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## Quest for Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

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Bharati Mukherjee occupies a very important place among the diasporic writers. The circumstances of her birth, upbringing, education in India, marriage to a North American and her education and career on the American continent are the indispensable contexts to understand her fiction. She is a prominent Indian American immigrant novelist.

This paper aims to study how Bharati Mukherjee deals with a woman's quest for identity in her novel *Desirable Daughters*. She presents the various circumstances in which an Indian woman faces identity crisis as a daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, and as a mother in India and after immigration in America and how she deals with it.

Mukherjee's novel *Desirable Daughters* is a tale of Tara's quest for her identity. In this novel, Tara is anxious about the shackles of her "wife-of-Bish-Chatterjee" identity. She concentrates on the very American pursuit of individual happiness. As one traverses through this novel to see an emergent transition in the process of assimilation, one can observe simultaneous reactive patterns manifesting in a parallel gender transformation. The modern feminine immigrant is aware, awakened to ideal gender notions and rights. So Tara quickly adapts yet is acutely sensitized to the plight of her gender back home.

For an Indian traditional woman, her parents' permission is mandatory in all matters regarding her life. She even cannot choose a career of her own choice without their consent :

"She (Tara's eldest sister Padma) confided a career ambition to be, somehow, a performer, to act or to dance. She was beautiful enough, and perhaps even talented enough, although of course our father would never have permitted any form of exhibitionism (29)."

Even Tara's husband Bish chose his career and married as per his father's decision. Children in India are not free to exercise their own will. They have to abide by and fulfill their parents' wishes :

"Bish became an electrical engineering student in India because his father told him he would be an engineer, and he excelled at it because that is what Chatterjees did..... When he expressed a desire to get married, his father and mine (Tara's) cut the deal. Best boy, best girl. Why waste money or time and energy on dating or getting to know each other (224)?"

Indian woman's fate is decided by her father's decision which she is expected to obey and abide by :

"I was nineteen years old, ..... when my father said the magic words : "There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is his picture. The marriage will be in three weeks (23)."

Tara's eldest sister Padma could not even think of going against her father's decision to marry a Christian, someone not a Hindu-Brahmin :

"But Ronald Dey was not possible. Daddy had not yet sanctioned someone for Didi to marry. And whenever that time did come, it would not be with a Christian, no matter what his social status and brilliant prospects (32)."

Love-marriage by Tara's middle sister Parvati is considered tragic and not permissible by Tara's father :

"AurobindoBanerji had not been selected by my father. He could have embodied every strain of Bengali beauty, wit, culture, athleticism and intelligence, but if my father had not selected him, he would forever be seen as wanting and pathetic (51)."

After marriage, a wife has to worship her husband. She is not supposed to call him by his name as per Indian tradition :

"I, of course, as a good Hindu wife-to-be, could not utter any of his (Tara's husband's) names to his face (23)."

But as Tara moved to America, she tried to become progressive and loosened the traditional hold over herself :

"But we're progressive people; after crossing the dark waters to California I called him (her husband Bishwapiya) Bishu, then Bish, and he didn't flinch (23)."

Soon after her marriage to Bish, Tara was taken to meet an aunt who was an example of an ideal Indian wife :

"My mother-in-law said, "..... she holds the bedpan under him. She cleans him with her own hands. And she has a master's degree from the Delhi School of Economics. How many modern girls are prepared to do that (83)?"

However educated an Indian girl might be, she is considered to be an ideal wife only when she serves her husband selflessly and unconditionally. After marriage, she has to devote herself to her husband and lead a life of endurance, loyalty and self-sacrifice.

Husband is the super-authority and decision-maker :

".....Auro (Parviti's husband) had been furious. How dare she not have checked with him first and ask his permission (66)."

Husband is like a lord – his informal approval and his know-how for everything is needed. However modern they might become superficially, Indian husbands still believe in male-domination.

The reason for Tara's separation from her husband and their divorce were Tara's unfulfilled American dreams. Bish could not rise up to her expectations:

"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? I wanted to take courses in the local community college, but we had a child at home (82)."

Tara struggles with her neither fully Indian, nor fully American identity. She is well aware that her caste-conscious childhood and values of modern-day America do not blend smoothly.

After Tara's divorce with Bish, everyone in India felt that her life in America was over and there was nothing more she could do there. But she wanted to start a new life :

“Come back to India, ..... your child isn't American or Indian and if you stay there any longer, you won't be either. They thought my “American adventure” was over. I wondered if it was just beginning (66).”

Tara's sister (Padma) condemned her for going through with her divorce :

“According to her, I had become “American”, meaning self-engrossed (134).”

Although divorce is a very common thing in America, for an Indian woman it was still something shocking and difficult to digest.

American and Indian cultures are both appreciated in different ways in Tara's life, but nevertheless they each hold equal importance for her, as evidenced by her frequent thought, “May be I really [am] between two lives.... (150).”

In *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee has created a multi-faceted story of identity, values and family. It is an examination of the search for meaning in one's identity, relationships and values. Tara possesses many identities at one time, yet she seems comfortable with her multiplicity, which allows her the freedom to assimilate while at the same time retaining the aspects of Indian culture she wishes to preserve. This multiplicity is the new form of assimilation for this generation of South-Asian diasporic immigrants. Rather than transplanting Indian culture or disposing of it altogether, the current pattern appears to be reinventing the very notion of one's culture as it bears on one's identity.

One realizes identity is not so much the act of choosing between cultures, but rather it is having the power to redefine the terms of cultural practices and customs to fit one's own experience. Thus, the diasporic Indian identity becomes ambiguous, with self-perception changing as one's perspectives on the surrounding environment and culture evolve. In *Desirable Daughters*, the creation of identity emerges as a continuous process, forever transforming and never truly complete. Identity is fluid and ever changing, subject to the experiences that will forever be molding it into something new.

### **Works Cited:**

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Desirable Daughters*. New Delhi :Rupa Co, 2003. Print.