

Identity And Assimilation In Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters

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Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* investigate the complex dynamics of identity, cultural assimilation, and personal reinvention through the lives of three Indian-born sisters navigating divergent paths in America. The novel explores the complexities of assimilation and the search for identity as the three sisters navigate their lives between India and the United States. This novel critically examines the tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as the pressures of immigrant adaptation, through the protagonist, Tara Bhattacharjee's journey of self-discovery. Mukherjee challenges the conventional notions of belonging by portraying how diasporic identities are shaped by displacement, memory, and reinvention. The narrative highlights the conflicts between familial expectations and individual tradition. It describes what it means to be *Desirable Daughters* within a transnational context. Through the interwoven perspectives and cultural hybridity, Mukherjee presents assimilation not as a linear process but as a contested, evolving negotiation of selfhood.

Keywords: Immigration, identity, belonging, self-analysis, assimilation.

Introduction

Bharathi Mukherjee, an Indian living in the United States, is one of the notable female writers who illuminated Indian English literature. Through her writings, she gains global recognition. Through her writings, Mukherjee expresses herself via her protagonists. Bharathi Mukherjee, like many postmodern writers, expresses the problems faced by Indian immigrants in the United States or the Western world. The migrants who grow up in one country and migrate to another have complex experiences. Their new life gives rise to various themes such as migration, globalization, transnationalism, cross-culturalism, and self-identity.

Bharathi Mukherjee, in most of her novels, deals with the self-realization of female characters through the search for identity. Her novels explore the shifting identities of immigrant women, between the modern life of today in America and the traditional life of the past in India. In her work *Desirable Daughters*, Bharathi Mukherjee explores the self-definition and self-identity of the modern educated women caught between tradition and modernity.

Desirable Daughters explains the identity, cultural assimilation, and self-reinvention in the lives of Indian women who immigrate to the United States. The novel centres on Tara Bhattacharjee, a divorced Bengali-American woman who navigates the tensions between tradition and modernity, family expectations and personal freedom. Through Tara's journey, Mukherjee delves into the challenges of reconciling diverse cultural identities in a diaspora where India and the United States often clash, both in the past and present.

Desirable Daughters focuses on the societal pressures placed on women to conform idealized roles such as dutiful daughters, obedient wives, or successful immigrants. Mukherjee critiques both traditional Indian patriarchy and the myth of the American dream. She reveals how women negotiate agency within these constraints. The themes of displacement, resistance and reinvention run throughout the novel as Tara and her sisters struggle with patriarchal traditions and attempt to define themselves.

The novel deeply explores the complexities of identity, cultural assimilation, and navigating life as an immigrant in a globalized world. The story follows Tara Bhattacharjee, a divorced Indian-American woman who must reconcile her traditional Bengali upbringing with her modern American life after a mysterious stranger who claim to be her long-lost brother. Through Tara's journey, Mukherjee interrogates the complexities of diasporic identity, the fragility of nostalgia, and the pressures of assimilation in a multicultural society. Through the lives of three sisters, Tara, Padma, and Parvati born into a traditional Bengali family and later dispersed across the continents, Mukherjee examines the tension between preserving one's cultural roots and adapting to the demands of a new society. The novel delves into the resented nature of identity, shaped by family expectations, personal aspirations, and the cultural dislocations inherent in the immigrant experience.

This article analyses the themes of identity and assimilation in *Desirable Daughters*, highlighting how Mukherjee portrays the challenges of balancing heritage with modernity and how the characters negotiate their sense of self in the face of societal pressures. These contestants shed light on how cultural identity is shaped by personal choices, family dynamics, and social expectations. As an immigrant herself Mukherjee grapples with questions of resentment, tradition, and modernity, offering a compelling and multifaceted exploration of the intersection between individual identity and cultural heritage. S.P. Swan in his article says that "Mukherjee's liquid and dislocated society is wondrous and roaming. Her lines are adventurous, constantly changing in identity, living a life of transit, and expressing frustration" (255). Mukherjee's protagonists, who navigate cultural conflicts, societal expectations, and personal aspirations are caught between tradition and modernity. This transit way of life refers to living between places, never fully belonging to any one culture, a central theme in Mukherjee's works.

The Immigrant Experience and Search for Identity

At the heart of *Desirable Daughters*, there are three sisters born in Calcutta named Tara, Padma, and Parvati. They were born into a wealthy Brahmin family. In the beginning, Tara remembers a mythical story which she heard from her father in her childhood. She remembers one of her ancestors, named same as Tara's father's name, Jai Krishna Gangooly who to had

three daughters. One of his daughters was named Tara Latta. Tara Latta was engaged to a boy at the age of five as it was a norm in India in the past of arranging a marital relationship during childhood itself. Just before the ceremony, the groom of Tara Lata is bitten by a snake and he dies and the groom's family goes to Jai Krishna, Tara Lata's father and says that Tara Lata is responsible for their son's death. So, he blames Tara Latta for the death of a son. So, the groom's father asks for dowry. But Jack refuses this demand by saying that he would see his daughter marrying a tree rather than paying the price for a marriage that does not take place. Jai Krishna forces Tara Latta to remain a throughout her life and due to this Tara Lata, the ancestor of the narrator came to known as the tree bride. The narrator then describes her present by introducing herself as Tara Lata. She describes herself as 19 years old. Tara Lata's sister, Padma, gets an opportunity to become an actress in the Indian film industry, but their father is not supportive of her ambition. Padma has an affair with an actor named Ron, but since he is a Christian, her father disapproves their relationship. Eventually, Padma elopes with Ron, and they settle in New Jersey, America. Padma goes against her father's wishes and has a love marriage without his approval.

Meanwhile, Tara Lata completes her schooling. She wants to choose her own partner, but her father's disappointment with Padma's actions influences his decisions. Wanting to avoid further conflict, Tara Lata agrees to marry the man her father chooses for her. Tara gets married and settles in San Francisco after marrying the African entrepreneur Bishwa Priya Chatterjee. Kalpana writes, "Marriage is considered permanent and should not be altered by either partner, free choice.... Divorce was taboo and considered a sure sign of Americanisation" (119).

Throughout this novel, the novelist brings out marriage as the medium of exploration of women rather than a desire for heavenly bliss. In a conservative society presented by resent girls, they are not allowed to choose their life partners of their own choices, particularly from another caste. She is also a housewife and fulfils all her duties, then she gives birth to a son, Rabindranath, and she calls him Rabi. After spending fifteen hours in his office and observing Indian religious customs, Bishwapriya returns home to his wife, Tara, and their son. Tara's journey reflects the broader struggle of many immigrants to reconcile their cultural heritage with the opportunities and challenges of their adopted homeland. Her sisters, Padma and Parvati, represent different facets of this struggle. Padma, living in New Jersey, embraces a recent version of Indian identity through her involvement in the Indian-American cultural scene, while Parvati remains in India, adhering to the traditional expectations but adapting to modern influences. Tara also thinks as an independent woman and realises her not fulfilled dream She wants to be independent, as her life intentions are unfulfilled. So, she gets frustrated. She divorces her husband and leads an independent life.

Mukherjee captures the complexity of identity through Tara's introspection about her place in the world, "In America, I have learned to float between worlds, never quite belonging to one or the other. I am neither fully Indian nor fully American, but something else Need something in-between" (4). This encapsulates the liminal space that Tara occupies, a hallmark of the diasporic experience. Her identity is not fixed but fluid, shaped by her interactions with both Indian and American cultures. Fakrul Alam notes that, "Mukherjee's characters often

struggle to carve out a space where they can be both Indian and American, without being wholly one or the other” (63). Tara’s sense of being “in-between” reflects this struggle, as she navigates the expectations of her traditional upbringing and the freedom of her American life.

Assimilation and its Discontents:

Assimilation, as depicted in *Desirable Daughters*, is not a straightforward process of adopting a new culture but a complex negotiation fraught with loss, resistance, and reinvention. In Indian culture where Indian women are not dare enough to call their husbands by name, it is an act of assimilation, where Tara welcomes slowly. "His American friends call him Bish. I, of course, as a good Hindu wife-to-be, could not utter any of his names to his face. But we're progressive people; after crossing the dark water to California I called him Bishu, then Bish" (Mukherjee 23).

Mukherjee feels migrating to the land of opportunities referred to as crossing of “dark waters” which is a step forward into evolution, progressive modernity, and emancipation. Tara’s marriage to Bish, an Americanized Indian, initially seems like a bridge between her Indian roots and American aspirations. However, as their marriage unravels, Tara begins to question the cost of assimilation. Bharati Mukherjee’s narrative illustrates that assimilation is not a seamless transformation but a complex process of layering, where the old self coexists uneasily with the new. Tara, in her attempt to assimilate into American society through her marriage, suburban lifestyle, and her son Rabi’s American upbringing, experiences persistent discomfort. She reflects, “I thought I could slip into America like a new skin, but the fit was never perfect. There were always seams, places where the old life showed through” (102). This highlights the enduring pull of her Indian heritage, revealing the challenges and incomplete nature of assimilation.

Padma, living in New Jersey, embodies a unique approach to assimilation by curating an exaggerated Indian identity. She hosts cultural events and performs as a symbol of Indian authenticity for the diaspora community. However, her materialistic lifestyle and glamorous persona suggest a superficial engagement with her cultural heritage in her married life.

Mukherjee says, “Padma wore her Indianness like a costume, something to be put on for effect and taken off when it no longer served her purpose” (33). This observation underscores the commodification of culture in the diaspora, where heritage is used as a tool for social capital rather than embraced as a lived experience. Uma Parameswaran argues that Mukherjee “exposes the hollowness of cultural nostalgia when it is divorced from genuine engagement with one’s roots” (34). Padma’s assimilation, therefore, is less about integration and more about strategic self-presentation, revealing the complexities of identity in a multicultural context.

Family and Tradition as Anchors of Identity

Tara Bhattacharjee’s family serves as a powerful anchor for the sisters’ identities, even as they navigate their lives in different parts of the world. The novel opens with a vivid depiction of Tara’s childhood in Calcutta, where the family traditions and societal expectations shaped her

early sense of self. The patriarchal structure of the family, embodied by their father, imposes strict norms on the sisters, particularly regarding marriage and duty. Tara recalls, “Our father had mapped out our lives before we were born, as though we were territories to be claimed and governed” (20). This quotation underscores the weight of familial expectations, which continue to influence the sisters’ choices even in adulthood. For Tara, breaking away from these expectations through her divorce and her decision to forge an independent life represents a significant act of self-definition. However, the novel suggests that family ties cannot be easily severed. The arrival of a mysterious figure claiming to be a relative forces Tara to confront her family’s past, revealing the secrets that challenge the understanding of her identity. Parvati who remains in India, embodies the traditional role expected of the sisters, yet she too adapts to modern influences, such as her use of email and acceptance of her husband’s progressive views.

Tara’s character illustrates that staying rooted in one’s culture does not change. Mukherjee writes, “Parvati was the keeper of our traditions, but even she had learned to bend, to let the modern world seep into the cracks of the old” (73). This observation highlights the dynamic nature of tradition, which evolves even in the context of cultural preservation. Anupama Jain argues that Mukherjee’s portrayal of the sisters “demonstrates that identity is not static but a constant process of negotiation, shaped by both heritage and environment” (13). The three Indian sisters whose experiences highlight the interplay between their Indian heritage and assimilation into American culture, illustrate how identity evolves through negotiation with cultural, familial, and personal influences.

The Role of Gender in Shaping Identity

In a patriarchal society, both in India and the diaspora, the sisters face unique pressures to conform to societal norms, where gender significantly shapes their experiences of identity and assimilation. Tara’s choice to divorce Bish and raise Rabi as a single mother represents a bold act of agency, yet it carries social stigma and personal uncertainty. She reflects, “I wanted to be free, but freedom came with a price loneliness, judgment, the fear that I had betrayed my family, my culture, myself” (158). This captures the gendered dimensions of Tara’s struggle, as her pursuit of selfhood is constrained by the societal expectations of women’s roles. Similarly, Padma’s flamboyant persona is a rebellion against these norms. It also reinforces stereotypes of the exoticized Indian women. Mukherjee’s focus on gender underscores the intersectionality of identity, where race, culture, and gender converge to shape the sisters’ experiences.

Conclusion:

In *Desirable Daughters*, Bharati Mukherjee weaves a rich tapestry of identity and assimilation, portraying the immigrant experience as a dynamic interplay of heritage, adaptation, and self-discovery. Through Tara, Padma, and Parvati, she explores the diverse ways in which individuals negotiate their sense of self in a globalized world. The novel challenges simple notions of assimilation, revealing it as a process marked by tension, loss, and reinvention. As Tara concludes, “I am a collection of fragments, pieced together from the places I’ve been, the people I’ve loved, the lives I’ve lived. I am not whole, but I am mine” (146). This final

reflection encapsulates the novel's central message that identity is not a fixed entity but a mosaic, continually shaped by the interplay of culture, family, and personal choice. Mukherjee's nuanced portrayal of the Bhattacharjee sisters invites readers to consider the complexities of belonging in a world where geographic, cultural, and personal borders are increasingly fluid. The novel ultimately suggests that finding a balance between one's heritage and demands of a new cultural environment is a continuous and evolving process that requires introspection, negotiation, and resilience.

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