



# Surveillance and Dystopian Consciousness in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

**Dr. V. Vijayay Reka**

Assistant Professor / English

School of Engineering and Technology

Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan University, Samayapuram, Trichy

Email: [rekaramkumar2006@gmail.com](mailto:rekaramkumar2006@gmail.com) | Phone: 9965798000

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1405-9110>

## Abstract

*Desirable Daughters* (2002) by Bharati Mukherjee has generally been studied in terms of its preoccupation with identity, migrant family relationships, classes, caste and gender politics of migration. The present article will claim that the work of a continuous, albeit frequently hidden, dystopian imagination based on the varying types of surveillance is also in play in this novel. By applying the Foucauldian theoretical framework of panopticism and Deleuzian theoretical framework of control societies to *Desirable Daughters*, this paper demonstrates that the notion of diaspora as regards it is perceived in the novel of Mukherjee is not only a hybridity or a place of opportunity but a disciplined field whereby subjects, particularly the women are measured, controlled and forced to display specific kinds of identities. The plot lines, narrative voice and character strategies include an architecture of watchfulness functioning by the state and immigration apparatus, the multicultural gaze of host societies, the expectancies of homelands as well as the interiorised self-surveillance of

characters in the novel. This paper performs a close reading of the main characters, devices of narrations and socio-spatial settings portrayed in the novel to exemplify how surveillance brings on a dystopian consciousness where freedom is conditional, identity is a weapon of existence, and agency is re-constructed. This paper finds that *Desirable Daughters* by Mukherjee is a work of contribution to the body of diasporic literature as it forms the use of the terms of surveillance and dystopian theory into the lexicon of critical writing of diaspora studies.

**Keywords:** Bharati Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters*, surveillance, dystopia, diaspora, panopticism, gender.

## Introduction

Fiction The fiction of Bharati Mukherjee has always received the interest of scholars in terms of subtle depictions of immigrants, who struggle with cultural dislocation, belonging, and reinvention. A novel that chronicles the journey of three sisters, Padma, Parvati, and Tara, *Desirable Daughters* (2002) glides carelessly between Calcutta and New Jersey, questioning the issues of class, caste, memory, and politics of performance in the



life of the diaspora. The critical scholarship has focused on how the novel explores the identity, nostalgia and transnational family relationships; what has not been extensively discussed is the consistent atmosphere in the novels that its worlds, homeland and hostland are governed by regimes of vigilance and control. The lives of the sisters do not solely evolve due to economic and cultural duplicity, but also due to ongoing surveillance: both of immigration authorities, of multicultural demands in the United States, as well as the inward observation each of the sisters subjects herself to.

This paper interprets *Desirable Daughters* as a place in literature where there is a convergence of surveillance and dystopian consciousness. I believe that Mukherjee enacts diasporic dystopia, a field wherein the discourses of normativity, the practices of institutions, and the gazes of individuals are in collusion to establish diaspora as a controlled state. By relying on the views of Michel Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* and Gilles Deleuze on societies of control, the analysis will demonstrate how the spatial structures of the novel, the processes of gender formation, and narrative forms create a panoptic economy: visibility is a powerful means of conformity, whereas invisibility is risky and expensive. The analysis specifically concerns Tara, whose experience in New Jersey is illustrative of the duality of the performance of and surveillance of immigrants; Padma and Parvati also portray peculiar differences of regulatory gazes. This paper broadens interpretations of the novel in terms of hybridity and adaptation to foreground power, discipline, dystopic coordination to foreground, and thereby achieve diasporic experience by foregrounding surveillance as key to the Mukherjee critical project.

## **Theoretical Framework: Surveillance, Dystopia and Diaspora.**

Monitoring texts offers effective conceptual keywords to explain the text by Mukherjee. The panopticon metaphor of Michel Foucault is a device through which power is internalised through the option of surveillance: the few observe the many, and the many start to control themselves in the fear of being controlled (Foucault). The model is useful in understanding the influence of social norms, bureaucratic inspection and the gaze of the other in creating migrant subjectivity. As a Foucaultian concept developed by Gilles Deleuze, the idea of societies of control was based on the idea that disciplinary institutions are substituted with more open systems of modulation and constant control; control is distributed among checkpoints, databases, and social expectations (Deleuze).

With the addition of surveillance theory to the study of diaspora, one can demonstrate that migration involves not just movement and hybridity, but also exposure to new forms of surveillance: border checks, documentation regimes, employer surveillance and the gaze of the multicultural marketplace. Furthermore, migrant women might be subjected to a gendered hyper-visibility (who are supposed to act as certain cultural identities), as well as being susceptible to the racialised invisibility or mistrust (Anthias; Mahajan). This two-way movement visibility as not only an instrument but also a liability, formulates a situation akin to dystopian novels in which agency is circumscribed by institutional surveillance and identity has been made a form of performative work.

Mukherjee, therefore, tempts one to read *Desirable Daughters* in terms of a diaspora imagined as a dystopian architecture: identities are traced and measured; bodies and



allegiances are surveyed; the difference of cultures can be a commercially instrumented and monitored object. This structure enables us to see how Mukherjee performs surveillance on the institutional, social and interior levels.

### **Watching and Regulatory Gaze in Desirable Daughters.**

Desirable Daughters is a story of three sisters who take completely different paths in this world: Padma remains in India and bargains with the caste and tradition, Parvati leads a modern life, and Tara emigrates and lives in America. The decision of each of these sisters, and their role in society, subjects them to various standards of questioning. Of special interest is Tara who turns out to be Tara Gangooly in America. This narration of the novel, which is quite commonly filled with irony and reflexivity, traces the way in which Tara manages the demands of an American multiculturalism, which glorifies and limits ethnic difference at the same time.

The surveillance system of the state is also present in the story very clearly and indirectly. The lives of the sisters are organised around immigration laws, naturalisation procedures and the bureaucratic need to set the legal and social structure of identity. The transfer of Tara implies creating paperwork, meeting the expectations of the employer, and bargaining about the forms of recognition provided by the institutions. The state, in the fictitious world of Mukherjee is never an omnipotent singularity, but a constellation of practices such as immigration checks, workplace norms and civic rituals that make up the migrant life.

Outside of an official institution, the multicultural gaze of the host society is a more nuanced but widespread system of control. By often putting the immigrant in the

role of the cultural object to be experienced, to be tasted or to be evaluated, multiculturalism tends to make the object a curated object, whose presence is tightly controlled. Her suburb implications where festivals, cuisine and so-called ethnic exhibitions are acceptable within some range implies that there is no means in which multicultural inclusion is possible without enacting the acceptable, non-threatening otherness. In these circumstances, we are surveilled on a daily basis: neighbours gawking, employers evaluating, children adapting, or they are marginalized.

Mukherjee also examines the manner in which the expectations of the homeland whether of caste or family honour and gender roles still persist as surveillance mechanisms beyond the borders of space and distance. Social obligations, letters and memories are mechanisms of diasporic responsibility. The sisters owe not only to the American laws but to the social account that has not been erased yet and is counting decency and fame at home. In this way, the surveillance in the novel becomes transnational: it traverses boundaries as it sustains the demand and restriction even remotely.

### **Gender, Performance and Self Survey.**

In the surveillance economy by Mukherjee, gender plays a central role. The expectations placed on women in Desirable Daughters are multi-fold and they determine how the women move and how they represent themselves. The life of Tara is like an example of female hypervisibility: being an Indian woman in America she has to be read racial and prescribed with images of feminism, home and exoticism. The novel reveals how Tara at times commodifies aspects of her past (recipes, rituals, anecdotes) that render her readable and sellable to the multicultural world; at other times she holds



back or covers up aspects of herself to prevent stigma or pity. This perpetual self-observation is a brand of self-policing: the internalisation of norms and preemptive adherence to the potential external criticism.

The life of Padma, in India, challenges the role of caste and class surveillance- her family status, marriage ties, and social behaviour is very closely monitored by the family networks. Even Parvati, much more modern and more cosmopolitan, cannot avoid the demands of her gender and family. Mukherjee therefore, illustrates how both patriarchal gazes are going to be continuous across geographies: migration changes them, but not necessarily the power of gendered discipline.

It is interesting to note that female performance, as depicted in the novel, is often shown as a strategic adjustment, but not necessarily as an act of victimisation. Even Tara choices about what to divulge, what to hide, what rituals to conduct, or which rituals not to conduct are all tactical methods of bargaining power. However, this agency is performed according to limited parameters; the very decisions are influenced by surveillance. In the story by Mukherjee, therefore, agency is ambivalent: yes, but always in response to a watching architecture. This ambivalence is the source of dystopianity in the novel.

### **Spatial Arrangements: The Home as Panoptic Site, Borderlands and Suburbia.**

The spatial dimension of surveillance is placed in essential spaces that Mukherjee uses in his novel. Borders- physical and figurative- come in the form of identity border checks. Airports, embassies and legal forms identify migrant bodies to be inspected. Suburbia is a sanctuary and a panopticon in the domestic context. The community in which Tara lives in New Jersey is a sociably minded area with

a difference, which is a location of policing by etiquette, gossip, and assimilation. The suburban yard and the PTA meetings, or the aisles of the grocery shelves and the corridors of the workplace, turn out to be the territory of negotiation of the ethical economy of belonging.

Even the very home is through the prism of ambivalence: it is the place where family traditions are preserved, but it is a place where performative gestures are made: celebrating festivals with visitors, setting out the objects to display cultural capital and packaging family histories to sell them to the outside world. In this regard, the household is a type of institution with surveillance (self-monitoring family members) as well as without (assuming the judgment of neighbours). Spatial imagination of Mukherjee therefore rethinks everyday domesticity as a place of regulatory visibility in accordance with Foucault's argument that power functions within places of dispersal.

### **Aesthetics of Surveillance Narrative Voice.**

The narration voice used by Mukherjee makes it difficult to enact the surveillance. Changing in tone from one instant to the other, the narrator of the novel becomes either intrapersonal, confessional, or ironic, detached, just watchful of the machismo of the cultural performance. It is a reflexive narration whereby the characters are viewed as both the objects and the narrators of their lives. The recursive performance of telling, whereby family histories are rehearsed, myths of origin are retold, anecdotes are repeated to social effect, is itself such a form of surveillance. Mukherjee emphasizes the role of autobiography and memory as the place of social expectations, rehearsing and policing by making characters narrators of themselves.



Additionally, the novel tends to be scrupulous about details the organisation of domestic objects, the acoustic correctness of a name, the exact contents of a recipe, and the minuscule facts of an appraisive gaze seem to be witnesses to an appraisal gaze. Such aesthetic preferences form a literary panopticon: little details are replicas of sincerity, ancestry, or accommodation. The reader is also involved in this gaze and thus is engaged in the evaluative economy, which also enhances the feeling of dystopia in the novel.

### **Resistance and Negotiation: Constrained possibilities.**

Although this novel predetermines the issue of surveillance, it also documents resistance practices and reframing. Negotiated autonomy is manifested in Tara in the form of tactical self-presentation, Parvati in the form of subversive modernities, and Padma in the form of insisting on cultural memory. The characters in Mukherjee never merely give up, they devise methods of putting themselves through the constraints, by irony, reinventions, selective revelations, and transnational relations.

But this opposition can hardly ever be complete. It is temporary, situational and in most cases expensive. The consciousness of dystopia raised by the novel is not dystopian hopelessness, but dystopian confined possibility: agency exists, but at all times, through watchful structures. In this way, Mukherjee provides such a realistic description of diasporic agency that it is resourceful, flexible, and yet, operates within the context of systemic surveillance.

### **Conclusion**

Desirable Daughters is a work that builds up on the deliberation of Mukherjee about the principles of the diaspora, as it insists that the

movement is not only a spatial act, but a kind of a relocation in the web of surveillance and regulation. Regimes of immigration, multicultural demands, family obligation and internalised self-observation as portrayed in the novel create a dystopian consciousness whereby the bodies and identities are on unrelenting evaluation. With attentive narrative techniques, spatial planning, and character development, Mukherjee is able to show that the concept of diaspora can serve as a managed field in its visibility, performance, and constrained characteristics.

An analysis using Foucault and Deleuze lenses helps to illuminate the systems of discipline that define the life of migrant women and even redefines diasporic studies to address surveillance as a key method of analysis. Mukherjee therefore does not just narrate migration and identity but she helps to expose how these identities are being policed and tries to negotiate, and sometimes rework the process of identity. Research that might continue to intertwine Mukherjee novels with recent scholarship of surveillance, particularly on the topics of digital surveillance and the control of databases, may fruitfully compare how newer technologies make the already problematic image of the diasporic life in the novel more complex.

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