

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**RECONSIDERING BHARATI MUKHERJEE: THE DISSOLUTION OF DIALECTICS IN  
*DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS*****NANDINI SHAH**

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**ABSTRACT**

Generally, in the depiction of the immigrant woman's negotiations with the New World, Bharati Mukherjee's treatment of the past spacetime becomes crucial. Usually, her novels portray the past spacetime as a circumscribing space that must be escaped in order to (re)construct identity. For instance, in *Wife*, Mukherjee depicts Dimple's inability to escape from the past as an inability to transform into an American individual who has the agency to define herself. On the other hand, in *Jasmine*, the protagonist almost completely rejects her past and her Indianness to facilitate her transformation and assimilation in America. Both novels depict the past as a constricting spacetime. However, in *Desirable Daughters*, instead of depicting the past as an essentialist, fixed entity that thwarts the transformation of identity, Mukherjee highlights the active participation of the past spacetime in (re)defining identity. Mukherjee's new artistic vision parallels Homi Bhabha's theory of the performative space, whose dynamicity challenges pedagogical fixity and contributes to the continual (re)structuring of both individual identities and nation-spaces. Meanwhile, Mukherjee's new treatment of the past spacetime resolves some of the dialectical strands of her artistic vision. To delineate the dissolution of these dialectics, this article traces Mukherjee's portrayal of the past spacetime, first as an essentialist entity, then as a fluid metaphor, and lastly as an ambivalent entity that helps the protagonist redefine her identity. In the process, critics who brush off Mukherjee's novels as having an Orientalist vision may be made to reconsider her aesthetics as well as her novels.

**Keywords:** Bharati Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters*, identity, Oriental, past

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Bharati Mukherjee's narratives generally deploy dialectical perspectives of spacetime such that they at once re-create Orientalist hierarchies of the West's superiority over the East and at the same time strive to break such Orientalist binaries. Consequently, several critics brashly disparage Mukherjee's novels for depicting "India" and "America" as essentialist entities and several other critics counter these charges by highlighting the metaphors of transformation incorporated into the novels to break essentialist binaries. Indeed, the ostensibly incompatible trajectories of Mukherjee's artistic vision generate complex contradictions that challenge a clean classification of her novels as dealing with assimilation or with postcolonial assertions of difference. However, Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* shows a positive trend towards the dissolution of these dialectics. In this novel, new *hybrid* spacetimes and identities are created which allow this novel to be situated in a more accommodative location, where contradictions can coexist.

Usually, in Mukherjee's novels, the very agenda that guides the plots of the novels necessitates the polarization of India and America as well as the typification of Indian women. In other words, Mukherjee's own agenda becomes her Catch 22: to show the alternative possibilities of America, India must be shown to be restrictive; to show Indian women transforming freely on American spacetime, India must be depicted as a place to be escaped; to show the agency available in America, Indian women must be passively sketched. The very aesthetics of portraying a transformation from object to subject, from passivity to agency, from patriarchal construction of identity to genderless individuality polarize and ossify "India" and "America" as static and hierarchical spacetimes. For instance, in Mukherjee's previous novels *Wife* and *Jasmine*, the protagonists are able to find agency to murder instead of committing suicide or directing their anger on themselves -- only in America. Such essentialism is present in *Desirable Daughters* as well. However, this novel is different from Mukherjee's earlier novels in that it attempts the dissolution of this essentialism. Nevertheless, the crucial dichotomy that must be set up in order to show its resolution is created as in her other novels

by casting India, Indian women and America in typified, flat capsules. This is evident in the lines below:

When everyone knows your business and every name declares your identity, where no landscape fails to contain a plethora of human figures, even a damaged consciousness, even loneliness, become privileged commodities.  
(*Desirable Daughters* 33-4)

The sustenance of Mukherjee's problematic essentialism and typification even in her most recent novel is apparent in the recurrence of deterministic images of India in the lines above, articulated by Tara, the protagonist of the novel, as she explains the reason for her preference of America over India. Even in this novel, initially, reified images of India as restrictive and America as emancipating abound to facilitate the demonstration of Tara's transformation from a stereotypical Indian wife to an ostensibly assimilated "California girl" (*Desirable Daughters* 63).

In doing so, however, Mukherjee plays the part of Edward Said's Orientalist who "*confirm[s]* the Orient in his readers' eyes; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions" (Said 65, emphasis in text). In stereotyping India as restrictive and America as the land of opportunity, Mukherjee gives her readers a version of Edward Said's Orientalism, which "[in] disregarding, essentializing, denuding the humanity of another culture, people, or geographical region, . . . views the Orient as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West" (108). Due to such stereotyping, "[t]he West . . . [becomes] the actor; the Orient a passive reactor" (Said 109).

Tara, in her description of her life in India, emerges as a typical Indian wife, though privileged by class, who has been "trained to be adoring" (81), and who readily marries the "right" boy her father chooses for her. Tara's childhood is described to have been secure and unadventurous – an impenetrable bubble – where everyone entering and leaving was monitored; where "there was no rebellion, no seeking after individual identity" (44). The image of the "impenetrable bubble" perfectly

substantiates an Indian woman's imprisoned life and Mukherjee's essentialist vision. As Bish's wife, Tara leads the life of a typical Indian wife -- she is shown images of perfect wifehood in the Indian woman who cleans after her paralytic husband; she is expected to preserve Indian values and re-create an "India" even in America, and is not allowed to study or participate in other activities, being first a mother. Like the other docile wives in Mukherjee's novels, Tara also follows her husband to America to support the achievement of his dreams, and, once in America, individual identity burgeons to protest patriarchal domination. America, therefore, initially emerges as the dreamland of opportunity. Just as both Dimple in *Wife* and Jasmine in *Jasmine* find agency to murder only after immigrating to America, Tara perceives that "the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled" (82) and gains the ability to divorce her traditional husband only after having lived in America for some time. For all these women, breaking or transcending the institution of marriage becomes imperative to assert identity: and such transcendence of patriarchal limits and assertion of individuality is possible only in America.

Meanwhile, in their euphoria of finding agency to transform their constricted selves and 'becoming American,' most protagonists in Mukherjee's novels seem to reject nostalgia and their past spacetime. In rejecting the past spacetime, it becomes an essentialist entity, a fixed stereotype of India, which must be rejected in order to transform in the New World. Again, binaries are created in the form of the ossified past and the transforming present. Mukherjee has often been accused of assimilationist tendencies because her protagonists reject their pasts as they acculturate. She seems to be following Karen Piper's view of assimilation here: "the idea of 'becoming American' mean[s] leaving behind ethnic distinctions in order to embrace 'American' identity" (20).

Mukherjee's aesthetics certainly necessitate setting up binaries, which in eliding political implications become problematic. The erection of the 'stereotype' by showing India as circumscribing and the West as the nation-space that provides agency and ability to transform identity, is very much "an orientalist discursive

strategy" as Said would put it or a "pedagogical formulation of the wholly Other for the sake of the West's domination" as Bhabha would put it. Mukherjee's portrayal of the image of the passive Third World woman coincides with Bhabha's concept of the pedagogical, which is fixed as well as repeated over and over again to reinforce the West's dominion over the typified. The pedagogical depiction of Indian women by recreating stereotypical qualities of the West's female Other -- passive, imprisoned and constructed in patriarchy -- re-creates orientalist and neocolonial agendas. The colonial stereotype created in Mukherjee's novels prompts postcolonial critics to interrogate the authenticity of Mukherjee's novels, their argument being that in molding her protagonists according to the needs of the plot, Mukherjee renders a distorted version of the true experience of the postcolonial subject's immigration.

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Although Mukherjee's agenda necessitates the formation of problematic polarities, she is in fact committed to breaking stereotypes so as to sabotage Orientalist binaries and the West's concept of the passive Third World woman. Focusing solely on the stereotypes and binaries implies only a sociological reading of Mukherjee's fiction. Mukherjee herself eloquently counters charges leveled by postcolonial critics against her seemingly orientalist aesthetics by invoking the metaphorical function of fiction and challenging the reduction of postcolonial literature to political sociology: ". . . no fine fiction, no good literature, is anchored in verisimilitude. *Fiction must be metaphor*. It is not transcription of real life but it's a distillation and pitching at higher intensification of life. It's always a distortion" (*Jouvert* interview 8, my emphasis). Acknowledging that Mukherjee's sociological messages are molded in fiction, which is metaphorical as she herself has asserted, reveals her keen endeavor to break binaries and erase essentialist boundaries.

Indeed, the movement from East to West, in Mukherjee's novels, usually involves struggles for power and breakage of stereotypes on the part of the protagonists enacted through rebellion, role-playing, dynamism and violence. Eventually, the movement also disrupts the pure categories of *the*

“East” and the “West”. Usually, in Mukherjee’s novels, the performative<sup>1</sup> in the form of struggle for power interrupts the Third World woman’s pedagogical formulation through rebellion. Through rebellion, she asserts her “self” as different from the erased or denied self, constructed in patriarchal roles. Similarly, the protagonists use violence – both physical and psychic – in the process of transformation and negotiation of power. Mukherjee also employs the metaphors of dynamism and journeys to rescue her protagonists from gender and space constrictions. The protagonists constantly remain on the move and escape stagnation, and symbolically extricate themselves from fixed roles and spaces. The protagonists’ constant movement interrogates the stagnancy of belonging and defies the “rooting” involved in stable states of territories and identities. For instance, escaping fixity, accepting rootlessness and constant movement become Jasmine’s strategies for crossing boundaries of gender and space and bridging the binaries of the “self” and the “other.” Trashing the past, however, is a precondition for her successful decision-making at the nodes of transformation.

With *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee adds the metaphor of the fluidity of the past spacetime and the Eastward journey motif to depict her protagonists crossing boundaries of space and gender. This new metaphor of showing the

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<sup>1</sup> Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “performative” may prove useful in charting the nodes of transformation where difference is dramatized and asserted through metaphors. The temporality of the subject positions produced at the transitional stations matches Bhabha’s “performative” spacetime, whose temporality and translatability interrupts the pedagogical discourse of subjectivity. According to Bhabha, the performative is the “enunciatory ‘present’” (147) that disrupts the pedagogical, which is “encapsulated in a succession of historical moments” (147). Truly, in tracing Mukherjee’s rejection of stereotypes, the performative, which enacts difference from essentialized notions of “us” and “them” must be taken into consideration.

dynamism of the past spacetime helps break binaries by accepting the performative and fluid nature of the past instead of rejecting it as a fixed pedagogical entity. Instead of showing the past as a fixed pedagogical entity to be fetishized or rejected as a haven of security, as the other two heroines do, in this novel Mukherjee depicts the necessity of accepting the past as a dynamic entity. She also acknowledges that acceptance of the dynamism of the past is crucial to gain agency to enunciate a new self.

The agenda of this novel, unlike *Wife and Jasmine*, is not the problematic transformation of an object to subject, a victim to agent, but a transformation of perception about the victimizing space itself and a reconsideration of what constitutes a victim. Nevertheless, the demonstration of the second requires the illustration of the first condition: Tara must be shown to transform from a victim to an agent so as to be able to rethink the victimized condition as well as the victimizing space. This creates her essentialist notion about India as narrated before. However, had she only transformed from a victim to an agent, the ossified past left behind would recreate the dualities inherent in her other novels. But, the reconsideration of the victimized space (India) after transformation from an object to a subject resolves the essentializing vision Mukherjee has been charged with. Unlike her previous novels, where the past spacetime or the country left behind appears as a circumscribed entity that can be cast off, in this novel the dynamism of the past problematizes such a facile belief in the past as a bounded entity.

Though Tara plays the role of a typical, docile Indian woman before her marriage and faithfully follows her husband, Bish to America, the promise of America soon gives her the agency to rebel. Like Mukherjee’s other protagonists, Tara protests the erasure of the self brought about by the construction of her identity in culturally prescribed gender roles by breaking the bond of marriage; here, through a divorce. The divorce represents a rebellious act that destabilizes the security of her complacent life even as it sabotages stagnancy of roles. Rejecting the iron gates of Atherton, Tara launches into a search for an agency to articulate her self in her own terms.

After her divorce, Tara moves into a house where living with Andy her lover and Rabi her son, she is able to assert her distinct “self” and adopt various roles denied to her as an Indian wife – lover, a gay child’s mother, a teacher and a computer tycoon’s ex-wife.

However, despite resisting the circumscription of the self through a divorce, Tara harbors an ossified opinion about her past Indian spacetime. Since she believes she has gained a distinct self through her divorce and become a part of “us,” she assumes the right to other “them” – she maintains a static belief in the pastness of her past. Using metaphors of the dynamism of the past and of Eastward journeys, Mukherjee depicts Tara’s – and her own – snag of essentializing the past as a fixed entity. Having always believed that “We are Bengali Brahmins from Calcutta, and nothing can touch us” (44), in one single incident of the past leaking into the present, Tara finds that “that hoard of inherited confidence, the last treasure I’d smuggled out of India and kept untarnished for sixteen years in America, was about to be exposed and auctioned off” (44-5). The sudden disruption of her placid belief in her family’s tradition-bound docility when Chris Dey appears on the scene claiming to be her sister’s illegitimate son, bursts her illusion of the fixity of the past. That there had been “gate-crashers” before her in her docile family comes to her as a “bolt of lightning” (31) that sends her on eastward journeys and sets “everything else in motion” (31).

Her feelings of alienation and powerlessness over her past impel her into a series of investigations to find the truth. Nonetheless, she discovers during her eastward journeys that gaining control over her past means neither trashing it completely as she had done before nor holding on to it as Padma, her sister does. Instead, she learns to accept its dynamism so as to control it by reinterpreting it in the present context.

Indeed, the displacement of static beliefs for Tara requires her to gain control over her past. Role-playing and eastward journeys become metaphors for the struggles for power through which Tara attempts to control her past and ultimately to redefine herself. The nodes of

transformation<sup>2</sup>, in Tara’s case dramatized as specific geographical spaces – New York, New Jersey, Bombay and Mishigunj – allow her to assume new subject positions and facilitate her acceptance of her past’s dynamism. The metamorphoses and psychic violence she undergoes at each node of transformation releases certain static beliefs she holds and takes her towards a fluidity that assigns an agency to articulate herself.

When Tara journeys to New Jersey and New York, she experiences the rigidity of preservation at the Indian ghettos of Jackson Heights and the Indian parties she attends with Padma. Here, Tara witnesses stark manifestations of role-playing and hypocritical duality. The entire ghetto of Jackson Heights, split between the need to imitate the West and the need to preserve Indian culture, emerges as a form of artifice that camouflages the truth. Every store in the ghetto, which looks outwardly like any store in India, hides “an ‘office’ somewhere in the rear where a computer-savvy nephew expands the online client base” (199). The change occurring in identities and ideologies in the new cultural context is concealed due to the presumption that change entails pollution, even while displaying outwardly a nostalgic reconstruction of Indian cultural norms. Padma also is involved in this dual attempt at adaptation and preservation, which is evident in her jewelry selling enterprise at Indian parties. Similarly, the climb to Danny’s (Padma’s friend and boss) office manifests “a fair representation of Danny’s rise up the ladder of success” (212) – Danny’s transformation from a pathetic “salesman in yellow jacket” (212) to the holder of the strings of the entire puppet-show of the Jackson Heights enterprise. Unwilling to transform completely, these preservers cling to a “half-India kept on life-support” (184), which ultimately leads them to pretence. The Jackson Heights enterprise represents a performed drama that ossifies into a pedagogical artifact – changed, yet denying change. All in all, Tara’s journey to Jackson Heights illustrates to her what she does not want to become: “a perfectly preserved bug trapped in amber” (184). She realizes that clinging to a lost version of the past only

indicates a relinquishment of agency and an ossification of the self rather than the enunciation of a new self. Moreover, the enterprise symbolically represents Mukherjee's own ironic repugnance towards those (Indian academicians in America) who advocate that the portrayal of immigrant experience should be restricted to nostalgic and tenacious clinging to a lost past as well as a passive acceptance of the unwanted changes necessitated in the new cultural context.

Similarly, at the Indian party in New Jersey, Tara encounters more versions of preservation. The museum-like preservation of time in Kajol's house, where "the deeper you go . . . the more desi [Indian] it becomes" (241), re-enacts an essentialist pedagogical version of the past. The room where Kajol's grandparents live represents the epitome of pretence: the grandparents and their servants haven't stepped out of the house in seven years and believe that they are still in Calcutta. The alienation of not-belonging becomes a form of rigidity here in that instead of negotiating new "homelands," nostalgic expatriates pretend to preserve a version of the lost home.

Tara's realization that she does not want to preserve her past as Padma does comes only after she herself unconsciously participates in the role-playing and in keeping up the pretence. She acts as the divorced and single wife: the perfect *femme fatale* for Indian men seeking the right combination of traditionalism and modernity. However, she unconsciously assists her sister in her hypocritical enterprise of selling saris at the parties. Keeping her sari edge low to set off the champakali as her sister had instructed and having her hair cut to set off the earrings, she believes she is capturing the hearts of all the men, little knowing that she is actually a mannequin displaying clothes and jewelry to people at the party. At the end of the party, when Padma strips her of her finery, she feels naked (257), not just for realizing that she had been involved in the community's preservation and pretence, but also because she realizes for the first time the pretence of her own ossified image of her past. More importantly, she realizes that role-playing and pretence of control over the past would not give her the agency to articulate herself.

Indeed, the journeys to New York and New Jersey only threaten to make her regress into "self"-less role-playing she has rebelled against by divorcing Bish. Her journey to Bombay, where Parvati maintains the role of a typical Indian wife reconfirms that simply being a wife implies imprisonment to her. Similarly, meeting with her parents in Rishikesh, where her mother suffers from Parkinson's disease – symbolically an immobile body imprisoning an active mind – and where her father is lost in tradition and spiritualism, shows Tara that these roles were unsuitable to her. Each journey, however, acts as a foothold in the course of the reconciliation of the self with the past.

Her search to enunciate herself leads her to literature. At two different points in the novel, Tara uses Tennyson's and Yeats's poems to make sense of her situation. However, these English men of letters do not help her find the voice she is seeking. Tennyson's poem "The Kraken" expresses the suddenness of change when a person's sleeping past cracks the surface and rises out of it in the form of the monstrous Kraken. In the Kraken who lies "Below the thunders of the upper deep/ Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea" (132), Tara recognizes the smugness with which she had let her past lie dead. She realizes this in the lines, "until the latter fire shall heat the deep . . . In roaring he shall rise" (133). Although Tara relates to the poem at some level, it does not become a mode of revelation to cope with the change she faces, for to her it depicts only the problem, not a solution. Similarly, the perfectly preserved version of India in Jackson Heights, reminds Tara of Yeats's Byzantium poems, which create a dream-like timeless world where "Golden birds on golden boughs and hammered gold and gold enameling" (205) represent the immutability of art, which is favored over human mutability. Again, Yeats's poem helps Tara recognize the tension between fixity and fluidity, between preservation and transformation that she has struggled with throughout the narrative. However, the poems, lacking the ability to help her strike a balance between ossification and rejection of the past, do not help her give voice to her ambivalent experiences. Western literature helps Tara identify her situation but does not give her the agency to voice her experiences and to transform her

situation. Mukherjee, it emerges here, certainly does not buy into Western ideology completely because she clearly depicts that Western perspectives do not always provide solutions to Third World women who occupy a different sense of reality.

Tara finds the agency to challenge imposed definitions and redefine herself through her journey to Bangladesh and through Tara-Lata's legend. Here, she learns to accept the dynamism of the past and strike the right balance between preserving and rejecting the past. Tara-Lata's legend is the "story" – falling on the thin line between fact and fiction – of Tara-Lata's transformation from a widow destined to be a family curse to an active nurse in India's freedom struggle. From a "despised ghar-jalani, a woman-who-brings-misfortune-and-death-to-her-family" (15), she goes on to become a saint, a freedom fighter (17) who takes on the roles of untrained nurse, spiritual healer and inspiration to a generation of peace-loving and peace-seeking individuals from around the world (20). Tara-Lata's belief that the Tree God had come down "to save her from a lifetime of disgrace and misery" (16) gives her the ability to control and transform her own and her country's fate.

The legend's ability to hold meaning even in Tara's present context makes it a metaphor, a node of transition for Tara because the subjectivity of the narrative allows crossing the borders of space and time and accepting multiple realities. Like others who had "discovered in her [Tara-Lata] something new" (29), Tara comes to understand "the stubborn potency of myth in the face of overwhelming change" (18) through the tale and finds firm ground to stand on in her unstable life. The metaphoric and performative nature of the legend allows Tara to move beyond the fixed label of "assimilated California Girl" and disrupt the pedagogical definition of the typical Third World woman.

Thus, a closed reading of Mukherjee's earlier texts has led to statements such as Gurleen Grewal's, who says in the context of *Jasmine*, "For the immigrant there are only two possibilities in *Jasmine*: either the ghetto where ethnic identity is tightly secured by a minimal interaction with the alien world or assimilation into the dominant white culture, requiring nothing less than the radical

rupture with the past" (183). However, in *Desirable Daughters*, the protagonist has not two, but three possibilities and the third one – of remaining in the liminal space -- is the one most of them eventually choose. While Tara undoubtedly rejects the nostalgia of expatriation, she also does not become "American," in the closed sense of the term. By preventing Tara from being labeled as either Indian or American and gaining stability, Mukherjee ultimately allows her the agency to define her own self. In the context of *Jasmine*, Gurleen Grewal also says, "Caught in the dialectic between the third world and the first, between the past and the present, *Jasmine* does not attempt a resolution by a complex synthesis; it simply dissolves the claims of the past" (183). However, in *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee does not "dissolve the claims of the past"; rather, by showing how the past cannot be completely elided, she creates the simultaneity she aims for in her novels, and succeeds in forming hybrid identities that are neither the one nor the other but "something else besides." Her "self," Tara realizes at the end of the narrative, is not a typical Indian or an assimilated American, but a hybrid – she learns to accept and locate her agency in this liminal identity.

The Third Space, then, is the liminal "no [wo]man's land" (*Beyond Multiculturalism* 31) where negotiations of "contradictory and antagonistic instances . . . open up hybrid sites . . . and destroy those negative polarities between knowledge and its objects, and between theory and practical-political reason" (Bhabha 25). This hybrid space "where difference is neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between" (Bhabha 519), in Mukherjee's novels, is usually formed of fusion and alienation; that is, the hybrid protagonist demonstrates Indian and American traits (fusion) and at the same time is alienated – neither American nor Indian -- as she straddle the liminal space. Bhabha's hybrid space formed of fusion runs parallel to Mukherjee's own theory of simultaneity, insisting on the "interpenetration of all things" (*Four Hundred Year* 38).

Despite rejecting the fixed roles of an Indian wife, Tara never assimilates completely into America. Though she herself believes that she is a California Girl and by "disguis[ing] herself in blue

jeans and a Pashmina shawl as one more divorced woman and single mother, happily bow[s] to the exalted American ideal of just blending in" (Mason 11), she is actually caught in the "undeclared war of Westernized Indian women with their country's traditional concept of a wife" (Mason 11). She is keenly aware in spite of her complacent belief in her assimilation that "I do not belong here, despite my political leanings; worse I don't want to belong" (79). Indeed, Tara never imbibes the rhetoric of western feminism in spite of rejecting her Indian role as wife. She is aware that the American feminist magazines she reads with other Indian women do not voice the ambivalence of their lives, that they "were not geared to the lives we led" (83) and that "the magazines weren't writing about us or for us" (83). Divorced from the role of devoted Indian wife, she finds herself just as alienated from the American feminist rhetoric that encourages, almost insists, that women talk about their problems and share their disappointments. Unacceptable as her peripheral role as wife is, she also cannot claim a central feminist role: "In America, it seemed to us, every woman was expected to create her own scandal, be the center of her own tangled love nest" (83).

When after her divorce she goes to live with Andy, her lover and her gay son, Rabi, she believes that her assimilation is complete because she "create[s] her own scandal" and takes on new roles inaccessible to typical Indian wives. Here, she feels "not just invisible but heroically invisible" (79) in "the rhetoric of modern San Francisco" (78), as if she had blended in the melting pot of America. Since the gay son resists the normal references of an Indian son and her live-in relationship with Andy resists all definitions of her being an Indian wife, she rests secure in the assumption of the modernization of her traditional perspectives in her retrofitted house. However, the house is also symbolic of preservation – she cannot forgo completely the "dusty identity . . . fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case" (78). This Indian identity, her past, remains preserved in her consciousness beneath the masks of modernization, so that in spite of believing herself to be a California Girl, her identity is still determined in Indian terms: "father's religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), sub-caste (Kulin),

mother-tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta), formative region of ancestral origin (Mishtigunj, East Bengal), education (postgraduate and professional), and social attitudes (conservative)" (78). Though she chooses to believe in her assimilation, the past in the form of her deterministic Indian self remains within her and she straddles the no-woman's land of hybridity.

Her complacent beliefs in the pastness of her past and her "secure assumptions about her smug, insular family" (Mason 11) are severely disrupted when her past suddenly becomes dynamic and penetrates into her present in the form of Chris Dey – "the bolt of lightning" (31) – who claims to be her sister's illegitimate son. As Deborah Mason puts it, Tara is "[s]uddenly forced to reckon with the culture she has cast aside" (11), and made to reconfigure her smug beliefs in the discrete "us" versus "them" rhetoric, where she believes herself to have earned a place among the "us." Realizing that she was rootless – neither an Indian nor an emancipated American severed from her past – she launches into a search for an agency to birth a new self.

Along with the disruption of her belief in the past, Tara finds that her belief in her assimilation is also questionable. The dynamicity of the past that destabilizes her belief in her assimilation resurfaces when Tara realizes that her past connections to Bish remain unsevered in the public eye. In spite of divorcing Bish and believing that she is an emancipated "California Girl" (63), she finds that "the ancient, tattered thread that connected" (143) her to Bish had still not completely worn out: Jack Singh points out to her that "especially in the eyes of Indians you'll always be linked" (143). Indeed, the news media, the Indians at the New Jersey party and even the imposter Chris Dey know her only as the wife of Bish. The public has an ossified view of Tara and therefore is quick to acknowledge danger to her person owing to her husband's fame. On the other hand, living in the present and believing that she has left the past behind, Tara wants to be recognized as an identity distinct from Bish's wife. The present in which she performs her difference is distinct from the past by which the public defines her. At the same time, she finds that the past is dynamic and its leakage into the present can disrupt linear



spacetimes. Andy tries to convince her that “the past is nice, this place is nice. It’s nice to visit the past every now and then. Just don’t live there” (76). Tara, however, has been rudely jolted into the understanding that the past is not a discrete “place” that one can visit occasionally and then forget – she has realized that the past is a dynamic undercurrent in the present and cannot be rejected; rather, it must be negotiated with to come to an understanding of the “self.”

Tara finds herself cast in a liminal space where she has no agency to voice the ambivalence of her position. Her split psyche vacillates between her American feminist half, which desires to find the truth about the illegitimate nephew, and the protective Indian self, which insists on settling for “a silence that would help preserve the family’s precious reputation” (Mason 11). Nevertheless, she launches on eastward journeys in search of the truth as well as the agency to express her ambivalent position. During these journeys, she finds that she does not want to be “a bug in amber” like her sister Padma and hold on nostalgically to a version of India. Tara realizes that though she cannot completely reject the past, she also must not cling to it nostalgically – rather she must accept her liminality. Significantly, even as the narrative moves eastward, Tara is not regressing to an original past – she maintains her liminal position. Mason has mentioned in this context that: “The marvel of *Desirable Daughters* is that even as its story flows into deeper and deeper pools of Indian history, religion and intrigue, it stays convincingly anchored in the wry, self-deprecating voice of a West Coast woman with a spiky, agonistic curiosity about the world” (11). Even in her Eastward movement then, Tara is not searching for a lost past; her journey is “most American of impulses, or compulsions, a ‘roots search’” (17) and also a search for an agency to voice her postcolonial ambivalence; that is, the movement is American as well as un-American. This position of being between worlds

dramatizes the activity of culture’s untranslatability, and in so doing, it moves the question of culture’s appropriation beyond the assimilationist’s dream or the racist’s nightmare . . . and towards

an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification of culture’s difference. (Bhabha 224)

By remaining between cultures and deferring the fixity of labels, Tara’s search for an agency to voice her postcolonial ambivalence marks the split and hybrid site of liminality where negotiations take place.

Ultimately, Tara gains the agency to voice her ambivalence through the ambivalent legend of Tara-Lata’s emancipation and her contribution to India’s emancipation. The ambivalent metaphorical quality of the legend – of its being “rooted” as well as “fluid” – gives Tara an agency instead of Western literature, which allows her to empathize but lacks the ambivalence of her postcolonial hybridity. Tara-Lata’s legend is a rooted pedagogical entity repeated over and over in history; at the same time, it is open to new interpretations and therefore is fluid. The search for an agency, allegedly a western concept, ends in India – her journey to India is therefore both Indian and American. Tara also gains agency due to the ambivalence inherent in Tara-Lata’s tale: Tara-Lata is a feminist as well as an Indian wife. Mason calls Tara-Lata’s marriage to a tree “the site of a most unorthodox and liberating marriage” (11) and an ancient magistrate is imagined to have said about Tara-Lata: “this woman does not look like a woman and she certainly does not behave as a woman” (309). Tara-Lata occupies a space wherein she is a liberated feminist. At the same time, even though Tara-Lata is involved in the emancipation of her country, she herself has never left the confines of her home – she has lived as a typical Indian wife. She is both typical and yet an unconventional Indian woman.

Tara-Lata’s ambivalence becomes Tara’s role-model for her own hybridity and she is able to accept her liminality of being an Indian as well as an American and of being neither an Indian nor an American. The legend, as a metaphor, becomes a performance of Tara’s difference from the roles of a typical Indian wife and the rigid identity of an assimilated California Girl. By turning her pedagogical static understanding of the legend handed down over the years into a performative

reinterpretation to gain power over the self, Tara learns to accept the dynamicity of the past and to control the definition of her own "self" not as either a typical Indian or a California Girl, but a dynamic being who need not be labeled but can be read through the stories she writes.

Both Tara and Jasmine find agency and the sense of homelessness-as-home in the liminal space itself by turning their liminality to advantage and becoming new hybrid Americans. Though the articulation of a new hybrid American identity is denied to Dimple, she also occupies an in-between space without turning her situation into opportunity. However, all three heroines share one trait: in attempting to articulate a new self, they find the past actively infiltrating into the present casting them into liminality. The liminality of the heroines – of their being neither American nor Indian as well as both American and Indian -- defers outside imposition of definitions on their identities and eventually the classification of the narratives, too. A complex synthesis of Mukherjee's dialectics, therefore, requires a concession of her incompatible contradictions as an inherent condition of postcolonial literature. According to Bhabha, the postcolonial writer should "neither reduce the Third World to some homogeneous Other of the West, nor . . . vacuously celebrate the astonishing pluralism of human cultures" (173). Bhabha affirms that postcolonial writing should incorporate dialectical modes of writing – a kind of "doubleness in writing" (141) --which would disrupt the pedagogical notion of assimilation and assert alterity to reflect the ambivalence of the postcolonial immigrant experience.

Though she calls herself an "American" writer, Mukherjee herself advocates "simultaneity" as her literary goal – "simultaneity" being her own more direct version of Bhabha's complex theory of hybridity. Most critics misunderstand Mukherjee's insistence on simply calling herself an American – "I choose to describe myself on my own terms, that is, as an American without hyphens" (*Beyond Multiculturalism* 33), she says -- as her buying into the American melting pot theory. They then project this assumption onto her novels so that they are seen as assimilationist. In fact, Mukherjee disavows the "coerced acceptance of either the

failed nineteenth century model of 'melting pot'" (*Beyond Multiculturalism* 32) or the model of multicultural mosaic, which to her implies "a contiguity of self-sufficient, utterly distinct cultures" (32). Rather, she advocates that culture and nationhood be considered "not as an uneasy aggregate of antagonistic them's and us's, but as a constantly re-forming transmogifying 'we'" (*Multiculturalism* 33). Her celebration of "mongrelization" is in effect a call to "redefine the nature of American and what makes an American" (*Four Hundred Year* 36) and a bid to portray the hybridity inherent in the cultural sign "American." Mukherjee's novels, then, should not be dismissed as neocolonial deployments based on the melting pot theory or ascriptions of postcolonial difference; rather, the new hybrid spaces and identities she creates should be read in parallel to her idea of simultaneity and mongrelization and to Bhabha's theory of Third Space.

It emerges eventually that reading Mukherjee's fiction while locating the political in her novels requires the concession of the dialectics of the postcolonial self. These dialectics upon synthesis form a complex dynamic of hybridity where elements of the contradictions meet to form a split, ambivalent and yet distinct entity that destabilizes the hegemony of polarities. The examination of the liminal identities thus challenges assumptions about Mukherjee's political leanings arrived at on the basis of the dialectics inherent in her novels. Ultimately, the changing dynamics of Mukherjee's artistic vision become evident.

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