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11 A Comparative Study of Bharti Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Dr. S.A. Khan

Ankushrao Tope College, Jalna (MS).

America is a country of immigrants. Almost one in five children in America is either an immigrant, or the child of immigrants. People from China, South Asia, and Africa have been migrating to America for various economic and political reasons, turning it into a melting pot of ethnic and cultural identities. Hence, writing about the experiences of the immigrants has reached the point of constituting a new literary genre. Indians started visiting England and America in the twentieth century initially for educational purposes. Enchanted by the alien culture and the prospects of prosperity, most of them decided to migrate and settle there. Thus like African-Americans, Chinese-Americans, etc. Indian-Americans have also become an important part of the multicultural population of America. Migration to a foreign land has many social, cultural, emotional, and domestic consequences. Hence, like other ethnic and cultural minorities, Indian-Americans also witness the clash of cultures and face the problems of assimilation.

Thus the immigrant narratives by Indian-Americans constitute a significant part of contemporary American literature. It is interesting to note that especially women writers of Indian Diaspora have created a big impact on American literary scene. Bharti Mukerjee and Jhumpa Lahiri are two distinguished voices in contemporary American literature. They have been praised and acknowledged both by the readers and critics and have received prestigious literary awards. Bharti Mukerjee and Jhumpa Lahiri share many things which make their comparison an interesting one. Both are women immigrants fiction writers. Both are highly educated.

However, apart from these superfluous trappings, certain concrete, academic, and literary considerations also encourage a comparison of their single selected works namely *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and *The Namesake* (2003). Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* appeared only after a year of publication of Bharti Mukerjee's *Desirable Daughters*. Both the texts have almost identical plot patterns with slight modifications. Both the novels deal with the lives and experiences of young Indian migrant couples from Calcutta. Both the couples have a son who plays a crucial role in the narrative. The female protagonists in both the novels pass through similar circumstances and come to the same end, though through different routes. However, in spite of these obvious similarities, these novels seem to communicate different approaches to the issues of globalization. The attitudes of the central women characters betray different sensibilities at the end of the novels.

Being complex creative works of highly refined and matured minds, these texts communicate a number of issues. However, this paper confines itself to the socio-psychological and emotional conditions of the first-generation migrants, the problems of their children, and the alternatives available to them in the context of the fictional world. *Desirable Daughters* traces the diverging routes taken by three sisters, Tara, Padma, and Parvati as they come of age in a changing world. The three sisters make their separate exits from the orthodox Brahmin Calcutta patriarchal family in the late fifties. Nineteen years old Tara's marriage was arranged by her father. Within three weeks she marries Biswapriya Chatterjee, migrates with him to America, and settles at Atherton where Bish makes a fortune in the Silicon Valley. However, once in America the husband-wife relations acquire a new dimension as individuality and freedom are not sacrificed here for family honor as has happened in India in the case of the Tree-bride. Hence, as the novel begins, she is a thirty-six years old divorced kindergarten teacher living alone at San Francisco with her son Robindra.

After the divorce she lives independently, sleeps freely with men and has a sort of live-in lover Andy. The son, Rabi, has been admitted to a school and visits his father occasionally on weekends. The father-son or the parent children relationship in American cultural context appear both amusing and appalling to the Indians. Tara informs that "From hints Rabi let drop, I assumed that Bish had caught him smoking pot and not made a fuss about it. Or Rabi had caught Bish in the red light district. This also suggests how the new culture affects and changes the attitudes and responses of the migrants.

The first-generation migrants find it very difficult to raise their children. They wish them to retain their native cultural heritage. But the American born children neither have the first-hand access to it nor do they care to know it. Migrant couples want them to fulfill their expectations. This tension acquires a momentum when a stranger comes to Tara's house with Robi claiming to be the illegitimate son of her sister Padma. Tara is shocked and tries to check out his history. However, Rabi is fascinated by him and meets him against her will. When interrogated he burst out "You've decided he is the heir because you called ... to Bombay to talk to your lying bitch of a sister. Every one's is a crook except the perfect Bhattacharjee sisters" Rabi later on confesses to be a gay. The appearance of the fake Chris Dey gives rise to many complications, revealing the past and the present of the sisters as well as their love affairs, flirtations, and hypocrisies.

Tara is bewildered. As she deals with these complexities, the family stories also guide her inner world and shape her responses, affecting her views of the external world and her behavior within it. She has been constantly in touch with her parents at Rishikesh and her sister Parvati at Bombay, making occasional visits to them with Robin. Now her past memories and her urge for the search of her roots constantly hangs on her. Angered by her decision to contact the police against his advice Andy leaves her permanently for good. Tara visits Padma and the mystery of Chris is solved by the police officer, revealing the plot of the gangsters and the murder of the real Chris Dey who was the actual illegitimate son of Padma. The threat to the lives of Robin

and Bish, who have been away on a vacation to Australia, is also communicated, Tara returns to her house informing them about the danger.

When Bish comes to drop Robin, Tara tricks him into staying for meals, prepares special dinner, and have sex with him. The Indian values have always been haunting Bish who feels remorseful due to the break of their marriage. Tara says, "Bish, please, it was my fault, my head was turned. I was so naive, I had too much time, and not enough to do.:"? There is a sudden explosion in the house when they were in the midst of a serious discussion on the deck in the early hours of the morning. Bish saves Tara from burning but is badly injured. He is admitted to the hospital where he is often visited by Tara who informs him of her plans and her urges to write; write about her experiences, about her past memories, about her roots, about the Tree bride.

The tree-bride was Tara's great grandmother Tara Lata, who was married to a tree at the age of five back in 1879 at Mishtigunj, West Bengal to protect her honor and the honor of her father. The last brief part of the novel shows Tara Chaterjee and her son Robin at Bombay with Parvati and then at Rishikesh where her old and dying parents are spending their last days. When we see her last, she is in the remote parts of Mishtigunj, exploring the history and searching with Robin the monuments of the Tree-Bride. Her search for the monument is symbolic of her search for her cultural heritage and her roots.

Like Desirable Daughters, Lahiri's The Namesake also begins in India. Like Tara, Calcutta-based Bengali Ashima's marriage is arranged by her father with Ashok Ganguli, Like Biswapria of Desirable Daughters, The couple migrates to America when Ashok is offered a fellowship. Eventually he is hired as an assistant professor at MIT. Ashima gives birth to a son. The parents cannot provide a proper name to him. Their patient but unrewarded anticipation of the "good" name selected by a Calcutta matriarch proves futile. Technical urgencies result in the child acquiring a pet name, Gogol, selected by her father. The name of the Russian writer strikes Ashoke because he was reading Gogol's book when he met an accident long back in India and had saved his life by waving the book from the debris to signal the rescuers. Before joining college.

However, initially, "assured by his grades and his apparent indifference to girls, his parents don't suspect Gogol of being, in his own fumbling way, an American teenager. In fact, Ashima and Ashoke are unable to let go of the land they knew and the customs they grew up with. But Gogol spends his life distancing himself from them and their ways. Like the first-generation migrant couple of the Desirable Daughters, Ashima and Ashoke also struggles to make their children appreciate Indian cultural heritage and values. However, the children in both the novels seem to rebel and try desperately to assimilate with their American peers. Gogol knows that "his parents and all their friends always refer to India simply as desh. He hates his name, is embarrassed by his parent's accent, and wishes that he could celebrate his birthday without his parent's Bengali friends. He abhors their annual trips to Calcutta. He longs for the day when he will be able to move far from home and start his own autonomous life. This can also be said, more or less, about his sister, Sonia. "Her formerly

shoulder length hair has been chopped symmetrically by one of her friends. Ashima lives in fear that Sonia willhave additional holes pierced in her earlobes ...

Gogol loses his virginity and after his break with Ruth, gets attached to Maxine. He prefers her company and denies Ashima's invitation to come home to see his father off who was awarded a fellowship to go to Cleveland for nine months. Even Sonia has been far away. Ashima prefers to live alone at her house.

Thus both the novels present the central women character as one caught between the two worlds. On the one hand there are parents and inherent native cultural influences which they cannot escape and on the other hand are the American born children, growing and behaving like native individualistic Americans. "Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, their need to keep their distance from her, is something she will never understand. Still, she had not argued with them.

However, in spite of the sudden death of her husband, unstable and shattered life of her son and her daughter's decision to marry an American, Ashima faces life stoically. She has learned to accept and assimilate, In the last brief, lyrical and most significant chapter of the novel we see her making arrangements for the last Christmas party she will host at Pemberton Road. It is the first one after her husband's death. The house where she has spent twenty-seven years of her life is recently sold.

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