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A Study of the Quest for Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee, a significant Indian-born American author who wrote numerous novels and short stories, is the author of *Desirable Daughters*. The purpose of this essay is to examine how female characters seek their own identities through freedom. In this book, three sisters were mistreated by their traditional Brahmin family. Despite being educated, the three sisters are constrained by rigid rules and regulations, and they never attempt to forge their own identities. Tara, one of the sisters who migrated to America with her husband and tried to defy many stereotypes. She divorced her husband and raised her son alone, she felt alienated in America because of her Indian identity. Other sister Padma, who creates her own identity by finding a satisfying career for herself, Parvathi is the only character who is proud to be an Indian conventional woman. *Desirable Daughters* also discusses how the female characters deal with hybrid identities in their lives.

Keywords: Patriarchal Stereotypes, Gender Inequality, self- Identity, Racial discrimination.

Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940, to wealthy parents in Calcutta. She is regarded as a significant immigrant writer whose works deal with cultural identity, immigrant experience, alienation, a diasporic element, multiculturalism,

and the search for identity. Mukherjee is regarded as a significant diasporic author who struggled with her identity throughout her migration to various locations. Mukherjee once told *The Globe* "I am looking for that new, constantly

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evolving thing" (The New York Times). *Desirable Daughters* is an important book published in 2002. This novel is a sequel to a novel called *The Tree Bride*. Mukherjee has used her own experience as the source of inspiration for this novel. The plot of *Desirable Daughters* centres on three sisters, namely Tara, Padma, and Parvathi.

In the beginning of this novel, Tara is narrating the story of her ancestor Tara Lata (Tree Bride). When she was five years old, her father, who was a firm believer in Bengali Brahmin tradition, arranged a marriage for her daughter, but before the marriage, the groom died, the wedding was called off, so his father decides to marry her daughter to a tree because the groom's family continues to demand dowry from the bride's family. This story is an absolute example of how women lived with no identity. Orthodoxy and superstitious belief are the two elements that are ingrained in the lives of every Brahmin woman's family. Every human has their own identity when they are born, but Tara's identity is easily changed into Tree bride as a result of Hindu tradition. In *Desirable Daughters* all the Women is considered as an object not as a sensible human being.

Many kinds of subjugation still prevailed in the name of orthodoxy. As a five-year-old child, she does not know what is happening around her, but she has to obey her elders' words. This story happened many years before now, modern Tara, who receives her name root from her ancestor. This symbolically represents this generation; Tara should also obey elders' words like her ancestor Tree bride. This tree bride story was told to the three sisters by their parents when they were children, and they were nurtured with the rigorous norms of their own faith. Tara and her sisters are very cognizant of their heritage. They must adhere to established female norms. Their identity has been shaped since their childhood. The three girls remain obedient and naive in the shadow of their

father. Tara, the protagonist, marries a man of her father's choosing and migrates to America at the age of nineteen, where she meets significant cultural contrasts and tries to live with her Indian identity. Tara is torn between following her own identity and adapting to an American way of life. People in America saw her differently, therefore she becomes weak often. She can't take the opposition any longer.

Tara lives a comfortable materialistic life, but she expects her husband to love her, but he never gives importance to family matters; according to him, taking care of family means providing them materialistic wealth and not beyond that, so Tara's sense of belonging is sometimes called into question. She feels alienated in her own home, and in America she has no companion to share her feelings, emotions, and thoughts. She is unable to communicate the complexities of her family's past and Calcutta life to her husband. Their cultural differences are the source of her inability. Marriage is a religious event in India that gives a woman an identity, and it involves not just two individuals but also their families. Marriage, on the other hand, is only a contract between two people in Western countries such as the United States.

"A Bengali girl's happiest night is about to become her life time imprisonment. It seems all the sorrow of history all that is unjust in society and cruel in Religion has settled on her" (46).

Tara is well aware that her marriage life is an imprisonment for her, but she has no choice to resist it. Tara's family believes that in order to achieve nirvana, a woman must marry a man. If a woman is unmarried, she will never be reborn; there are numerous misconceptions about women's marriage in Hindu society. They never comprehend women's identities. Tara's objective is to continue her education, but her

dreams are dashed by the marriage. Tara's father said "There is a boy and we found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks"(27).

Tara tries to discover herself in America because her materialistic husband leaves her alone very often. In the absence of her father, she reinterpreted her own identity without any religious influences. She knows that her marriage life is not happy, so she decides to divorce Bish and raise her son Rabindranath as a single mother. Tara violated her customary values when she divorced her spouse. She gains independence and develops her own identity as a schoolteacher. Tara is portrayed by Mukherjee as more rebellious than the Tree Bride.

Women like Tara face so many challenges in finding their own identity. Tara never informs her family of her decision; according to her conservative family, divorce is a kind of sin. Tara entered into a new relationship with her white boyfriend Andy; she enjoys life with him, and she experiences a new kind of love that is not bound by any commitment. Tara once defined "Love is having fun with someone, more fun with that person than anyone else, over a longer haul". Now Tara slowly tries to adopt the culture of American identity, but she is so shocked to hear that her son is gay. Even though she was living so many miles apart from her native land, her cultural identity was strongly rooted in her mind, so she did not accept the gender change easily. Tara's identity crisis is very crucial to understand. Her diasporic journey constantly reconstructs her identity.

Not only Tara, but her sisters also face a different type of identity crisis in their lives. The eldest Padma married a man, moved to America; she lives the life of a wealthy Indian woman in America, she faces many kinds of racial discrimination, Since she wants to be

independent, she built her career as a news anchor after many struggles, and she also runs a designer saree business.

Parvathi, the older sister, married the man of her choice and stayed in India; she is the only character who accepts her identity as an Indian traditional woman. Though these three sisters were well educated, they were forbidden to make careers in their culture. However, each sister finds their identities to survive. Their childhood was filled with strict rules and regulations, but after marriage, they started to focus on themselves.

One day Christopher Dey introduce himself as an illegitimate son of Padma, this was an another shocking incident for Tara, in her community having an ill-legitimate son is unimaginable, Tara was now adapting to a new American society, but this was still a huge cultural shock for her; this demonstrates Tara's inability to transform into wholly western individuals. Mukherjee depicts a migrant woman's dual consciousness in this scene. Tara has been living in America for a while but, she cannot get rid of her native ties easily, so she started thinking about her childhood experience, her upbringing. She tries to judge her sister according to Indian tradition and culture. Tara's identity is often dynamic because this overlapping identity creates confusion that whether she wants to follow her Indian or American identity.

Tara is aware that Indian culture places a higher value on virginity and having children before marriage is bad. Tara is shaken by hearing that information. Even though she started to perceive a new culture, she still had Indian ethnic standards in her mind. Like Tara, Padma did not totally discard her Indian identity. Her thinking was influenced by her Indian traditions. She accused Tara of bringing dishonour to their family by divorcing. Like Tara, Padma is also absolutely rootless. It is difficult to analyse their characteristic features.

Mukherjee claims that despite the sisters are far from their homeland, though they suffered tremendously as a woman in India, they have some form of connection to their previous identities, and hence it usually appears in some scenarios. As a result, they are unable to completely accept American society. They are frequently tormented by the past, which causes them to become hybrids. Tara resolves to return to India in order to rediscover her own native identity. She is well aware that she would be referred to as Bish Chatterjee Tara by everyone, but she wants to be reunited with her family. Tara realizes, in the end, that her identity is deeply rooted in her native land. Wherever she went, she could not run her life without her native ties.

According to Indian society, individual happiness is subordinate to the community. These three sisters were brought up with rigid forms of social code: they should take care of their family and home; they should not disclose their desires; and they should be subservient to their husbands. By looking through the lives of these three sisters, Mukherjee depicts that both their husband and society attempt to marginalise them. Therefore, women are often doubly marginalised by their position. The migrants, like Tara and Padma, long for their lost homelands. They could be physically present in any country, but they were emotionally tied to their Indian identity.

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