didn’t, whether David would know that she loved him fiercely.” (Tigers’s Daughter, 210)

### Selection of Brides and Grooms

Patriarchal rule in Indian society largely affects the selection of brides and grooms. Financial matters, caste, social status and same political and religious faith are the chief priority concerns. Sometimes professional interests of the fathers involve in the matchmaking of candidate for their daughters and sons’. Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* hubs round the life of Dimple, twenty years old, timorous, middle-class Bengali girl who is eagerly waiting to be married. She has multihued dreams about marriage. Dimple has fixed her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father is looking for engineers in the matrimonial advertisements.

Daughters are a curse in Indian patriarchal set up especially for the financially weak families. They are afraid of the huge dowry, they have to pay on the marriage of their daughter. It is a traditional fashion to demand mouthful of dowry from the bride’s parents whether they are in a position to provide or not. Many daughters remain unmarried due to the curse of dowry their parents cannot afford. Whenever a baby girl is born in any home, they do not consider it a blessing. They say, it is a punishment to us for our past misdeeds. Even there are family breakdowns if there are a large number of girls born to a woman. Men ever prefer baby boys as they would be their heirs and keep their race on going in the world. They are the representative and caregiver to a family. Jyoti, the narrator in *Jasmine* comments on the patriarchal feelings on the birth of a baby girl in their home in India:

“In a makeshift birthing hut in Hasnapur, Jullundhar District, Punjab, India, I was born the year the harvest was so good that even my father, the reluctant tiller of thirty acres, had grain to hoard for drought. If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfill. But daughters were curses. A daughter had to be married off before she could enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generations. Gods with infinite memories visited girl children on women who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations. (*Jasmine*, 39)

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