

Contemporary Diasporic Cultural Identities in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* and the *Tree Bride*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the culture and structure of identities with specific connection with women's diaspora in modern era. This paper focusses two novels *The Tree Bride* (2004) and *Desirable Daughters* (2002) by Asian-American writer Bharati Mukherjee. These two novels present true cultural manifestations of transnational displacements and identity process. Concepts of transnationalism, diasporic and hybrid identities have remained in focus during this study. Theories of Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Inderpal Grewal support this study in analysis and findings. Concepts presented by Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler support the trajectories of empowerment, agency and performativity with both non-feminist and feminist perspectives. The paper discusses the structure of transnationalism and diasporic identities. The central findings after the analysis support the perception that, Bharati Mukherjee presents and problematizes the issues and subjects related to south Asian diaspora and identity formation of women in the selected novels. Diasporic element is very strong with cultural properties in relation to the India/U.S. movement. This study creates a critical awareness and understanding about women's subject in relation with diasporic process.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee constructs the image of a North American writer, who decides to immigrate to the United States to escape imperialism in the U. K. and in Canada. Such a dream of freedom is portrayed in her work, and the United States is deployed as the land of opportunities for immigrants. In Bharati Mukherjee's novels, diasporic women subjects travel these paths towards freedom. The writer has produced a considerable number of literary works, which consist of eight novels and two short story collections. There are also her memoir and non-fiction books. The protagonist of *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*, Tara Chatterjee, undertakes a project – to return to her origins, in India, the place where she was raised, to look back on her family's past. Tara collects information about her ancestor Tara Lata – the *Tree Bride* –, as an attempt to reconcile part of her Indian heritage and her present life as an assimilated U.S. woman. The idea of quest may represent one of the “most American impulses” – “a root search” (DD, p. 17), according to Mukherjee's narrative. This paper proceeds with the exploration of such themes. In addition to the approach favored in that study, the present analysis incorporates discussions on transnational women diasporic identities; the revision of myths, under a comparative and gendered perception; and the concepts of power and empowerment and their gender implications in relation to the protagonist's characterization. Thus, my attention now shifts to issues of cultural identity resulting from diasporic movements, which are experienced by Mukherjee's characters on the threshold of a new century, and especially represented by the protagonist of these two novels, Tara Chatterjee. The protagonist of the novels, the youngest of three sisters, is raised in a Calcutta conservative prosperous family. After getting married to a brilliant engineering student, she moves to the United States. From Tara Chatterjee's contemporary experiences, she imagines her ancestor, the *Tree Bride*: “a Bengali girl's happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrow of history all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her” (DD, p. 4). After the premature death of Tara Lata's husband, bitten by a snake, her father decides that she should marry a god who “come[s] down to earth as a tree to save her from a lifetime of disgrace and misery” (DD, p. 16). From this time on, Tara Lata begins a recluse living in the remote rural Mishtigunj, and becomes a local healer and a martyred freedom fighter. By considering this tale and comparing/contrasting it to the contemporary Tara's experience, Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist begins a process of self-evaluation, as well as a process of evaluating her sister's life stories, having the heroic deeds of Tara Lata as

a background to this movement. “Each generation of women in my family has discovered something in her. Even in far-flung California, the Tree Bride speaks again” (DD, p. 289). As Tara Chatterjee walks slowly with her son along the jungle pathway, following the same route taken by her ancestor before her, she has a vision that can be associated to a promising experience. This, in turn, may lead to the character’s redemption and self-discovery/self-knowledge. As she walks the village streets again, Tara Chatterjee finds her ancestry in the subtle details that help reconstruct her memories of childhood. And, by having the company of her son, she sees with fresh look, concerning the perception of a foreigner’s glance, that is, that of her U.S. son, at a familiar environment (to her). By doing so, Bharati Mukherjee’s work provokes reflections upon the composition of cultural identities of diaspora, which is the central subject of this study.

South Asian women writers have arrived like courageous fighters into the diasporic English literary scene. These women were willing to fight for their rights: the right to have their work published and read, and to help others to do the same by overcoming obstacles of every nature. They have come prepared to tell, reveal and denounce the Eastern social- economical-political restrictive practices towards women. Works by South Asian women writers have dominated bookstore shelves in English speaking countries in a way those by South Asian men writers have never done. Such women writers tell their stories in many various mother tongues, such as Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali among others. In their narratives, such women writers present claustrophobic and dystopic worlds regarding the patriarchal systems in which women are located and the severe cultural patterns that they are supposed to follow through. In general, they reveal a routine of hard physical labor in smoky kitchens and brutal human conditions. In Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction, a mosaic of immigrant images is portrayed, and transnational displacements assume a privileged *locus*. As Peonia Guedes argues, “Mukherjee [...] explore[s] relentlessly the contradictions in her own native culture and present[s] a dramatic revised vision of India, America, the world and the new immigrants” (Guedes, 2002).

1.1 DIASPORIC IDENTITIES

The representation of the process of identity composition of Asian Indian and U.S. individuals in the late twentieth and the very beginning of the twenty- first centuries, by looking at Bharati Mukherjee’s novels. It is perceived that the ever- changing processes which link history, culture, gender, and human displacements involve, as a result, the constitution of identity and citizenship. For the present study, the interconnections in such fields are observed, which provide the elements in the protagonist’s identity composite. Considering that diaspora has been linked to a multiplicity of spatial and temporal references, and also that it’s meaning has been expanded more than it originally had, it is important to understand the connections and complexities of diasporic movements that result in diasporic identities. A dialogical approach between historical processes and the constitution of identity composites favored by diaspora is proposed. In Bharati Mukherjee’s work, the characters go through diasporic processes. These, in turn, can be observed by means of their displacements, which are generally transcontinental, going from India to the United States. History usually appears in Mukherjee’s narratives as a referential backdrop to the characters’ trajectories. In a sense, Bharati Mukherjee draws upon many historical passages as a way of bringing her criticism on several Indian and North American political issues, such as interracial relationships, immigration and terrorism. Mukherjee makes use of the real event in order to make a critical assessment of Indian politics and, at the same time, the author reveals the changing shape of the North American society.

1.2 GREATEST MIGRATION

Large movements by immigrant women of voluntary and forced displacements cause the spread of millions of women immigrants throughout the globe. In Tara Chatterjee’s case, marriage leads her into a transcontinental displacement. She goes to the U.S. to accompany her future husband, who had been awarded a scholarship on engineering at Stanford at that time in the narrative. Yet, she could have gone to Paris, London or New York to continue her studies; for she had already graduated with honors from the University of Calcutta, and had received offers from those universities. The biggest mass migration of South Asians happened in 1947, as the British decided to grant independence to the colonies in the Indian subcontinent, a fact which resulted from the high cost of maintaining colonial rule. Despite the provisional union of Indians from different religions to fight the British during the independence campaign, many Muslims suspected that the Hindu majority would have given them unfair treatment once independence had been achieved.

Many of the Partition refugees migrated to the West – particularly to the USA and the UK – in the following decades, the 50’s and 60’s. With regard to the particular case of the women migrants, the different experiences they underwent and the reception given to them resulted, in most cases, in vulnerability to hardship, discrimination and

abuse. During the Partition process, the struggle and violence, sacrifice and loss are known by means of many reports that reach us, narrated in a myriad of individual and collective histories. The narratives have a common point: the greatest scale of violence was perpetrated on women. In many villages,

“Hindus threw their young daughters into wells, dug trenches and buried them alive. Some were burnt to death, some were made to touch electric wires to prevent the Muslims from touching them”
(Menon & Bhasin, 1998).

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To highlight the issues associated with hybrid identities and transnationalism.
- To bring the matters under research, linked with women's diaspora in the selected texts.
- To present the diaspora identities project by an Asian American writer in the selected texts.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q.1: How Bharati Mukherjee presents the contemporary culture and issues related to diasporic

identities in her novels *The Tree Bride* and *Desirable Daughters*?

Q. 2: How transnationalism and historical trajectories have presented in the selected texts?

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study offers analysis of the protagonist's trajectory. The woman's identity quest evokes intersections with specific concepts which have been explored by thinkers and commentators in the area of Cultural Studies. The notion of “diasporic identity/ies”, theorized by Stuart Hall (1990, 2003), is central to this study insofar as it is used to illuminate, analyze and discuss the identity constitution of Mukherjee's major character, as a U.S. female immigrant, from the higher Indian caste: that of Brahmin. Another relevant concept for my purpose is the one of “transnationalism”, elaborated on by Inderpal Grewal (2005, 2006), as it makes it possible to characterize, thus enabling an understanding of, the protagonist's displacements throughout the narratives. Central for the reflection on the issue of amalgamated identities resulting from diaspora is the idea of “hybrid identity/ies”, discussed by Homi Bhabha (2006). All these concepts illuminate the process/es that forge/s the diasporic identities of the main character in the novels and are discussed *vis-à-vis* the readings that compose the chapters that follow. The field of Gender Studies also informs the present reading and adds a feminist perspective to the identity issues in focus. The notions of ‘agency’, and ‘performativity’, conceived by Judith Butler (1990, 2008). Studies on revisionist writing, myths and utopianism provide further theoretical frameworks for reading Mukherjee's fictions. In a text that has become a classic in feminist thought and criticism in the Anglophone context, Adrienne Rich (1973) proposes “writing as a revision”, as the strategy of “entering an old text from a new critical direction” (p. 18). This is metaphorized in the fictions being studied by means of Mukherjee's portrayal of Tara Chatterjee's fresh look on Tara Lata's story, as the former undertakes the rewriting of the tale. Revision is also at work in the novels in relation to myth. Hence, Alicia Ostriker's idea of “revisionist mythmaking” (1986), a feminist literary strategy, is also considered in the present reading as it suggests an interpretative possibility to approach the story of the protagonist's ancestor. In Mukherjee's fiction, the narrator revisits the myth of the Tree Bride in a revisionist perspective, by adding a renewed, gender-marked cultural experience to timeless myth. Carolyne Larrington (1997), in her turn, offers some considerations on the mitigation of gender asymmetries through a reinterpretation of the roles played by women portrayed in a mythical (Hindu) perspective.

In an attempt of thinking about the constitution of identity/ies in contemporary times in relation to female diasporic displacements, I propose a reading of the novels by observing two main theoretical frameworks, those of Cultural and Gender Studies, and by drawing from studies in the areas of mythology and of Utopian Studies as they provide ways to widen the scope of the reading approach I build. The possibility of an investigation related to the phenomenon of mass displacements is suggested by the immigration of individuals coming from the impoverished third world countries towards the prosperous first world – a recurring theme in Mukherjee's narratives. They

displace themselves through transnational⁶ movements in order to take advantage of the opportunities given by their favorable economic situation in a rich country – a modern/Westernized academic formation, the possibility of applying such expertise in order to make more money, for instance. The categories of utopian and dystopian writing are also explored *vis-à-vis* Mukherjee's realistic writing. Ildney Cavalcanti's theory on feminist critical dystopias (1999) offers a useful and analytical resource to discuss the "patriarchal hells of oppression" which are presented in both novels by Mukherjee. And so does Vita Fortunati's (2006) description of the characteristics of utopian writing, which is appropriated in the context of the readings of the fictions proposed here. Although Mukherjee's fictions are more mimetic than most literary utopian writing forms, some tropes identified with this speculative genre can be observed in them, as will become clear in the discussion below.

5. ANALYSIS OF *THE TREE BRIDE* AND *DESIREABLE DAUGHTERS*

Bharati Mukherjee begins with the mythic family story of Tara Lata Gangooly and her contemporary great-niece, Tara Chatterjee, Bharati Mukherjee provides a new perspective on the issue of tradition and culture. Such a new perspective can be contrasted with the one presented in the author's previous novels, in which characters tend to be portrayed as immigrants or as outsiders, who have to deal with their tradition and their roots, in order to reinvent themselves again in a foreign country, often, in the United States – the place of reinvention. A series of displacements takes place throughout the narratives of *The Tree Bride* and *Desirable Daughters*, impacting on the main cultural understanding. Tylor's introductory consideration on culture, discussed by Greenblatt, is helpful in the context of the present discussion in the sense of relating the ethnographic perspective in the composition of a cultural identity mosaic, a process which can be observed in Mukherjee's protagonist.

"The term culture has not always been used in literary studies, and indeed the very concept denoted by the term is fairly recent. 'Culture or Civilization', wrote the influential anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in 1871, 'taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [and woman] as member[s] of society.'" (Greenblatt, 1990)

By resorting to the observation of the phenomenon of cultural assimilation, represented in the narratives, not only can I identify a utopian aspect, to the extent that one observes a movement or tendency towards reaching a reconciliation by means of the convergence of the cultural influences from the two worlds: Eastern and Western, which is manifested in the character's construction of a hybrid identity; but it can also be noticed as a dystopian one in the sense that the female characters experiment subjection to patriarchal culture and feelings of alienation. Throughout Mukherjee's fictions, both dimensions can be noticed. In the following fragment, for instance, the nostalgic utopian vision of a lost past is broken by the depiction of dystopic urbanization under colonial rule. In the depiction of the ancient village of Mishtigunj, before the British invasion. In the following fragment, a world made of beauty and perfection can be initially identified in the description of the geography. The utopian space is, in turn, suddenly disrupted by the image of the "sprawling city" which takes over it:

"Last century's green-gold village of Hindus and Muslims set between the forest called in British days the Sundarbans, and the clean, fish-rich river called the George is now a sprawling city renamed Razakpur [...]. There was a time when the extensive forests of the Shoondar Bon, the Beautiful Forest, protected all the southeastern Bengal from destructive storms. Wetlands filtered the salt and silt and sorted out the fisheries between shrimps and carp." (TB, pp. 28-29)

The idealized description above evokes an idea of a perfect and happy society, typically utopian. The idea of a place shared by Hindus and Muslims peacefully leads to a harmonious sense where nature assumes a fertile and abundant aspect. And the use of the expression "there was a time" emphasizes how far that time is from now. Besides, the presence of the „Tree Groom“ is also brought – Shoondar Bon, the Beautiful Forest who exercises his protection against natural destructive forces only, in a time before the British invasion. The image of a lost perfection is dismantled by the interference of Western political and cultural forces associated to the British permanence in the

Indian subcontinent. Such an invasion brings several unfolding's to the notion of the Indian national identity composite. Many critics have developed studies on the fictional construction of cultural identity. Among them, I emphasize the work by Sharmani Patricia Gabriel states:

“Multiculturalism as a concept of cultural citizenship, Mukherjee's work suggests how multiculturalism as a narrative of exclusion which demands a model of homogeneous people can be reconstituted into a view of multiculturalism as a discourse and practice in continuous remaking, representative of the 'routes' of identification brought into play by diaspora.” (Gabriel, 2005)

Stuart Hall's considerations regarding the issue of diaspora are relevant in this context. His comments can be taken as an acknowledgement of the problem which arises from a normative universalization of the diasporic identity: “a concept of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference, by hybridity” (Hall, 1990). In her narratives, Mukherjee represents what she defines as the hybridization of the United States of America and portrays the status of the new diasporic identity/ies of the ones who personify and embody several ethnicities together. This, in turn, results in the complex cultural composition of U.S. 'real life' envisioned in her fictions. Much has been discussed about the interconnections between Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies. Terry Eagleton states that,

“Indeed, the most flourishing sector of cultural studies today is so-called post-colonial studies... Like the discourse of gender and sexuality, it has been one of the most precious achievements of cultural theory [...]” (Eagleton, 2003).

The concept of cultural identity plays a central role in postcolonial struggles, once the processes of displacements and replacements in a new world order are leading to new geographical and cultural reshaping. The subject of diasporic experience may (re)discover something that was once hidden underneath history: the possibility to retell his/her own story by resorting to renewed personal perceptions that may generate, in turn, new conceptions of identity within new practices of representation. Thus, through such processes, the negative connotations of the experience of diaspora, resulting from forced displacements, victimization and alienation feelings, are gradually being replaced by a new scenario of recognition of the different as taking part in the construction of new patterns of identification. As it was already mentioned, Mukherjee's characters undertake transcontinental journeys, in order to acquire new perspectives, new experiences by means of which they may develop their potentialities. I argue that, in her writings, the author enables readers to reflect on culture from a renewed perspective by depicting characters that displace themselves throughout continents; and that, by doing so, they may represent the multicultural mix, opening up the possibility of the recognition of cultural „minorities“ which is opposed to a centered definition of culture.

The novels *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* are different from Mukherjee's previous work, especially from those of the first trilogy. The experience of a double identity leads the protagonist to her identity quest. Tara Chatterjee's hybrid identity shakes the concept of her previous fixed identity, her “Indianness”. As she enters the U.S. cultural context, she oscillates between being an Indian and a U.S. subject. For this reason, she needs to find out who she has become. And in relation to the present fictional time, these historical events are fictionalized in the representation of the terrorist attacks, which include the bombing Tara's house narrated in the beginning of the novel. This event triggers a series of investigations which also leads the protagonist back to her native homeland – India. Once there, Tara Chatterjee explores the paths of her ancestor's trajectory and finds out the connections between her family and the bomber's: the Gangoolys and the Hais. Tara tries to understand the implications which led the young man to destroy her house and almost kill her family. She states, “I know that somewhere in the wire-web of history, our lines have crossed” (TB, p. 246). After the bombing of her San Francisco house and a coincidental meeting during an ordinary visit to a doctor, Tara Chatterjee is compelled to try to decode who she really is. *Desirable Daughters* introduces, at first, the story of the protagonist's ancestor, which is going to be pursued in the narrator's quest. The contemporary Tara finds a connection between herself and her great-great aunt, which sets the stage for the undertaking of her roots journey: “All of my life or at least ever since my mother told me the story of Tara Lata the Tree-Bride – and that I had been named for her – I had felt, for no discernible reason, a profound connection” (DD, p. 16). By questioning her life status, she wonders about her family origins. This conducts her to investigate the composition of her own cultural identity. In the beginning of *The Tree Bride*, the protagonist recollects the stories she was told in her childhood. These include some Hindu legends that make her

look back to her cultural origins, a useful and necessary knowledge for Tara's identity search. By examining the Hindu version of the stork legend, for instance, another connection between the two Taras may be traced as the soul of Tara Lata may have waited awhile to be embodied again – in her great- great-niece's body, Tara Chatterjee. According to the Hindu version of the stork legend, the ancient soul is reborn in a new living body, which bears its "past tenancies": Tara Lata's soul is reincarnated in Tara Chatterjee's body. In this sense, the fragment above functions as a metaphor for Tara Chatterjee's birth and epitomizes further approximations in the two characters' trajectories. Their transgressive attitudes in the face of the establishment, for instance, provide another clue to such parallelism between the characters. Tara Lata provoked the British Raj by sheltering revolutionaries under her roof. The authorities considered her to be behind an insurrection, a fact which probably may have caused her death. In a similar way, Tara Chatterjee proved to be equally challenging, by breaking with the Hindu (Bengali) tradition – getting divorced and having a foreign lover – and also, by deciding to follow her own path. The ancestor's courage is brought back into life in the protagonist's attitudes, starting from the very simple act of moving to a far different country, to the challenging attitude of breaking with her cultural tradition.

To some extent, Mukherjee's fiction is indeed blind to the evils of the Third World's immigration process. That is to say, although her characters go through oppression, violence, they find redemption in the process of forging their U.S. cultural identity. I tend to agree with Gabriel regarding the absence of a more critical approach concerning the issues of "race, class, gender in the workings of identity politics in the America". It must be emphasized that the author seems to take a benevolent perception of the North American culture, while she is heavy on her native culture and traditions. I understand that Mukherjee possesses such an optimistic view for she has never been a poor or illiterate immigrant; on the contrary, she immigrated to the U.S. with a good academic background and married a North American citizen. This may indicate a possible way to understand her positive attitude to the West, North America particularly. The critic emphasizes that "assimilation is cultural looting, cultural exchange, or a willful and sometimes costly negotiation: an eye for an eye, a self for a self." Drake defends her argument by pointing that

"Mukherjee's stories do not simply promote American multi-culture or celebrate assimilation; rather, precisely in order to confront the historical circumstances of ethnicity and race in the United States and the complexities of diasporic subject-formation." (Drake, 1999)

Some factors reconfigure the idea of community. Both the local and the global, here and elsewhere, are reconfigured in Mukherjee's fiction, as evidenced in the following excerpt from *Desirable Daughters*: "The rhetoric of modern San Francisco makes me invisible. I am not 'Asian', which is reserved for what in outdated textbooks used to be called 'Oriental'. I am all things" (DD, p. 78). By assuming to be "all things", Tara Chatterjee declares her globalized cultural identity/ies. In her eyes, she attempts to embrace a desired status – invisibility. In the U.S., she is not a rich Bengal-Brahmin woman; she may be just any woman. The protagonist of *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*, on the other hand, does not need to change name(s), to fight for inclusion or acceptance. I already mentioned the fact that Tara belongs to a high social group, not only in India for being a Brahmin Bengali, the highest caste in the national hierarchy, but also for being extremely rich in North America. And I also highlighted that although she has a wealthy and successful life, having reached a high standard in the so-called "American way" of life, she opts to track down her cultural- historical background in order to understand who she is/represents, by undertaking a journey back to India. It is symbolic that this happens after Tara Chatterjee's Californian house is bombed by mysterious people, causing serious wounds to Bish Chatterjee seriously, once she considers herself to be partially responsible for that occurrence. So, Tara understands that the probable reason for the bombing was an attempt to end her life. In the following extract, Tara presents the reason for returning to India:

"The Tree-Bride, the aged virgin who did not leave her father's house until the British dragged her off to jail, the least-known martyr to Indian freedom, is the quiet center of every story. Each generation of women in my family has discovered in her something new. Even in far-flung California, the Tree-Bride speaks again. I've come back to India this time for something more than rest and shopping and these gin-and- lime filled evenings with my mirror-self. I'm like a pilgrim following the course of the Ganges all the way to its source." (DD, p. 289)

In this sense, she returns to the India of her childhood, and tries to follow her ancestor's track, which takes her to building up a different perspective on the country in which she was born. This time, she concentrates her attention on the past, getting in contact with the story of Tara Lata and the evils committed against women those days. As a result, she attempts to narrate her family story in order to understand her present in more depth, and be in peace with herself.

Concerning the fictional treatment given by Mukherjee to reveal the atrocities perpetrated to women in the East, particularly, in India, emphasis must be given to the very title of the novel *Desirable Daughters*, which clearly denotes a rather ironical sense. In Hindu societies, especially in over-protected patriarchal families, daughters are not desirable at all for they only foretell trouble. The three daughters are three Brahmin upper-class sisters. The sister-characters are named Parvati, Padma and Tara. Their mother named them after goddesses²¹, due to her belief in the power of the deities, longing for strength, capacity for survival and prosperity to her three daughters. All of them reach such things throughout the narratives, but in different ways.

6. DISCUSSION

In *Desirable Daughters*, the story of the narrator's ancestor is presented: Tara Lata Gangooly who married a tree. In order to avoid family misfortune and death, "the god of Shoondar Bon, the Beautiful Forest, come[s] down to earth as a tree to save her from a lifetime of disgrace and misery" (DD, p. 16). And in *The Tree Bride*, the protagonist tries to understand the bonds which unite the Tree Bride and herself. In the passage below, the unfolding of the tree bride's unusual wedding is presented, which leads her to become an agent of changes, despite never having left the Mishtigunj village. In this sense, the contemporary Tara feels the need to discover the „real“ bonds that connect herself and her ancestor and wonders there must be more to her than just a name. Despite the chronological and situational distinctions, as indicated in the passage below, both of them break with the rigid Hindu system in which they locate their origins.

In developing the idea of a utopian aspect in the search for cultural identity, I draw attention to the village of Mishtigunj as a remote, peaceful landscape where Tara Lata Gangooly isolates herself from the rest of the world, after the night of her strange marriage. The character is beyond people's reach and assumes an attitude of a "saint", of a special and "untouched" being. And Mishtigunj is described as the place which receives and protects her. "The narrow world of the house and the city felt as secure to me [Tara Chatterjee] as it must have to Tara Lata in Mishtigunj" (DD, p. 23). The utopian dimension, in this case, is perceptible in the representation of the isolated space as an enclave, a haven, which is a recurring motif in utopian literature. A transformation and reconfiguration of the village into the headquarters of young soldiers and rebels, which signals a shift in perspective from utopian to dystopian tendencies. When Tara Lata decides to open her house to receive such people, she takes part in the rebellion, also becoming a fighter and supporter herself, a different person from that one she had become in the night of her uncommon wedding. The portrayal of the evils of violence and oppression in Mishtigunj characterize dystopian aspects, going in the opposite direction from the utopian aspirations of happiness, prosperity, benevolence and good conduct initially associated with that space. Considering the idea or motif of utopia as an ideal place, a refuge from a troubled reality, it must be emphasized that Tara Lata's house is transformed from an idyllic place into a „bad“ place: a territory where violence is perpetrated against the inhabitants whose lives the authorities want to control. Thus, the idea of the refuge as an alternative „good“ place is subverted. In a passage of *Desirable Daughters*, the evils committed against the people during the rebellion period in Mishtigunj are presented. In this passage, Bharati Mukherjee makes use of a different graphic strategy in her narrative. The atrocities are introduced in a list format, in which the violent actions appear as statistics, like a report.

MISHTIGUNJ
Killed by bullets - 9
Wounded by bullets - 35
Rape and assault on women - 65
Assaulted by lathi-charge - 359
Homes looted by police - 100
Homes burglarized by miscreants - 70
Houses burned by soldiers - 20
Arrested - 617
(DD, p. 308)

Talking about the past is always a way of telling a story, that is to say, it arises a connection between fiction and history. According to Hutcheon, “narrative is what translates knowing into telling, and it is precisely this translation that obsesses postmodern fiction” (Hutcheon, 1988). As it has also been pointed out above, a dystopic reality can be observed in the novels. First, in ancient times, violence is manifested in Mishtigunj by the imposed marriage of a five-year-old child. Then, more violence is presented in the lists of atrocities committed against women, culminating with Tara Lata’s murder. And in more recent times in the narrative, violence and destruction compose the chaotic narrative setting – the bombing of Tara Chatterjee’s house, leaving Bish crippled, as he suffers the impact of the explosion, and the violence committed against Victoria Khana, her doctor friend, causing her death. The representation of dystopian elements in Mukherjee’s fiction is characterized by a perceptible gendered point of view. This aspect enables us to emphasize the convergences between the textual strategies deployed by the author and theorizations on the literary genre of the feminist critical dystopia. For Cavalcanti, such narratives “portray, in most cases in an exaggerated way, women’s oppression under patriarchy, thus provoking a cognitive response and satirical attitude with regard to our gender-polarized social environment” (Cavalcanti, 1999).

7. FINDINGS

Bharati Mukherjee’s protagonist comes from an upper-class family, she does not face social and economic difficulties, due to her wealthy Brahmin caste. In this sense, the novels under analysis are to some extent blind in relation to the evils of transnationalism and present gaps in relation to the chaotic and violent side of such displacements for some immigrants who are less privileged. What is depicted in these two novels is an encounter that ultimately becomes a celebration of two different cultures, historical backgrounds, and two distinct times (the ancient and the contemporary), by means of the dialogue between the local and the global symbolized by the main character’s interconnections. It is relevant here to refer to Whitman’s fragment that opens this chapter. Its tone of celebration of crossings can be considered as analogous to Mukherjee’s when identified a similar approach to the movements: Whitman’s poem proposes a risky journey to distant lands, full of potential for exploration and discoveries; in her turn, Mukherjee also offers such a journey in her narratives through the protagonist’s trajectory. In her fictions, Bharati Mukherjee seems to call the readers’ attention to the abuses women have been subjected to by means of drawing from historical circumstances of dystopic situations lived by women in remote societies. The author represents and contextualizes an oppressive system which is emblematic of patriarchal societies, by depicting the parallel stories of the Tree Bride and of the protagonist and her sisters. In spite of all different situations they undergo, they converge in relation to their historical background and share a common pursuit: they want to know who they are, and to become themselves.

Finally, as concerns a formal aspect, it is emphasized that Mukherjee’s writing is composed as a saga, and view this as a significant narrative strategy that enables her to develop her stories spanning generations. This allows the stories to cover a long period of time, encompass geographical spaces (transnational and diasporic displacements), and be constantly revising historical, social, and cultural references from different points of view. Thus, it is believed that the author finds a successful balance between evoking a timeless aspect (by resorting to mythical narrative and to recurring human experience of diaspora) and the revisiting and reviewing of culture. Indeed, Mukherjee’s works offer readers a privileged *locus* of representation for one of the major trends in contemporary fictions: the presentation of contemporary characters who undergo India/U.S. transnational movements; while they also provide us with renewed renditions of some of the Indian primordial narratives. The role of transnational movements which epitomize the articulation of diaspora and the construction of multicultural identities in the novels studied. By presenting open endings, Bharati Mukherjee’s narratives suggest that identity processes may be triggered continually. This writing mode, in turn, may be seen in relation to the Hindu pantheon, which features gods and goddesses in their multitude of incarnations. I defend that the central outcome of the protagonist’s trajectory is the possibility of her reinvention as an autonomous individual – a subject who is undaunted by the patriarchal structures in which she is inserted, and decides to move across continents in order to search for her cultural roots.

8. CONCLUSION

Bharati Mukherjee’s portrayal of social mobility which characterize contemporary displacements and mass movements in the East/West dynamics by looking mainly at the protagonist Tara Chatterjee’s quest in two of her most modern novels, *The Tree Bride* and *Desirable Daughters* as well as some other characters like Tara’s sisters and her ancestor, Tara Lata Gangooly, whose ‘presence’ and impact on the main character pervade both narratives. It focuses on immigration, diaspora and particular attention was given to the processes of identity composition, metaphorized by the protagonist’s geographical dislocations and the cultural and subjective implications of such processes. It shows that both novels offer a privileged *locus* for observing the imaging of the newly reconfigured

Indian-U.S. subjects in the late twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. In so doing, the fictions enable a better understanding of diasporic subjectivities. In regard to presence of a utopian/dystopian dimension in the fictions analyzed, It points out that both novels feature elements that can be associated with a utopian literary tradition, but in a more critical, fluid view of utopia as an ongoing process which retains a strong transformative tendency without the programmatic quality of the traditional utopian discourse. With regard to gender issues, Mukherjee's novels suggest a more critical stand. By investigating her cultural roots by means of revisiting her ancestor's path, Tara Chatterjee makes a connection which goes beyond the coincidence of the name between them. She is inspired by and identifies with the gender subversion accomplished by the *Tree Bride*. Her ancestor defies the phallogocentric order by challenging the authoritative regime imposed by the British raj. Her acts and their implications and effects on Tara Chatterjee's own actions provoked this gendered-informed reading, which reflected on the subversive potential of the narratives. Hence, I defend that the narratives propose a cultural revision of the standards imposed by patriarchal societies.

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These are the first editions of the novels, and in future references, the initials DD and TB are used, followed by page numbers.