

Between Traditions and Self-Becoming: Identity Crisis and Transformation in *Desirable Daughters*

Mr.Abishek.V

Assistant Professor, SRM Arts and Science College, Kattankulathur

Abstract- This article investigates the nature of identity crisis and transformation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2002), focusing chiefly on the protagonist, Tara Chatterjee. This paper explores how Tara negotiates tradition and modernity, internal conflict, familial expectations, and migration. Using close reading of key passages alongside thematic analysis of secondary literature, the article argues that Mukherjee portrays identity not as fixed, but as fluid, multiple, and relational. Tara's transformation, while real and empowering, remains partial and ambivalent—she redefines herself, yet cannot fully escape her roots. The article contributes to understandings of diaspora, female subjectivity by illustrating how narrative structure, symbolic elements, memory, and the space of migration enable a path to self-becoming even as constraints persist.

Keywords: Transformation, assimilation, navigation, migration, resilience, identity.

I.INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* presents a multi-layered exploration of identity, migration, gender, and tradition. The novel follows three sisters—Padma, Parvati, and Tara—each navigating her own path across cultures and expectations. Among them, Tara emerges as the focal figure whose identity crisis and transformation illuminate much about the diasporic female subject. The Protagonist Tara mentally transforms according to the alien culture after many challenges she faced. The novel opens with an epigraph that frames the conflict at the heart of Tara's journey:

“No one behind, no one ahead ... the path the ancients cleared has closed; and the other path, everyone's path, easy and wide, goes nowhere. I am alone and find my way.” (Mukherjee)

II.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article applies the Stuart Hall's concepts of diaspora identity, where identity is not static but constituted through difference, cultural memory, and on-going negotiation. Here the Feminist theory examines how social systems and cultural narratives perpetuate gender inequality. It critiques the patriarchal control over women's choices and also the cultural constraints that define women's “desirability” in terms of obedience, purity, and domesticity.

III.METHODOLOGY

The attentive textual interpretation of the sections that depict the pivotal periods of identity crisis, such as marriage, divergence, and memory, is examined in this research. Comparative thematic analysis of research on agency, diaspora, and tradition vs modernity. It also examines the story's narrative and symbolic elements, such as the myth, epigraph, time, location, and relational situations.

Desirable Daughters tells the story of immigration, three sisters' behaviour, and their diverse approaches to identification. The tale centers on three incredibly endearing girls from a unique Bengali Brahmin family in Calcutta who struggle to balance freedom and tradition while trying to conform to frequently diametrically opposed expectations. Tara Chatterjee, the youngest, seems to have flown the furthest away from home. Tara and Silicon Valley resident Bishwapriya are not together.

Tara, the main character, battles identity crisis, self-destruction, and self-discovery. Through the life of the protagonist, who defies tradition in countless ways while keeping ties to his homeland, this book depicts both a traditional Indian Brahmin family and a modern

American one. As her adolescent fiancé gets bitten by a snake on her wedding night, the narrative of Tara Lata, a five-year-old girl going deep into the forest to marry a tree, opens *Desirable Daughters*. Being a lawyer, Tara's father saw the avarice of the groom's family after her fiancé's father demanded the dowry and made the startling choice to declare, "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." [DD 14]

Tara is cut off from tradition, yet the modern path seems unfulfilling. Her task becomes forging an identity in the liminal space between. Her identity is fractured by postcolonial forces and patriarchal structures, which prevent her from finding a stable, self-defined identity in either India or America. Character like Tara, who strives for self-actualization by overcoming patriarchal limitations and questioning the essentialism of cultural identity, are at the forefront of identity transformation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*, which entails a complex, fluid negotiation between Indian heritage and American culture. As people are uprooted and fight for freedom and independence in their diasporic existence, the book examines the difficulties of assimilation and the development of new identities through the blending of past and present. For diasporic people like Tara, who must continually renegotiate her sense of self between two places, the novel presents identity as a dynamic and dynamic idea.

Her father handpicked her a multimillionaire, and she is raising a "sensitive" adolescent child by herself. The depressing aspect is that she works as a menial instructor, which is unthinkable given her natal circumstances. Tara describes her pitiable childhood moments especially about the restricted happiness. In the name of marriage, she faces unavoidable situations. She never makes decisions over her father's. She reviews the absolute absence of romanticism in her marriage, where her dad advised her.

"There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks." (DD 23)

It conveys the authoritarian atmosphere of conventional Indian matchmaking, which excludes a woman's autonomy. Tara later begins to doubt her identity, freedom, and position between Eastern conservatism and Western independence as a result of Mukherjee's use of this instance to emphasize the tension between tradition and individuality. Without getting any way to move out of the situations, she admits herself into the life. Here the way of adoring the customs and principles of our tradition explicits,

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

She simply tells her tale, including the parts about her history and today. She remembers her previous experiences in India. Tara, an American immigrant who has integrated, feels free to express herself in both India and the United States. She is able to speak Bengali when necessary and freely use Indian phrases. She converses with her American acquaintances while using American slang terms. Her sister Padma, on the other hand, speaks a combination of Indian and American English and takes pleasure in being an immigrant of ethnic heritage in America. In America, Padma uses her fixation on her Indian heritage as a coping mechanism.

Mukherjee projects the story of Tara and Padma to present the essential crisis of assimilation. Padma, sister of the protagonist Tara, who accompanied her to migrate to US. There Padma tries to assimilate in the alien world and also recreates India in the new world to expose her culture. She connects herself with the people of only Indian origin, she works in an Indian television channel and she resides in the area which is populated by South Asians, whereas Tara moves forward and tries to recreate her in the new land. She is ready to face the challenges of assimilation and to recreate herself. She views her sister's attempts to safeguard Indian culture as her impotence to cope with the provocations of assimilation. Tara on the other hand changes throughout her life in America. She views the multiplicity of her identity. Tara says:

“Her clinging to a version of India and to Indian ways and to Indian friends, Indian clothes and food and a 'charming' accent seemed to me a cowardly way of coping with a new country. Change is corruption; she seemed to be saying. Take what America can give, but don't let it tarnish you in any way.”(DD 29)

This demonstrates aversion to change and nostalgia. For emotional stability, the character clings tenaciously to her Indian identity. Instead of seeing this as pride, the narrator interprets it as fear, implying that resisting assimilation is a sign of weakness. It displays the internal conflict of immigrants who fear losing their cultural identity while desiring the advantages of a new country. Mukherjee draws attention to the conflict that arises when one embraces change in a foreign country while maintaining one's cultural heritage. Tara's identity issue has multiple facets, including psychological, familial, gendered, and cultural. Tradition is both rejected and reinterpreted in her metamorphosis. She possesses fragments of both worlds, resulting in an incomplete yet genuine hybridity. Tara mentions on her relationship with her Hungarian lover Andy. After divorcing Bish, Tara starts dating Andy. These are deliberate departures from conventional responsibilities. She wants financial independence, refuses forced marriage, and affirms her sexual liberty.

"It's one of those San Francisco things I can't explain in India, just as I can't explain my Indian life to the women I know in California" (DD 25-26)

The resulting internal conflict increases the agony of her alienation. She can't explain her situations about her arranged marriage to Bish because of the cultural complexities over Indian culture in the migrated land. She loses her control in many places.

“I have told my Calcutta story many times, and Americans seem to find them endlessly amusing and appalling. And yet, until last year, I'd never really understood what I was revealing and what I was suppressing. I was going for the effect, Tara, No! The easy approval. Oh! Tara, you're so brave!”(DD 35).

Tara is very conscious of how she feels like an outsider and that she doesn't belong. When she reads American

periodicals, her cultural dyslexia makes it clear that she cannot relate to mainstream American society. She is a motivated immigrant who wants to acculturate, but she finds the process challenging. Because their native tongue is insufficient to express diasporic realities, immigrants suffer from acute linguistic dispossession. Tara's dilemma when she discovers that her native tongue is insufficient to convey societal realities in the adoptive nation is reflected in the lines that follow.

“We couldn't talk about why a young woman with everything she could ever want would decide to leave her protector and provider.”(DD 69).

This moment shows her inner conflict — the tension between authentic self-expression and self-exoticization in a multicultural setting. Mukherjee here critiques how immigrants may reshape their cultural narratives for Western consumption, revealing the psychological cost of assimilation and validation. Tara's identity issue has multiple facets, including psychological, familial, gendered, and cultural. Tradition is both rejected and reinterpreted in her metamorphosis. She possesses fragments of both worlds, resulting in an incomplete yet genuine hybridity.

—There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks.¶

IV.CONCLUSION

In *Desirable Daughters*, Bharati Mukherjee offers a complex portrait of identity in the diaspora: one that resists easy binaries of tradition vs modernity, India vs America. Tara's journey of identity crisis and transformation is not linear or total, but carried out in moments—some of resistance, some of compromise, many of ambivalence. Symbolic stories, memory, space, relational ties all function to remind her of what she comes from even as she forges what she will become. This study contributes new insight by emphasizing Tara's internal conflicts, the symbolic/legendary structure in the novel, and how narrative form itself mediates identity transformation. Future work might compare Tara's transformation with that of other diaspora protagonists, or examine reader responses to Tara's ambivalence; or study how

caste or class more specifically affect transformation in other editions or adaptations.

REFERENCE

- [1] Mukherjee, Bharati. *Desirable Daughters*. Rupa & Co., 2002.
- [2] Gupta, Purnima. "Gender Biases and Resistance in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2012, pp. 2–5.
- [3] Santhi, M. Vijaya. "Exploring Identity and Culture: Thematic Analysis of *Desirable Daughters*." *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–15
- [4] Shabana, S., and J. Benazir Begum. "Immigrant Woman's Self-Discovery in Bharathi Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*." *Jamal Academic Research Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1–12.
- [5] Gupta, Purnima. "Gender Biases and Resistance in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2012, pp. 2–5.
- [6] Shabana, S., and J. Benazir Begum. "Immigrant Woman's Self-Discovery in Bharathi Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*." *Jamal Academic Research Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1–12.
- [7] Sumedha Theri. "Therigatha 213–223." *Therigatha: Verses of the Elder Nuns*, translated by Charles Hallisey, Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 85.