

Identity Crisis in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters

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Abstract

The question of identity occupies a central position in diasporic literature, particularly in the works of Bharati Mukherjee, whose novel Desirable Daughters explores the complexities of selfhood in a transnational context. This paper examines the theme of identity crisis through the lived experiences of Tara Chatterjee and other characters, focusing on the tension between tradition and modernity, homeland and host culture, and personal freedom and social expectations. By analysing cultural displacement, psychological fragmentation, and the process of self-reinvention, the study highlights how Mukherjee redefines identity as fluid and evolving rather than fixed. The narrative reflects broader concerns of postcolonial migration, gender dynamics, and cultural hybridity. Drawing upon critical perspectives and textual analysis, this paper argues that identity in Desirable Daughters is shaped through negotiation, resistance, and transformation, ultimately suggesting that the immigrant experience leads not to loss but to the reconstruction of a more complex and plural self.

Keyword

Identity Crisis, Diaspora, Cultural Hybridity, Immigration, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Self-Discovery, Bharati Mukherjee

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The exploration of identity has long been a central concern in diasporic literature, where questions of belonging, displacement, and cultural negotiation shape the experiences of individuals living between worlds. Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* offers a compelling narrative that delves into the complexities of identity formation in a globalised and transnational context. Through the life of Tara Chatterjee, Mukherjee presents the intricate process by which identity is continuously constructed and reconstructed, influenced by cultural memory, migration, and personal choice. The novel does not merely depict the immigrant experience but interrogates the very notion of identity as something fluid, contested, and evolving.

At the heart of the novel lies the tension between tradition and modernity, a conflict that profoundly shapes Tara's sense of self. Raised in a conservative Bengali Brahmin family, Tara is initially bound by the expectations and values of her cultural heritage. Her arranged marriage to Bish Chatterjee represents the continuation of these traditions, reinforcing the notion that identity is predetermined by familial and societal structures. However, her migration to the United States marks a turning point, as she is exposed to a culture that prioritises individuality and personal freedom. This exposure challenges her previously held beliefs and compels her to reassess her identity. As Tara reflects, "I was not the same person I had been in Calcutta," a realisation that underscores the transformative impact of migration on the self.

The concept of identity in *Desirable Daughters* is deeply intertwined with the idea of cultural hybridity. Mukherjee portrays the immigrant experience as one of negotiation rather than assimilation, where individuals do not simply replace one identity with another but instead create a hybrid self that incorporates elements of both cultures. Tara's life in America illustrates this hybridity, as she navigates between her Indian roots and her American surroundings. She exists in a liminal space, neither fully belonging to one culture nor the other. This duality is captured in her acknowledgement that she is "suspended between worlds," a state that reflects the fragmented nature of diasporic identity.

The theme of identity crisis is further complicated by the role of gender, as Mukherjee foregrounds the experiences of women in her narrative. The three sisters—Padma, Parvati, and Tara—serve as representations of different approaches to identity and cultural adaptation. Padma, who remains closely tied to traditional values, embodies stability and continuity, while Tara represents change and self-exploration. Parvati occupies a middle ground, reflecting the negotiation between tradition and modernity. Through these characters, Mukherjee highlights how gender shapes identity, particularly within the constraints of patriarchal structures. Tara's decision to leave

her marriage and pursue an independent life challenges traditional notions of womanhood, asserting her right to define her own identity.

Marriage, in this context, becomes a crucial site for the construction and negotiation of identity. Tara's arranged marriage initially reinforces her role within a patriarchal framework, where her identity is defined in relation to her husband. However, her eventual divorce signifies a break from this framework, allowing her to reclaim her autonomy. This act of defiance is not merely a personal choice but a statement against the societal norms that seek to confine women to predetermined roles. As Tara asserts her independence, she begins to reconstruct her identity on her own terms, illustrating the dynamic and evolving nature of selfhood.

The immigrant experience in the novel is marked by a profound sense of alienation and displacement. Tara's life in America is characterised by a constant negotiation between belonging and estrangement. While she embraces the freedoms offered by her new environment, she is also acutely aware of her status as an outsider. This duality creates a sense of fragmentation, as she struggles to reconcile her multiple identities. The notion that "home is no longer a fixed place" reflects the shifting nature of belonging in a diasporic context, where identity is not tied to a single location but is instead shaped by movement and experience.

Memory plays a significant role in the construction of identity, serving as a link between the past and the present. Tara's recollections of her childhood in India provide a sense of continuity, even as she adapts to her new life in America. These memories, however, are not always comforting; they often serve as reminders of the expectations and constraints she has sought to escape. The interplay between memory and experience highlights the complexity of identity formation, suggesting that it is influenced by both continuity and change. Mukherjee's narrative emphasises that the past cannot be entirely discarded, as it continues to shape the present in subtle and profound ways.

The relationship between memory and identity becomes even more complex when one considers the selective nature of remembrance. Individuals do not recall their past completely or objectively; instead, memories are often shaped by present emotions and circumstances. In Tara's case, her recollections of India are filtered through her current experiences in America, which alters their meaning. Certain memories become idealised, while others are suppressed or reinterpreted. This selective process creates a reconstructed past that influences her sense of identity in subtle ways. As a result, identity is not merely formed by lived experiences but also by how those experiences are remembered and narrated over time.

The impact of globalisation on identity is another key theme in the novel. The movement of people across borders creates new opportunities for self-reinvention, but it also introduces challenges related to cultural adaptation and belonging. Mukherjee portrays America as a space of possibility, where individuals can redefine themselves beyond the limitations of their origins. However, this process is not without its difficulties, as it involves navigating unfamiliar cultural norms and confronting issues of discrimination and exclusion. The immigrant's quest for identity, therefore, is shaped by both external forces and internal conflicts, resulting in a multifaceted and often contradictory experience.

Language and communication further contribute to the construction of identity in *Desirable Daughters*. The ability to navigate between different linguistic and cultural contexts becomes a marker of adaptability and hybridity. Tara's use of language reflects her shifting identity, as she moves between the cultural codes of her past and present. This linguistic fluidity symbolises the broader negotiation of identity, where individuals must constantly adjust to new environments while retaining connections to their heritage.

Memory also functions as a source of emotional anchoring in an otherwise unstable environment. For immigrants, memories of the homeland provide a sense of continuity and familiarity that contrasts with the uncertainties of the present. Tara's connection to her past allows her to maintain a link with her cultural roots, even as she adapts to a new environment. However, this reliance on memory can also hinder her ability to fully engage with her present reality. The tension between holding on to the past and embracing the present becomes a central aspect of her identity crisis, highlighting the dual role of memory as both supportive and restrictive.

Another significant dimension of identity crisis in the novel lies in the conflict between individual desire and collective expectations. Tara's journey is marked by her struggle to assert her individuality in the face of societal pressures. The Indian cultural framework, which often emphasises family and community over personal aspirations, creates a tension that shapes her identity. Her decision to pursue an independent life in America represents a departure from these expectations, but it also leads to a sense of uncertainty. The freedom she gains is accompanied by the challenge of defining herself outside the structures that once provided stability.

The role of geography in shaping identity is also central to Mukherjee's narrative. The contrast between Calcutta and San Francisco highlights the cultural and social differences that influence Tara's sense of self. These locations are not merely physical spaces but symbolic representations of different ways of life. Tara's movement between these spaces reflects the fluidity of her identity, as she adapts to

changing circumstances while retaining elements of her past. The idea that identity is shaped by movement rather than rootedness underscores the dynamic nature of the immigrant experience.

Mukherjee further complicates the notion of identity through the introduction of uncertainty and disruption in the narrative. The appearance of unexpected elements, such as mysterious connections to Tara's past, challenges her understanding of herself and her place in the world. These disruptions highlight the instability of identity, suggesting that it is not a fixed entity but a process subject to change and reinterpretation. The unpredictability of life, as depicted in the novel, reinforces the idea that identity is continuously evolving.

The generational aspect of identity is another important theme, as it reflects the changing nature of cultural values over time. The contrast between Tara and her ancestors illustrates the transformation of identity across generations. While earlier generations were defined by tradition and conformity, Tara represents a shift toward individuality and self-expression. This generational difference highlights the influence of historical and social contexts on identity, emphasising that it is not inherited but constructed through experience.

The novel also critiques the notion of complete assimilation into a foreign culture. While America offers the promise of reinvention, Mukherjee reveals that assimilation does not necessarily lead to a cohesive identity. Instead, it can intensify feelings of fragmentation, as individuals struggle to reconcile their original cultural identity with the demands of the host society. Tara's experiences demonstrate that the desire to belong is often accompanied by the fear of losing one's roots, creating a continuous tension within the immigrant psyche.

The psychological dimension of identity crisis in *Desirable Daughters* becomes increasingly evident as Tara confronts the contradictions within her own self-perception. Her internal dialogue reflects a fragmented consciousness, where different versions of her identity coexist and often conflict with one another. This fragmentation is not merely a result of geographical displacement but also of emotional and intellectual transformation. Tara's awareness of her shifting identity creates a sense of unease, as she realises that the self she once understood is no longer stable. The realisation that identity is mutable rather than fixed becomes both liberating and disorienting, highlighting the complex nature of selfhood in a diasporic context.

The novel also underscores the role of cultural expectations in shaping the individual's sense of duty and belonging. Tara's upbringing instils in her a deep sense of responsibility toward family and tradition, values that continue to influence her

even after she moves to America. This lingering attachment to her cultural roots creates an internal conflict, as she attempts to reconcile her desire for independence with the expectations imposed upon her. The tension between obligation and freedom becomes a defining aspect of her identity crisis, illustrating the difficulty of breaking away from deeply ingrained cultural norms.

Another important aspect of the narrative is the influence of social perception on identity formation. Tara's identity is not only shaped by her own choices but also by how she is perceived by others, both within her cultural community and in the broader American society. The labels and stereotypes associated with being an immigrant woman contribute to her sense of alienation, as she struggles to assert her individuality in the face of external expectations. This highlights the relational nature of identity, suggesting that it is constructed not only internally but also through social interaction and recognition.

Mukherjee also explores the concept of nostalgia as a double-edged force in the immigrant experience. While nostalgia provides a sense of comfort and continuity, it can also hinder the process of adaptation by idealising the past. Tara's memories of India are often tinged with both affection and critique, reflecting her ambivalent relationship with her homeland. This ambivalence complicates her sense of identity, as she is unable to fully embrace either her past or her present. The novel thus presents nostalgia as a powerful yet problematic influence on identity formation.

The economic and social mobility afforded by migration is another factor that shapes Tara's identity. In America, she is exposed to opportunities that were not available to her in India, allowing her to redefine her social position and personal aspirations. However, this mobility also creates a sense of instability, as it disrupts the familiar structures that once defined her identity. The transition from a clearly defined social role to a more fluid and uncertain position underscores the challenges of adapting to a new cultural environment.

The role of relationships in the construction of identity is also emphasised throughout the novel. Tara's interactions with her family, friends, and romantic partners influence her understanding of herself and her place in the world. These relationships serve as mirrors through which she examines her identity, revealing both her strengths and vulnerabilities. The shifting dynamics of these relationships reflect the broader changes in her identity, illustrating the interconnectedness of personal and social dimensions of selfhood.

Mukherjee's narrative further highlights the importance of self-reflection in the process of identity formation. Tara's journey is marked by moments of

introspection, where she critically examines her choices and experiences. This self-awareness enables her to navigate the complexities of her identity, even as it exposes the contradictions within her. The emphasis on introspection suggests that identity is not passively inherited but actively constructed through reflection and conscious decision-making.

The novel also engages with the idea of cultural performance, where identity is expressed through behaviour, language, and social practices. Tara's ability to adapt to different cultural contexts involves a degree of performance, as she modifies her behaviour to fit the expectations of her environment. This performative aspect of identity underscores its fluidity, suggesting that it is not an inherent quality but a constructed and adaptable phenomenon. At the same time, this performance can lead to a sense of inauthenticity, as Tara questions whether she is truly being herself or merely conforming to external expectations.

Another layer of complexity is added through the exploration of fear and insecurity in the immigrant experience. Tara's sense of vulnerability in a foreign environment contributes to her identity crisis, as she grapples with feelings of uncertainty and displacement. The fear of not belonging, of being misunderstood or marginalised, intensifies her struggle to define herself. This emotional dimension of identity highlights the psychological impact of migration, emphasising that the search for selfhood is not only an intellectual process but also an emotional journey.

Finally, Mukherjee presents identity as an ongoing process rather than a final destination. Tara's journey does not culminate in a definitive resolution but remains open-ended, reflecting the continuous nature of identity formation. The novel suggests that identity is shaped by ongoing experiences and interactions, evolving in response to changing circumstances. This perspective challenges the notion of a fixed or stable identity, emphasising the fluid and dynamic nature of the self. Through this portrayal, Mukherjee offers a profound insight into the complexities of identity in the modern world, highlighting its capacity for transformation and reinvention.

Ultimately, *Desirable Daughters* presents identity as a complex and multifaceted construct, shaped by a range of factors including culture, gender, memory, and globalisation. Mukherjee's portrayal of the immigrant experience challenges traditional notions of identity, emphasising its fluid and evolving nature. Through Tara's journey, the novel illustrates the possibility of embracing multiple identities, suggesting that the quest for selfhood is not about finding a single, fixed identity but about navigating the complexities of a plural and interconnected world.

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