

# Cultural Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughter*

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**Abstract :** Culture is a quest for good but it is not good if the quest is not a free choice. Immigrants have exclusive fictions that show experiences of liberated and developing countries. Tradition and cultures have taken up a new form in the modern times, where the problems of diaspora and cultural and self- identity crisis have become predominant subject in the contemporary literatures. *Desirable Daughters* by Bharati Mukherjee portrays the struggles faced by Tara, the protagonist because of Eastern culture and Western culture. It portrays the journey of culture identity through the protagonist's trials and tribulations in her life. The new identity in America creates problems for Tara, where she is alienated by her own community and the natives of Americans as well because of her attempts to adapt western culture. Her life is a microcosm of all women and their world who undergo similar situations and it exemplifies how women can become matured and overcome these problems in such situations and empower themselves without depending on men in immigrant country.

**Key Notes:** tradition, alienation, reincarnation, immigrant, microcosm

## I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'culture' described simply as that which makes life worth living. According to T. S. Eliot, culture requires a unity and diversity with respect to regions, religions and social classes. There should be a group of cultures sharing a common core as in east and west. The culture of the individual is dependent upon the culture of the society. Culture is a quest for good but it is not good if the quest is not a free choice. Culture plays a vital role in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee. Tradition and cultures have taken up a new form in the modern times, where the problems of diaspora and cultural and self- identity crisis have become predominant subject in the contemporary literatures. This study deals with the problems that arise in the lives of immigrant women due to their attempt to adapt a new culture.

## II. Sufferings of Immigrants

Immigrants have exclusive fictions that show experiences of liberated and developing countries. As an immigrant, Bharati Mukherjee also experienced difficulties to adjust to the traditions, society and culture in abroad which she has depicted through the lives of her women protagonists. A natural desire to tackle cultural tensions finely defines her creative impulse remarkably manifested in all her novels. The conflict of the Occidental and Oriental cultures and their impact in the lives of the protagonists are expressed beautifully in her novels. Her women characters confront a multicultural society affect their immigration and evolution.

## III. Tara's Thirst of Culture

In Indian patriarchy, marriages are imposed on girls. Girls are not allowed to be in love or marry a man of their choice especially of other castes. According to the Hindu myth, marrying as a child bride would lead her to reincarnation. Tara, the main character living in a Bengali village too is introduced as a traditional child bride to be entangled in an arranged marriage. But just before the ceremony, the groom was bitten by a venomous snake and died, even though both families had correctly worshipped the snake goddess to avoid the predestined tragedy of hers. She escaped her ill-fate but the bridegroom was bitten by it. Even though the marriage had not taken place, the bridegroom's father came to claim his share of the dowry. The bride's father refused to give it to him.

In Hinduism, the only way for a woman to reach nirvana is through the worship of her husband. This means that an unwed woman is both a social outcast and unable to be reincarnated. To save his daughter in this life and the next, Tara's father symbolically married her to a tree. This was considered a better fate for her than remaining unwed. So everyone in the village mockingly called her as a 'Tree Bride'. The Tree Bride is a symbol of self- sacrifice.

The 'Tree Bride' also gives a positive meaning as it serves as a symbol to celebrate the liberation and independence of woman from the male domination and male support because the 'Tree Bride' proves that a woman need not be safeguarded and supported by man; she can live even without a man. Tara says that,

**"The 'Tree Bride' has become the 'model of selfless saintliness' while My story was different, perhaps an inversion."(*Desirable Daughters*.p.280)**

She is the protagonist of the novel because she has the invincible courage to transcend the boundaries, to take initiations on an unknown path which may lead her to ruin. As a brave heroine, she makes adventure in dress, food and fashion. She began to address her husband as Bishu while in India, she could not utter his name. She also enjoyed sexual freedom with Andy. She gave divorce to her husband because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled while she knew that divorce was a stigma for woman in Indian society. She wanted to work and to be economically independent. She says;

**"I married a man I had never met, whose picture and biography and bloodlines I approved of, because my father told me it was time to get married and this was the best husband on the market."** (*Desirable Daughters* p.26)

Husband in Indian traditional society is treated as God, sheltering tree, provider and protector, but Tara broke this myth and chose another man who suited her character and who satisfied her sexual desires. She rejected to be an object of sacrifice and a silent and passive creature to her husband. She aspired to be loved and respected and did not want only to be provided and protected by her husband as was desired in the case of other women. So she differs from other women.

All three daughters had been expected to adhere to the parents' wishes and become well-groomed Indian wives, married to men of their own social class and caste. Padma lived in America, but she clinged on to Indian ways, friends, clothes and food. The eldest daughter, Parvati, married in a love match rather than through an arranged marriage, but she filled the traditional role of an Indian housewife. While Tara's sisters Padma and Parvati led a complacent and passive life, adopted a middle path and had conflicts about their new identity. Yet, they did not feel the need to extend their horizons and were less confident.

**"Our bodies changed, but our behaviour never did. Rebellion sounded like a lot of fun....My life was one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage."** (*Desirable Daughters*.p.27-28)

She differed from her two sisters. She divorced her wealthy husband, the richest and most important Indian in the country. She strived hard to raise her teenage son, Rabi, on her own. Divorce was unheard of in Tara's Indian immigrant community, so hers had become an open secret, something everyone knew about but which no one ever talked about. She was happy with Andy as she was not with her husband, who saw love as interchangeable status and honour. Being a different woman in the family she faced the issues of sexual and mental problems. Because of these cultural changes, she lacked her family supports.

Tara emerged as a powerful figure to meet every adverse situation. She marched ahead with all her limitations to an unknown and unfathomed path of realizing her full potential as an independent human being. Tara refused to see herself as foreign, as anything but American. She was able to define herself through what she was not, but struggled to identify what and who she was. She described herself as feeling invisible, but to her, this invisibility was freeing.

Tara arrived home one afternoon and found a stranger sitting with Rabi in her living room. The man, Christopher Dey, addressed her as aunt and explained that he was Padma's illegitimate son, the product of an affair with a Christian man when Padma was only a teenager. This revelation was a bombshell: a child born out of wedlock, a child fathered by a man of a different social caste, and a teenage pregnancy were all sinful behaviour to people of Tara's caste.

This surprise led Tara to reflect on her past and on the culture she was raised in with its strict premarital social codes to protect daughters' virginities and its equally rigid definition of what makes a good Indian wife. As she tried to uncover clues about Christopher's parentage to determine if he was telling the truth, she reminisced about her years growing up in Calcutta, among lavish parties where she and her sisters would wear British-style dresses and ate Western foods and had education at a convent school where they were expected to learn perfect English, confidence, and dignity. But in finding the truth, she must confront Padma about her past. The events forced Tara to confront the harsher aspects of her past and the culture she was raised in.

In the end, Tara decided to find her roots by traveling back to India with her son to identify her own culture. The two travelled along a path amidst imagery that echoed the descriptions used in the tale of the Tree Bride at the beginning of the novel. Tara had a vision of kerosene lamps that again echoed the opening scene, and experiences a spiritual moment of wonder.

#### IV. Conclusion

*Desirable Daughters* reflects the struggle of Tara to search her own identity and culture. Woman has been considered as a powerless, weak and second sex in the world. So she has to fight against her inner conflicts and male-dominated world to empower herself. On the whole, her life is a microcosm of all women and their world who undergo similar situations and it exemplifies how women can become matured and overcome these problems in such situations and empower themselves without depending on men in immigrant country.

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