

## Loss of Self and Struggle for Identity in Bharathi Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters

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### ABSTRACT

Bharathi Mukherjee, an Indian born American, is a prominent literary figure in the Indian Writing domain. She is one of the major novelists of Indian Diaspora who has carved a niche among the contemporary writers. As a diasporic writer, her novels mainly highlight themes like immigration, dislocation, and search for identity, identity crisis, alienation, cultural transformation and transformation of self. People of diaspora have migrated to alien land for their profession and education and face many racial problems there. Bharathi Mukherjee has spotlighted the cultural transformation and identity crisis of those immigrants as the major theme in most of her novels. Predominantly, Bharathi Mukherjee's protagonists are expatriates but deeply rooted in their homeland. Bharathi Mukherjee generally depicts the life of Indian immigrants who struggle to find a place in a non native country especially America. This paper is an attempt to explore the loss of self and the struggle for identity depicted in Bharathi Mukherjee's novel *Desirable Daughters*. This novel unfolds the story of three sisters who settled in different countries and struggled to find their own way. Tara, the youngest of the three sisters, is the protagonist of the novel and her quest for individual identity leads her place to place, country to country, new culture, new society and different kinds of adjustments in overseas.

**Key Words:** Desirable, Diasporic, Immigration, Identity, Struggle.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Bharathi Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* spans around the lives of three sisters named Padma, Parvati, and Tara who belong to the orthodox Hindu Brahmin family in Kolkata. Three daughters of Bhattacherjee family are known for their beauty, intelligence, respect and compliance. "Sisters three we are...as like as blossoms on a tree. But we are not." (*Desirable Daughters* 21). They are always confined within the four walls of their family. Their

father does not allow them to walk in the streets and hence their car was equipped with window shades and driver. This indicates the way they were trained to maintain family status in the society. Tara, the main Protagonist of this novel describes her preliminary phase of life in Calcutta as, "Our bodies changed but our behavior never did." (*Desirable Daughters* 27). Indeed, the siblings were destined to be subservient and denied to express their opinions transparently. Since their childhood, they have been familiar about the secondary position of women in the society.

The trio is convent educated. The eldest daughter Padma resolves to pursue acting as her career but it was not encouraged by her father. In those days, girls entering the silver screen had lesser chances in marriage prospects. Later, she gets married to a non-Bengali groom and settles at New Jersey in America with her husband. In her post marriage she takes up her passion of acting. The second daughter Parvati marries a businessman of her choice and settles in Bombay. She leads a luxurious life in a separate apartment.

The third daughter Tara is wedded to Bishwapriya, one of the multi-millionaires in Silicon Valley, America. The marriage of Tara was her father's choice. He determines to pick a suitable bride who meets out the social and family standards of the Bhattacherjees. He never got the wish of his daughter and merely said, "There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks." (*Desirable Daughters* 23). At the age of nineteen, Tara's parents arranged her marriage with Bishwapriya Chatterjee and the couple moved to San Francisco.

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

Bish Chatterjee was born and brought up in India. He got his basic education in India but migrated to Stanford to pursue higher studies. After

a brief time of working experience he started his business and became a billionaire with the support of Tara. When Tara arrived in America, she started following her Indian culture and became a role model for Indian wives. Bish proudly boasted to his parents and relatives about her promiscuity.

Well trained this upper-class Ballygunge girl had become, what a good cook, what an attentive wife and daughter-in-law. What a bright and obedient boy she was raising. I wanted to take course in the local community college, but we had a child at home (Desirable Daughters 82).

Tara prioritized to play the role of a perfect mother to her son like other Indian wives in Atherton, California than continuing her studies. She dedicated her whole time for the family. Tara fulfilled the requirement of daughterhood, beauty, intelligence, politeness and obedience. She also aptly fit into the shoes of a daughter-in-law for Bish's parents. Bish spent fifteen hours at his office and did not spare time with his wife and son. Tara gradually adjusted herself to the American culture. It took ten years for her to enwrap the new culture. For times, she felt she didn't have a separate identity and did not want to be called Mrs. Bish or Mrs. Billionaire.

Tara got irate with the mundane marital life. Only after a decade in wedlock, she realized that life as American wife was not a promising one. She started feeling gloomy due to a loss of identity of her own. Tara wished to complete her studies and later on to work but Bish did not encourage her. At this juncture, his male chauvinism popped up and tagged him as a typical Indian husband.

Tara felt neglected by her husband because Bish's 15 hours work at office, attending public functions and meeting in different parts of the world made Tara secluded though she was equipped with all the sophistication in her home at Atherton gated community. She was doomed with grief and solitude. Tara determined to sprawl out of the four walls of her house and understood the American culture in the social milieu by close observation. She used all the opportunities given by America and started embracing that culture. She decided to live a life by her own wish and will. As the first step she stopped wearing red sindur in the part of her hair. A traditional Indian woman will not dare to remove sindur from her hair because that is a symbol of a living husband.

Tara slightly changed herself from a classic Indian woman to a modern American woman. She lost herself for making her own identity and struggled for her new identity in America. However, as Tara integrated herself in California, she

witnessed holistic transformation which was an increasingly easier process.

I am not the only blue jeaned woman with pashima shawl around my shoulders and broken down running shoes on my feet. I am not only the Indian on the block all the same, I stand out, I am convinced (Desirable Daughters 79).

She abhorred worshipping husband as a god who had come to uplift a woman's life after marriage. Tara started to call her husband as Bish or Bishu. Indian women do not dare to call their husband's name. But Tara welcomed all the assimilations in her life to change her identity.

His American friends call him Bish .... I, of course as a good wife-to-be, could not utter any of his name to his face. But we are progressive people; after crossing the dark water to California I called him Bishu, then Bish and he didn't flinch (Desirable Daughter 23).

The unfair distinction between male and female sexuality in Indian culture prompted Tara to leave Atherton. She disliked to continue her life with Bish under the patriarchal cultural restriction placed upon her. Commonly married women are known by their husband's name in foreign countries. But Tara did not want to carry her husband's name with her as she wanted to be identified by her own name. Tara took a bold decision of departing from her husband.

When I left Bish after a decade of marriage, it was because 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? (Desirable Daughters 82).

Generally in India, marriage is a life time bond and eternal between the two souls. In the outset of her life, Tara had been a marginalized woman forced to hide all her wishes. This has ultimately put forth her craving to be a modern woman wearing western outfits, speak American English and much more. In spite of all the self transformation, there was emptiness in her life. She fed up with her husband Bish and ultimately divorced him. In her San Francisco home, she started living with her Hungarian Buddhist friend Andy karolyi which was not in favour of the conventions of the traditional Indian family.

Marriages are considered permanent and should not be altered by either partner's free choices...divorce was Taboo, and considered a sure sign of Americanization. (Desirable Daughters 119-137).

Tara showed her individuality which gave license to act out of her own individuality. She wished her son to be successful in his life and got

placed in a decent job. Mostly the Indian mothers want their sons to be successful in their career. Now Tara is more Americanized to accept all the odds or abnormal situations in her life boldly with high mindedness as a process of assimilation. It is quite common for any Indian to be proud of their family legacy, system and hierarchy. But separated from her husband, living with another man and accepting the son with another man ruins family prestige and legacy. Tara's eldest and youngest sister Padma and Parvathi also warn the act which would tarnish the reputation of their family.

In a conservative society a woman's second marital life is like a curse instead of a heavenly bliss. Tara was caught between Tradition and modernity. She underwent transformation from desirable daughter to an advocated American lady. But Padma advised her not to be more Americanized. "Please, please don't be Americanised." (Desirable Daughters 105). She reminded Tara of the mythical women icons like Sita and Savitri to insist her on the importance of chastity. "...things are never perfect in marriage. A woman must be prepared to accept less than perfection in his lifetime - and to model herself on Sita, Savitri and Behula, the virtuous wives of Hindu myths." (Desirable Daughters 134).

But Tara had a desire to establish her individual identity. The disturbing part in Tara's life is that she worked as a lowly teacher, a choice which would be unthinkable in the culture of her birth. Tara was projected as a character who was more status conscious and tried to uphold the values of traditional society despite falling for different allurements in the present. Thus, we can say Tara, in the initial years in America led an Indian life which resulted in alienation. Only, after a decade of marriage she got accustomed to American culture

and strived to find a separate identity. As an aborigine, she suffered a lot in the beginning and struggled to adjust in the new culture in a short span of time. Tara is a woman who adjusted herself and lost her self-identity and searched for a new identity in the third world countries. The whole novel exposes the Tara's search of self and while establishing an individual identity how society generates the restriction for women. Tara had not succeeded in her life in search for her identity. Tara's journey started from America and ended in India with Tara's return to her father's house for solace.

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