

# Immigration and Cognitive Conflict in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

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## Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee, a Bengali Indian-born American settler is known for her diasporic novels. Her novels mainly explore the migrated women, their struggles, cultural conflicts and identity crisis. Her early novels expressed her personal struggles later on expanded general issues of immigrated women. Among her several writings this article deals with *Desirable daughters*, one of three novels which is considered as three sisters. This paper throws light on the protagonist's movement to America from India and how its character gradually Americanizes.

**Keywords:** Expatriation, Diaspora, Immigration, Cognitive dissonance, Cognitive Conflict, Bharati Mukherjee

Geography has a significant impact on culture. People's migrations from one place to another leave a trail of culture on the land as well as themselves too. As time flies, men run to places to make money which takes them to a point to decide to leave their home or homeland and transfer to an alien land. Following the family head, the family too moves with him. More than men, it is women who faces lots of struggles in this shift. They get tormented between cultures and society as both varies

respective to the land. Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian born American writer, through her writings depicts the struggles of women during and after immigration. In her novels she not only displayed the outer struggles but also the inner struggles which include the emotional and cultural conflicts.

Bharati Mukherjee, born in Kolkata in 1940, a notable Indian-born writer and professor, was known for her exploration of immigration and identity in her writings. She lived with her father's extended family until emigrated to the United Kingdom in 1947 and was there for three years. Returning India, she got her bachelors' and master's in English and ancient Indian culture. She emigrated to USA to become Master of fine arts in creative writing and a Doctor in English and comparative literature.

After her marriage with Clark Blaise in 1963 and completing doctorate in 1969 she moved to Canada where she felt discrimination and found Canadian citizens generally hostile toward Asian immigrants which became the prominent theme of her earlier works. After moving to America in 1980, the embracement of melting pot philosophy made her an American citizen in 1987. Then she called herself an American with Bengali origins by shedding the idea of Asian American or Indian American.

Her novel, *Desirable daughters* (2002), has been criticized often for the exploration of immigrant issues and has challenged the stereotypes of immigrants. To break the stereotypes, i.e. Indian immigrants has same cultural background, Mukherjee emphasized the individuality of each characters which displays the multi-faceted Indian culture. To show that a person not only gets influenced by past experiences, culture, and beliefs but also present experiences, culture, and beliefs play a vital role. Mukherjee's characters are embodiments of range of immigration experiences – expatriates – cling into their pasts with nostalgic zeal as well as embrace a new life irrespective of their origins. Expatriation is a term to indicate the act of leaving one's home country to live in another, the choice could be either voluntary or external force.

The novel, *Desirable daughters*, starts with the account of marriage of Tara Lata, a five year old girl. Her father, Jai Krishna Gangooly, a pleader, has arranged a pompous marriage and all the formalities such as poojas and aachars have been strictly followed to get the blessings of gods and goddesses. Just before the wedding, people tell him that the groom was bitten by a venomous snake and they blamed it on them as the snake goddess was not correctly worshipped. Furtherly the groom's

father demanded more dowry. Gangooly, refusing to give it, took Tara into the sundarban forest and married her to a tree as it is better than being a widow, considered as a social outcast. As in Hinduism, the only way to reach nirvana for a woman is by worshiping her husband. That earned her the title Tree Bride.

In the modern day, Tara, a great grand-child of Gangooly, is married to Bishwapriya Chatterjee, a techie later developed into tech world tycoon and together moved to California's Silicon Valley after their marriage. For Bish, it is a passage to grow and develop and create a tech empire, a classical male act. But for Tara, it is a part of emancipation from the restraints of her born-country. Most of the female emigrants were taken to foreign lands as a part of after-marriage settlements, running after their husbands, living the life of a traditional Indian wife. Very few find it as an unchaining moment, a freedom to explore outside India, trying new things which were forbidden to do in their homeland.

In Tara's case, her newly found freedom made her to choose herself over Indian cultures and her parents' belief too. As she was not satisfied with her married life, Tara and Bish are divorced and a American divorce settlement happened. She then started to live with Andy, a Buddhist carpenter, whom Bish calls as Tara's mistri. If they were in India, this less likely could have happened, as Indian culture values the bond of marriage as a sacred one and a divorce is a lot more treated as a social taboo. Her expatriation made her comfortable as well as confident on her decisions, since geographic location plays a humongous role and the people they meet leave a trail in cultures and customs. After migration few habits change, and then changes happens in diction, body language, behavior which extends to lifestyle, beliefs and customs.

When Tara talks about the marriage with Bish, she says, "I married a man I had never men, 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." On the other hand, the same of Andy is "Love is having fun with someone, more fun with that person than with anyone else, over a longer haul." Still Tara left Andy and started to live alone with her son Rabi. When Bish comes to know this he asks cool, "Tara's mistri has flown the coop?" It could have been an awkward situation or somewhat weird. Their life in Western world has made them prone to Indian cultures but not wholly.

Thinking life goes on with good vibe, a bomb drops on Tara's lap, named Christopher Dey, the self claimed illegitimate son of her elder sister Padma. He enters the life of Tara with a knock that shook her peace. Claiming himself as the son born for Padma and Dr. Ron Day, Padma's teenage mistake, now has come to meet her mother with the help of his aunt Tara. This drags her through past memories and fear of what-her-parents-would-do. As in Indian culture a woman's virginity is seen as a wedding gift given by the wife to the husband and a child before marriage is totally unimaginable. This questions not only the wife but also the upbringing of her, the parents, the total pride of her ancestors. Instead of affecting Padma alone, the impact of this shatters the honour of Battacharjee as well as her ancestor Tara Lata – the Tree Bride.

Here comes the cognitive dissonance and cognitive conflict. Cognitive dissonance is the mental discomfort when someone feels when their beliefs, values or actions contradict each other but the contradiction doesn't have to be the exact same thing on both sides. And Cognitive Conflict is a psychological state of tension or discomfort caused by holding or encountering contradictory beliefs, attitudes or information. In her personal life she gave importance to her happiness. She did what felt right and what made her happy. She chose things irrespective of her culture or others opinion or judgment. But when it comes to others her stereotype Indian culture starts to kick in. She started to think about what people would say, what the society would say, how things could go down as it will also affect her life too.

But, when her son Rabi revealed that he is gay Tara is in profound shock. In her Indian-Bengali upbringing homosexuality is unacceptable and a taboo too. For a moment she wondered how to take it to Bish as well as her sisters. However, she ultimately accepts his sexuality and valued Rabi's feelings and happiness over anything else which is a pivotal moment in her assimilation to American culture.

Immigration is not a conscious or voluntary choice for Bharati Mukherjee's protagonists. They were either forced or happened to move from their place either for upliftment or settlement. They take it as an unchaining moment or emancipation. In that journey they lose their tongue, actions, sense of fashion, beliefs, cultures or they themselves to become a new person – a better person – a new identity. In that shift they get caught in the swirl of cultural calamity where they cannot lose their culture which is deep rooted in their genes as well as run in the river's flow. In this novel, the protagonist, Tara also

struck with cultural calamity embraces the American culture which is growing inside her, at the same time decides to travel to India to get to know about her roots further more.

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