

**IDENTITY CRISIS IN BHARATI MUKERJEE'S
*DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS***

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Abstract

Bharati Mukerjee is one of the well know Indian diasporic writer. Immigrant is the fore most concepts in her most of the novels. Being an immigrant writer, she exposes the topics like immigration, Diaspora, cultural conflicts and quest for identity. Most of her protagonist strives hard for their identity in the native as well as foreign land. Her novel *Desirable Daughters* deals with the story of three sisters namely, Padma, Parvathi and Tara, the narrator of this novel. A person's identity can be judged by the self-conception as well as their social presentation. Tara Bhattacharjee is the character of searching her identity throughout the novel as the background of Calcutta Brahmin family. She is the identity of American migrant and Calcutta Brahmin. This paper focuses on search for identity of Tara and her sisters. Tara is the youngest of the three sisters in struggle between Indian Hindu culture and American modern culture.

Keywords: Identity, Tradition, Immigrant, Modernity

In the presented paper I have focused on the identity crisis of the protagonist, Tara. In the novel, *Desirable Daughters* Bharati Mukherjee has struck a balance between tradition and modernity by representing past and present which is achieved through the female protagonist - Tara, who severed her links with tradition but remains tied to her native country. The novel is based on three strikingly-beautiful sisters from a privileged Bengali Brahmin family in Calcutta, they felt hard between tradition and freedom. The three sisters, Padma, Parvati, and Tara, are born exactly three years apart from each other and share the same birthday. They are named after the goddesses's name, hoping that they will survive and prosper in whatever they do

The novel, *Desirable Daughters* opens with the narration of the story of the tree bride here the author clearly prepares a ground for the novel. The protagonist named Tara urges to relate her identity with her ancestor, Tara Lata, the Tree Bride. The story of the tree bride describes the Indian culture in detail.

The protagonist, Tara, is the youngest of the three sisters. She was born and brought up in India. She arrives in the Silicon Valley of America after her marriage with Bish. They have only one son, Rabi. Tara got divorced with Bish and lives with Rabi in San Francisco. As a single mother, Tara faces new challenges in terms of fulfilling her son's needs and wants. Since Rabi is born and raised in America, his lifestyle is different than his mother that he is not used to living with a large family, where everyone has no rights inside the household and the fact that one

cannot make his/her own decision. When Rabi first declares his sexuality, Tara gets the shock of her life. Then, she accepts the truth and she changed her mind set because she loves her son and she cannot afford to lose him by arguing with him. At this point, she realizes that she must leave behind her Indian lifestyle and values to get along with Rabi in the future. With this influence, she slowly begins to adapt an American lifestyle and eventually starts to move away from her Indian identity

Tara has become the New World woman who is caught in the struggle between her Indian traditions and the modernity to which she is exposed in America. The change in her attitude and outlook is also proved. Her Americanization is reflected at various points of time, her Americanized life and thinking. She cannot isolate herself completely from her Indian roots: "I am not the only Indian on the block. All the same, I stand out, I'm convinced. I don't belong here, despite my political leanings; worse, I don't want to belong" (79).

This drastic change gets in her way when she visits her sister Padma in New Jersey after many years. She realizes that she disappoints her sister in many ways. Her clothes were the total opposite of her sister's sari and she spoke English inside the house instead of Bengali. With each 'American' move that Tara makes, she makes Padma angry. While attending Bengali parties with Padma, Tara receives disappointed looks from many guests. After observing Tara for a few days, Padma tells her younger sister that "You seem so American, but you've got an obsession with India, a very strange aspect of India" (Mukherjee 152). At first Tara finds this remark insulting, however, later, she understands that somewhere deep down she is still attached to her roots and that is where her real self lies. From putting on a fake personality and lifestyle, she realizes that if she continues this onwards, she will just widen the gap between the two cultures she is a part of the two cultures.

The novel "Desirable Daughters" represent the turning points in the central character life, Tara, her divorce makes a negative impact on her personality and her future. Prior to the divorce, she is an ideal housewife whose inner desire of being an American wife is not fulfilled. Tara "left Bish [her husband] after a dozen years of marriage because the promise of life as an American wife wasn't being fulfilled" (Mukherjee 85). Despite the fact that Bish is a rich entrepreneur in California whose wife does not have to work, Tara feels the need to follow her career and gain independence and freedom from her household responsibilities. This clash of ideology between Bish and Tara not only causes her divorce, but also it changes Tara's attitude towards her own life.

Once she is free, she learns to give up her identity in order to get along with her son. Thus, she adapts the American lifestyle in a short time. She lives with her Hungarian boyfriend, Andy, who teaches her to live a carefree life. Nevertheless, Tara's excitement and happiness only last for a few days. Her struggles become that of a new immigrant, she has to earn her own money and raise her son on her own. Since Tara is caught up in living an American life away from her ex husband, she loses contact with his group of Indian friends. With the lack of friends and support, Tara is not able to see how much she has changed after the divorce and no one is available to guide her back to her true personality. Later, when Tara meets Bish through her son, she hears him mention that "marriage is a man's dharma, his test, his duty, the outer sign of his inner strength and harmony" (Mukherjee 279). Hearing this, Tara understands that her married life was what gave her inner peace. She also notices that when she is around Bish, she does not have to be anyone else.

The Identity of the protagonist is highly understandable. She can adopt and accommodated both tradition and culture. She lived in the lifestyle of Indian as well as newly adopted modern tradition. She tries to move away from the unnatural identity and vacillates between two lives.

She tried to reconstruct her identity through her diasporic experience. She was attempting to redefine her culture's importance through space and time. Her loneliness made her little wickedness and merciless in America. She thus, not only highlights the longing of immigrants for Indian cultural heritage but also expresses her disgust at the changing scenario within India itself and the shifting dynamics of American culture.

Tara realizes that the confusion created by living an American and Indian life, causes her to give up on her culture and customs. It takes her a while to grasp that her personality has changed drastically and that it is her responsibility to find her way back to her identity before it is too late. With this thought, Tara decides to visit her ancestral roots in India. At this view the author, Mukherjee uses the nostalgia of Tara, significantly exposes the loss of spiritual values in the materialistic glamour of the west. Mukherjee's women are permanently in a quest for freedom in all aspects of their lives.

In "Desirable Daughters", there is a celebration of an evolving identity, an identity that changes constantly when cultural connections are lost, resulting in creation of multipleselves.

The gap between the youngest and oldest, the disparity of our marriages and the paths our immigration have made us strangers. Her reaction to my divorce (that I had brought shame to the Bhattacharjee family had been her refrain) had hurt.[33]

The author dwells on every detail of this highly traditional occurrence. The father of the child bride is a traditionalist even though he is a lawyer educated in English and English law. The groom dies of snakebite and his family blames the bride as unlucky. Greedily the father of the groom demands the dowry. But the bride's father takes his daughter into the forest where he marries her to a tree. She becomes a woman noted for her courage and generosity. Her American granddaughter visits her home. She has the same name, Tara Lata, as the old woman.

Upon reaching India, Tara states "I've come back to India this time for something more than rest and shopping and this 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" (Mukherjee 306).

In the need to find her pure, inner-soul just like the people who visit the Ganges to remove their sins in the holy river, Tara discovers that she is named after her great-grandmother (who happens to be her namesake). After researching, she understands that her namesake was a saint who fought to preserve her Bengali culture against the British. From this, Tara not only understands that she never lives up to her great-grandmother's name but she also realizes how different her personality is from her great-grandmother. She understands that by living life on her own terms, without leaving behind her true identity and culture; she will be satisfied and will please herself and her family members.

The novel unfolds the story of three sisters who are settled in different countries and are suffering to find out their own identities as they come to realize the marginal position as well as substitute role in family and society. The quest of the protagonist Tara for a separate identity in the traditional bound society leads her place to place but wherever she moves, she finds the spaces of tradition and a fixed sense of identity as an Indian immigrant

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