

# Quest for Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's 'Desirable Daughters'

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## Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee, an immigrant Indian writer, has played a notable role in the escalation of Indian English Writing with her notable works. The prime premise of her works is the issues encountered by women in their foreign atmosphere. Mukherjee's amalgamation of two cultures has given her a true outlook of traditional Indian and contemporary American way of life which she in turn has given to the readers through her works. Being an immigrant writer she unveils the topics, diaspora, assimilation, cultural conflicts, immigration, quest for self actualisation and identity. Most of her protagonists strive hard for their identity in the native as well as foreign land. This paper aims to analyse the depiction of personal identity of Indian migrant woman in the U.S. by Bharati Mukherjee in *Desirable Daughters*.

**Key words:** Assimilation, Immigrant, Identity, Modernity, Tradition.

Bharati Mukherjee, an expatriate Indian in the United States of America, is one of the remarkable women writers who have enlightened the Indian English Literature. Through her writings, she has received a world - wide recognition. Mukherjee, through her writings, has unveiled her own self via the protagonists. Bharati Mukherjee, like many other post-modern writers, has revealed the issues encountered by the Indian immigrants in the US or Western world. Immigrants, being grownup in one country and migrated to another one, have complex experiences. Their new life has paved way to various themes like diaspora, globalisation, transnationalism, cross-culturalism and self identity.

Bharati Mukherjee, in most of her novels, has dealt self actualization of female characters through their search for identity. Her novels explore the shifting identities of diasporic women, between the present day modern life in the United States of America and the past traditioned life in India. Bharati Mukherjee, in her work *Desirable Daughters*, has unveiled the quest for the self definition and self identity of modern educated woman being caught in-between tradition and modernity.

*Desirable Daughters* is a story of immigrants and the behaviour of three sisters and their various ways of dealing with identity. In this novel, the prime protagonist Tara Lata struggles with the themes of identity crisis, self destruction and self discovery. This novel

portrays the traditional Indian Brahmin family and a contemporary modern American one through the life of the protagonist, who in innumerable ways broken with tradition still remains bundled with the native country.

The novel, *Desirable Daughters* begins with the story of Tara Lata, a five year old child headed deep into the forest to marry a tree, as her teenage fiance is bitten by a snake on her wedding night. When her fiance's father has claimed dowry, Tara's father, being a lawyer, realized the greediness of the groom's family and took a striking decision declaring, "*I will see my daughter married to a crocodile, to a tree, before you get a single piece! I give dowry only to one who does not demand it. There will be a wedding tonight, the auspicious hour will be honored.*" [14]

The tree bride spends her entire life within the walls of her house, emerging out only at the time when she is dragged by the colonial police for her participation in the freedom fight and for her financial support. The protagonist, Tara is named after her great grand - mother, Tara, the Tree Bride, with whom she relates her identity.

Tara after her marriage migrated to the United States of America, where she divorced her husband chosen by her father for her. In Sans Francisco, she engrossed herself in non familial life. By isolating herself from her family and community, Tara challenges the traditional value of Indian family of considering husband as god and his goodness as prime concern. Tara discloses the sufferings that Indian women encounter in name of marital dharma through the words, "*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.*" [4] These words reveal the gender discrimination prevailed in the Indian society and at home. Tara unveils her ancestral search, "*. . . I finally yielded to that most American of impulses or compulsions, a "roots search."*" [17]

Padma, Parvati and Tara, three sisters grew in Calcutta in 1950's, are close together looking alike like a blossoms on a tree but have different characteristics that is revealed through the lines, "*Sisters three are we . . . as like as blossoms on a tree. But we are not.*" [21]. In the entire novel, their difference in quality is prevailed. Tara, the youngest daughter of the family is the protagonist and narrator of the novel, connecting past with the present. Tara lives in Sans Francisco with her adolescent son, Rabi and lover Andy, an ex-biker, Buddhist carpenter. Though she lives in America, she constantly has feeling of Indian in her. The striking point in her life is the arrival of the stranger, Chris Dey, bearing a letter of introduction from Ron Dey, claiming himself as the illicit child of her older sister, Padma, and calling Tara as his 'mashi'. This incident has forced her to remember her childhood days, when she and her two elder sisters are brought up with the rigid cultural values.

The conservative traditional rule in Indian society, in which the three sisters are brought up, is obviously explicit in the instances that the narrator recalls. The groom for marriage will be selected only by the elders of the family where the bride is to accept a stranger as her husband and he has to be worshipped as a god according to scriptures. When Tara desires to study more, she hears from her father she calls as magical words, “There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks.” [23]

Tara is taken back when Chris Dey appears as her sister’s illegitimate son, challenging her perceptions of the past questioning her assumptions about her past and threatening her identity. Tara believed that any violations of the codes, any breath of scandal was unthinkable for her family. “In India, we didn’t have outside influences like the media, or lax schooling, or cars and dating and drugs. We didn’t know family breakdown. Our families existed inside an impenetrable bubble . . . There was no rebellion, no seeking after individual identity.”[44] Though there is Americanization in her behaviour and thinking, she is entangled with the Indian roots. Tara’s quest for her roots associated with her great grandmother, Tara, the tree bride, proves to be her journey for identity. Though she has gone far from the nest, her stay in Rishikesh provides evidence for her encounter with her lost Indianess.

Tara, not only divorces Bish, but also raises her teenage son Rabi on her own. She also works as a simple teacher, a choice which would be unimaginable in the culture of her birth. Cultural differences are revealed in the novel in various places by the narrator. Mukherjee has depicted the difference in culture between the East and the West. “It’s one of those San Francisco things I can’t begin to explain in India, just like I can’t explain my Indian life to the women I know in California. I have told my Calcutta stories many times, and Americans seem to find them endlessly amusing, and appalling.” [26]

Bharati Mukherjee, through the lives of Tara Lata and her two sisters, the author, skilfully portrays the themes of changing identity, western feminism versus Indian tradition and self-discovery. Moving with ease between generations, Mukherjee weaves together enthralling stories of the sisters' ancestors, their childhood memories, and dramatic scenes from India's history. Mukherjee has cut out the shapes of three Bhattacharjee girls of Ballygunge and placed them at strategic points - Mumbai, where the middle one lives, New York, where the most forward of the girls has settled, and San Francisco, where Tara, the youngest, makes a home.

Tara discloses the issues of marital relationship through the relationship of Bish and her: When I left Bish (let us be clear on this) after a decade of marriage, it was because of the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled. I wanted to drive, but where would I go? I wanted to work, but would people think that Bish Chatterjee couldn’t support his wife? [82]

Tara had a reason for getting divorce from Bish. She was living her marital life in a comfortable zone. Being secluded, she reveals the facts that her husband had no time for her as well as she was carrying on the relationship just for formality. To Bish, love has different meaning. Love is the remains of providing for parents and family, donating to good causes and community charities, earning professional respect, and being recognized for hard work and honesty. Bish remained so busy that she says: In his Atherton years, as he became better known on the American scene-a player, an advisor, a pundit-he also became, at home, more of a traditional Indian. He was spending fifteen hours a day in office, sometimes longer.

Her quest for identity takes her back to her childhood reminiscence against the conditions of the scene from Indian history which gives a loaded image of what it means to cherish a female in the society which gives little thoughtfulness to her. Her memories about her childhood and youth in India, is not a happy one. The fact that her family had been conservative and traditional makes her to rethink. She says: "We were traditional Hindus, very orthodox Bengali Brahmins, despite Daddy's occasional peg of Scotch in the evenings and the MGM musicals. We were afraid of Brahmos, fearing contamination from our own side, our own best side in many ways, more than from true aliens like Catholic nuns"[180].

Tara feels that she would not be relaxing in India, where the old conservative values still exist.

Tara became limited with an identity of Bish, where she states "My world was Atherton, and the two weeks we spent each winter in Calcutta visiting his parents-with a few side visits to mine-and the arrival-and-departure nights in Bombay with Parvati" [82]. In this novel conflicts emerge between native and foreign cultures. These two concepts are incompatible. The conservative role assigned to women in India is the very antithesis of what American feminists adopt. She knows that in India, people will view her with disgrace as she is a divorcee. Not only patriarchal system but also the Hindu society's customs and rigid norms are depicted in the novel:

Therefore, Ron Dey slipped under the most refined radar system in the world: Hindu virgin protection. So many eyes were watching, so many precautions were taken, and so much of value was at stake-the marriageability of Motilal Bhattacharjee's oldest daughter, which, unless properly managed, controlled the prospects of his second and third daughters as well that any violation of codes, any breath of scandal, was unthinkable [32].

The aforesaid example also brings out the different ways in which societies are organized in traditional India and America. In India, the bliss of an individual is subsidiary to the collective goodness of his/her community. More importantly, the role of women is to be supportive to their husbands in all situations.

The individual needs and aspirations of women were not given due importance in India. But in America, each and every individual male or female enjoys their life fulfilling

their wishes or living their life in their own concern without thinking about others. The three sisters from Calcutta are no longer strictly hurdle by this primal culture, for they find themselves in the midst of liberal America, where the scope of their freedom and expression is at its furthest from realities in India.

Padma, who is a clothing designer in New York, knows nothing of the boy, but at the same time, in India Ron Dey, accepts that the boy is his. The mystery deepens when Tara approaches the police, who determines that the boy in reality isn't Chris Dey but a pretender using his passport. At the same time, Tara finds that she's being hunted by a Bengali gangster, and her ex-husband Bish is caught up in a cyber terrorism threat by Indian hackers who threatens they'll unleash a super virus that could hinder every hard drive in the US.

Tara, though she has attained modernity in America, is not free from her community. In spite of her eagerness to escape the margins of her community, Tara remains constrained inside it by the gender markers of wife and mother. For example, the detective whom she consults for Chris Dey's threats warns her that she is a target for being the wife of Bish Chatterjee. The detective points out to Tara that in "the eyes of Indians," Tara will always be connected to Bish. Hence she cannot hide her identity as the ex-wife of a prominent and extraordinarily wealthy member of the Indian community, and therefore an objective for the Indian underworld.

Tara, though seeks invisibility within the rhetoric of a modern rootless life in San Francisco, she remains steadily entrenched within the social and cultural identity assigned by her gender, caste, and economic status. "When I spoke of this to my American friends- the ironclad identifiers of region, language, caste and subcaste - they call me over determined and of course they are right." [33]

Padma complicates Tara's quest for the truth about the past by denying the truth in Chris Dey's story and refusing to discuss the situation. She discards any claims from Chris Dey. Her husband, Harish Mehta, also "blotted out all that was inconvenient or didn't fit". This centre of attention on the future marks these characters as "true Americans". Padma is an emblematic Mukherjee heroine, playing between identities. Though she expresses her hatred on the past, she tries to lead a traditional Bengali life in New Jersey. Despite the mobility of modern life, community networks prolong to define Tara and her sisters' identities, keeping certain individuals on the outside.

Tara returns to her roots, along with her re-emerging relationship with Bish. She cannot escape her several layers of identity. The ambiguity of her identity, testifies not only her own but also the ambiguity of the immigrants. Hence, the whole novel discloses the narrator's search of self and individual identity and looks how society generates the margins for a woman. Tara's journey starts from America but ends in India. Finally Tara returns to her father's house for succour.



Bharati Mukherjee asserted that in an age of diaspora, one's biological identity may not be one's real identity. Emigration brings changes in both physical and psychological. Tara suffers from an identity crisis because of her family ties and her search for truth and security in both cultures. Tara is a symbol of an Indian who tries but fails to connect entirely with the American culture.

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