

## Alienation and assimilation of Tara in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

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### Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the well-known Indian born American writers. She is an Immigration writer whose novels mainly emphasis on themes like immigration, assimilation, alienation dislocation, culture shock and identity crisis. Colonization and decolonization have led to the upsurge diasporic literature. Many people have migrated to the alien land for greener pastures i.e by their profession and the other reason for migration is colonization. These migrated people have to confront different cultural problems in the alien land which is completely contrast to their home land. All the protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee have migrated to foreign country but, their roots always remain in their homeland. The present paper is an attempt to explore the protagonist's alienation in foreign land and the process of assimilation to the western culture in the novel *Desirable Daughters*. The novel reveals the story of three sisters, who are settled in different countries, and are misery to find out their own identities as they come to realize their frontier position as well as secondary role in family and society. *Desirable Daughters* is a tale of immigrants and the perspective of three sisters and their means of negotiating the multiple dislocations in three different perceptions. Tara Chatterjee is the protagonist and the narrator of the novel who migrated to San Fransico after marriage with her spouse.

**Keywords:** alienation, assimilation, diasporic, immigration, roots

### Introduction

I can't change the directions of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination – Jimmy Dean

*Desirable Daughters* moves around the lives of three sisters, belong to Hindu Brahmin background. Among the three sisters, the two undergo a diasporic change. The three daughters of Bhattacharjee namely Padma, Parvati and Tara are known for their beauty, intelligence, respect, compliance. They are always confined to the four walls of their family. "Our father could not let either of my sisters out on the street; our car was equipped with window shades" (DD: 29). These lines indicate how they were trained to maintain family status in the society. Tara comments on her early life in Calcutta, "Our bodies changed, but our behaviour never did. Rebellion sounded like a lot of fun. ...My life was one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage" (DD: 27-28). It means they were suppressed and were not allowed to express their opinion. Since their childhood, they very well know the secondary position of women in the society. The woman protagonist and the other female characters search for freedom in various means, which are against the traditional conservative practices and lifestyles of the third world. The three of them were convent educated. Being born in the patriarchal society, their life was dominated by their father before marriage and the husband after the marriage. The eldest daughter is very much interested in film industry, but this is not accepted by her father. It is because, girls who are entering into silver screen would lessen marriage prospects. She had to marry a non-Bengali groom of her father's choice and migrated to New Jersey with her husband. After her wed lock, she takes up her passion of acting. The second daughter Parvati married to a businessman and settled in Bombay and leads the most luxurious life. The third daughter,

who is the protagonist and narrator of the novel married to a multi-millionaire influenced by her father's charming words. She is the most UN Indian of the three.

Tara, the female protagonist, is born and brought up in Calcutta. At the age of nineteen her parents arranged a marriage with Bishwapriya Chatterjee, who was moved to San Fransico. Tara's husband Bish Chaterjee is born and brought up and educated in India but for higher studies he migrates to Stanford and works there, and becomes a billionaire. He is an extensively travelled man, a transnational scholar. Tara migrates with him to California, and forms the company, planned CHATTY, the operating system for the world.

When Tara arrives in America, she started following Indian culture and behaves like model Indian wife. She is dutiful and docile to her husband and well-versed in fulfilling all domestic responsibilities like a traditional Indian wife; such as

Serving pakoras and freshening drinks while  
 Bish and his friends watch "a Sunday football game.... (24)

Bish is proud of her and shows off to his parents and relatives. This quality is commonly found in third world men who are proud of their wife's outlook. He says:

...how well-trained this upper-class ...girl had become,  
 What a good cook, what an attentive wife and daughter –in-law.  
 What a bright and obedient boy she was raising. (82)

Tara is very much interested to pursue her studies, but she is completely occupied in taking care of her son just like other Indian wives in Atherton, California. Bish has become

multimillionaire and promising young technocrat in a short span of time with support of Tara, who dedicates her full time in attending Bish and supporting the family. This kind of attitude can be seen in third world women, which has been ingrained since their birth. Bish spends fifteen hours at his office and does not have time to spend with wife and son.

In the beginning Tara has not only enjoyed her stay in America but also fulfilling duties as home maker. Slowly she has adjusted to American culture. Generally for any girl after marriage, it takes some time to understand her husband and his people and other conditions of the family. For Tara also it has taken ten years' time to enwrap American culture. She feels she does not have separate identity and does not want to be called as either Mrs. Bish or Mrs. Billionaire. Now Tara feels lonely, isolation and not belonging in this new environment, in the midst of such welcoming comfort. Tara is fed up with this mechanical life and looking forward to embrace American culture. After a decade of marriage, she realizes that the life as an American wife is not promising. She feels sick and alienated. Tara has passionate to work, but Bish has not encouraged her, he is a mere traditional Indian husband. She wants to join college and pursue her studies. Tara feels neglected because Bish's 15 hours' office, and attending public functions in different parts of the world makes Tara secluded. Tara's world is only Atherton gated community; she feels "sick... alien" (87).

Tara has decided to come out four walls of her house and understands American culture and society by her close observation. She has availed each and every opportunity to adopt to American culture to her best. She decides to live life on her own wish and will. Being an immigrant American, "self-appointed Joan of Arc" (221), as a first step of assimilation Tara stopped wearing of red "sindur" in the parting of her hair. A Hindu married woman cannot dare to leave the use of 'sindur', symbol of a living husband.

However as Tara integrates herself in California, she begins to give up certain age-old traditions and finds adapting to a western environment an increasingly easier process. She completely hates to worship husband as a god and who has come to uplift the women after marriage. Tara calls her husband by his shortened name – "Bishu, Bish". When she was in India she never calls her husband by his name, now she calls him as Bish or Bishu by claiming that they are progressive people. This is again contrast to Indian culture, whereas Indian women were not dare enough to call their husbands by their name. It is an act of assimilation, where Tara is welcoming 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 (23)

She feels migrating to the land of opportunities referred as crossing of "dark waters" which is a step to evolution, progressive modernity and emancipation. During her first few years of marriage with Bish, Tara and her friends (other Indian women living in Atherton) often pursued American magazines, captivated by how different the media's hopes of sexuality were from their own.

Meena read the American magazines, and she  
Would quiz us what we ate: Does your husband  
Know how to satisfy you? (83-84)

As she is propositioned by many of Bish's old friends, Tara begins to see that Indian males living in America do not have to hide their sexuality; in fact they appear to flaunt/exhibit it. Khandelwal recognizes this sexual double standard as historical and based on a culture of shame for women.

Men's deviations from expectations seldom  
Brought penalties and were easily forgiven,  
Whereas women who strayed from prescribed  
Gender behaviour risked ruining the reputations  
Of their natal and martial families. (124)

The unfair distinction between male and female sexuality in Indian culture prompts Tara to leave Atherton. She does not want to continue her life under the patriarchal cultural restrictions placed upon her.

Normally in the Third world countries married girls are identified with their husband's name, now Tara is looking for a separate identity and does not want to be called as either Mrs. Bish or Mrs. Billionaire. Tara is looking for respect, for a life apart from her husband's identity, while he is expecting her to be a good cook, an attentive wife, and raise a good boy. Hence Tara has taken a very bold decision of separating herself from her husband, which is considered as taboo in Indian context. Generally in India, marriage is considered as life time relationship and is eternal bond between two people. But the drastic decision of Tara's divorce which is symbol of embracing herself into the Western culture. As Khandelwal writes of the Indian culture,

Marriages are considered permanent and  
Should not be altered by either partner's  
Free choice...Divorce was taboo, and  
Considered a sure sign of Americanization. (119-137)

She separates herself from the husband for her own identity immigrant American, American wife. Moreover she maintains a live in relationship with Hungarian Buddhist and former biker Andy. She now feels, "for the first time in (her) life totally at home, unwilling to leave" (25). But this is not at all welcomed and appreciated in traditional Indian family. This feeling at home can be an indication of a process, known as adaptation. America has provided her an opportunity to acquire modernity. She shows her 'Individuality' which gives license to act out her desires. Her divorce is in an attempt to develop her own individuality. She accepts serenely her son's confession: "I am a gay". Once again it is sign of Americanization. Usually in the third world countries, mothers want their children (especially sons) to be successful in education, profession and in their personal life. But Tara is more Americanized to accept all the odds or abnormal situations in her life boldly with high-mindedness is a process of assimilation. It is quite common for any Indian to be proud of their family legacy, system and hierarchy. But the separation from her husband and living with a man and accepting son's for another man ruins family prestige and respect. Tara's eldest sister also warns about her act which brings insult to their family legacy. Thus, we can say that Tara in the initial years of America led an Indian life which resulted

alienation. After a decade of marriage, she welcomes American culture and assimilates to it. It is a general quality of human being that in the beginning they struggle to adjust, in due course of time they imbibe that culture and become the civilian of the soil. Tara is a woman who swiftly changes/assimilates herself, because women can learn, adopt and adjust to anything quickly is ingrained in their blood.

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