

## Search For Roots: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters

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### Abstract

Homelessness, rootlessness are the common themes of postcolonial literature. Love for home and land leads to the root-search. Going back in the past is an emotional experience. Family history, pride in one's culture weakens the pain of dislocation. Bharati Mukherjee's novel "Desirable Daughters" deals with the phenomena of dislocation of the protagonist Tara and her consequent root search. She finds herself in a situation that ultimately leads her to return to India from America. Mukherjee herself is aware of her Indian heritage despite being comfortable with her hyphenated identity. The story moves across the black water of time and space and the novelist takes the reader from colonial India to Try City, Jersey City and again back to India. Conflict between inherited identity and adopted modernity is presented in the novel. Forced by the life-threatening events, Tara undertakes a search for her roots and learns that the quest for one's origin is the pursuit of an ever-receding horizon.

**KEYWORDS:** postcolonial literature, root search, family history, dislocation, identity, culture

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### Introduction:

Searching for roots is a very New World phenomenon. No matter how far we go away from our home and settled anywhere at the back of the world, sooner or later, we are pulled back by our roots. What beckons us is our land, family, history and culture. A sense of belongingness for the exotic world takes us for a trip down memory lane. Eventually we get our hands on the old memories, tradition as well as perspectives of people around us accompanied by a set of understanding and misunderstanding. This revelation of the past might weaken us intellectually but ultimately enriches us on the emotional part. The person is marked by his or her place. People are convinced of the solidity of their family tree and its firm rootedness in time and place (Wampole). Humans are context-seeking creatures, and this need to feel woven into the world takes many forms: research into family history; pride about one's hometown, state, or country and the specificities of these places that have marked one's character, behaviour, and speech; nostalgia for a past when people appeared to have stable destinies when gender roles, social hierarchies went uncontested; and the pastoral longing to restore a lost communion with the earth itself (Wampole). This is what the protagonist in *Desirable Daughters* does to find the history of her family. Tara's root search leads her to the story of her namesake, Tara Lata the tree bride, who was betrothed to a tree and became a leader in the Bengali resistance against the British. As she learns more about her heritage, Tara experiences historical convergences as past events begin to impact her personal life.

This reaching back to one's ancestral "roots" can be a powerful, almost Utopian, emotional pull (Ang). To return to one's roots depicts a person returning to the start, from the beginning where he/she came from. It is kind of homecoming of wanderers who are

away from home for a long time. Eventually they will return back home to their family. Bharati Mukherjee wrote this novel from the point of view of Tara, youngest of the three beautiful Bhattacharjee sisters, all born on the same birthday in the late 1950s and early 1960s into the last generation of Calcutta “high society.” The three sisters attend an exclusive Catholic convent school, protected from the outside world physically, morally and psychologically: “We are Bengali Brahmins from Calcutta, and nothing can touch us.” Despite the best efforts of their parents, however, all three girls leave the safety of home and family. The oldest of these sisters, Padma has a love marriage and settled in America for many years and lives a life of a celebrity in New Jersey. The second sister, Parvati is also married off to a husband of her own choice and lives with her husband and children in a fancy Bombay apartment. However, Tara, the youngest girl, gets married to a boy of her father’s choice. Very soon after her marriage Tara and her husband leaves for the USA. Her marriage runs into trouble when Tara could not find the happiness she is hoping for in the marriage. She takes her son with her and leaves her husband. She gets into a new relation with a Hungarian biker- carpenter. Then one day her happy world shaken when a young boy claims to be her nephew disowned by her sister in her teens. She gets back to her roots to discover the truth about her family.

In her novel, *Desirable Daughters*, Bharati Mukherjee weaves the narrative across the black water of time and space from the present occupation of California to the historical incidents of India. Much of the novel is set in California but the novelist also takes us to Try City, Jersey City, Newark area, and ultimately back to India. The story is also about three sisters and their relationship to the past. Tara, the thirty-six-year old narrator, is living in a globalized world where East is East, West is West is no longer possible and in which there is “a gradual spectrum of mixed-up differences” (Geertz). She discovers in her American life that her elder sister Padma has had a little fling with a Christian boy Ronald Day. Her father disapproved the marriage because of the different caste of the two. Now, years after her marriage and divorce with Bish, Tara is living with her son and live in partner. But the past is going to assault her in unexpected and disproportionate state. A young man arrives her home and claims that his name is Christopher Day and he is the illegitimate son of Ronald and her Didi, Padma. Tara is suspicious about his identity but gets disturb by his claim. His arrival becomes a real propulsion for the plot in terms of finding out who he is and what he really represents. The novel, *Desirable Daughters*, described by Michael Krasny, is full of suspense, intrigue, and the cultural tensions of traditional India in contemporary America. As the story unfolded, we see that even a highly Americanized woman like Tara, the novel’s protagonist and the youngest of the novel’s three sisters, is not really far from her Indian roots in terms of consciousness despite her life as a single mother with her liv-in partner (Krasny).

Bharati Mukherjee, in *Desirable Daughters*, has finally settled with the issues of rootlessness and rootedness in the process of dislocation. In this novel, she says:

I am coming to terms with what my Indian heritage has left me as residue and what America I have discovered, and discovered as empowerment, and knitting the two together so that I know who I am (Mukherjee).

Similarly, Tara, the narrator in the novel, undertakes to know the history of her family despite being mocked by her close ones:

I have had the time, the motivation, and even the passion to undertake this history. When my friends, my child, or my sisters ask me why, I say I am exploring the making of a consciousness (Desirable Daughters 5).

Tara's root search leads her to the story of her namesake, Tara Lata the tree bride, who was betrothed to a tree and became a leader in the Bengali resistance against the British. As she learns more about her heritage, Tara experiences historical convergences as past events begin to impact her personal life. What we find in the novel is a conflict between inherited tradition and adopted modernity. The narrator is contended with her traditional Indian background, but who also has been or played the role of a mall siren and yet drawn back more and more to what really is her traditional Indian background. The narrator begins her narration with the story of Tree Bride, kind of a folkloric character, who becomes very important to the consciousness of the narrator to get back to her roots. The novel begins with a family wedding in a district of the east Bengal in the year 1879. We are being told about a wedding ceremony where a five-year-old bride Tara Lata is married off to a tree because her would be husband dies of a snakebite on his way to the wedding pavilion. The father of bride, Jay Prakash Gangooly, is a learned barrister who suddenly realizes that there are ways of resisting colonial pressure by going back and learning to cope with and understand the purpose of Hindu tradition. He saves her from an unhappy life as a widow by marrying her to a tree. Tara Chatterjee reveals to the readers that she got to know about Tara Lata and her being made into the Tree Bride through her mother. For seventy years the Tree Bride lived in her father's house and never left the house till her imprisonment by British officers. She reportedly died of heart attack shortly after her arrest. As her grandfather is Jay Krishna's son by his ninth wife, Tara Chatterjee feels connection to the Tree Bride. And it is this connection compels her to visit the same house where once the Tree Bride lived.

Once again mapping the fine line between personal agency and cosmic destiny, *Desirable Daughters* demonstrates Mukherjee's cultural fluency as she seamlessly weaves the narratives across the black waters of time and space from the present preoccupations of California to the historical incidents of India. The novel lays out the spuming of a consciousness, the high and lows of the tangible mental processes which helps the most loving daughter from an affluent family to get the true picture of the in and out of the world she inherits and the world she moves in (Edwards). Mukherjee's earlier works describe the transformation of characters due to dislocation; however, in this novel the novelist analysed how a rooted identity "smashed by hammer blows, melted down and re-emerging as something wondrous, or grotesque" (*Desirable Daughters* 196). In an interview with Dave Weich, Mukherjee explains her strategy of discarding the old-fashioned formula and employing a new one. Tara, the narrator, is very cosmopolitan. She knows Gilbert and Sullivan, and she also knows how to do Indian singing and dancing and all that, but she doesn't have the focus; she doesn't have the tradition that she thought supported her. She accepts the husband chosen by her father. Later, she realizes that those were either fraudulent or not worth hanging onto intact (Mukherjee). The novel not only traverses through history and geography but also investigates the issues of hyphenated identities. In her earlier novels, diasporic transmigration meant new opening and emancipation from the clutches of convention bound society. In her previous novel *Jasmine*, Mukherjee explores how the diasporic experience of dislocation from home and relocation to new socio-cultural spaces

redefines the personality of the female protagonist; however, Tara Chatterjee in *Desirable Daughters* undertakes a quest which is poles apart from the journeys of Jasmine. Jasmine travels from the Indian village Hasnapur, undergoes myriad experiences in the different American cities, and becomes Americanised. On the other hand, Tara Chatterjee, the most 'un-Indian' Indian in America, commences her journey from the New World, and whose immigrant experiences lead her to go in search of her roots opting a transmigration phenomenon. In *Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee considers different pattern of belonging in the global perspectives from in-between temporality to assimilative permanence and further, hyphenated and unmixed nationness.

The three sisters in this novel are breaking away from their traditional Indian communal identity and negotiating individual identity. Padma, the elder one lives with her husband, Harish Mehta in New Jersey. She has become an influential television personality and Bengali role model. Parvati, the middle of the Bhattacharjee sisters, chooses her own husband and marries before her older sister. She lives in an expensive high-rise apartment in Bombay. Unlike to her sisters, Tara seems to believe in the idea that "our roots are what made us what and what and who we are." in her early days in the States, never forget the place she comes from and the culture she belongs to. She is fully aware of her Bengali heritage and believes that Bengali culture trains one to claim the father's birthplace, sight unseen, as his or her desh, her home. For her fellow American friends, it is quite unheard of. But Tara explains them Indian culture consists of iron-clad identities of region, language, caste and subcaste.

In India, every word relating to family carries a special meaning... Close friends, or the vaguely connected from the same desh, the same remote village, are enfolded as "cousin-brothers," much to the consternation of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (*Desirable Daughters* 36).

However, Tara's pride in her culture is not synthetic like her sisters. Her multiculturalist elder sister reacted strongly to Tara's divorce and subsequent life. But ironically, it is Padma's past that haunts Tara most. When her home is bombed by Abbas Sattar Hai who feigns to be the illegitimate son of Padma, Tara decides to return to India as she has a story to tell. She undertakes a search for her roots and learns that the quest for one's origin is the pursuit of an ever-receding horizon. What one confronts is neither stability nor authenticity but fluidity. If one's Indianness is fluid, then one's Americanness in the twenty-first century (Iyer).

At the end of *Desirable Daughters*, Tara Chatterjee visits her parents in Rushikesh, where they have retired from Calcutta. Tara tells her parents about her recent brush with death, and her father calls Hai an agent of Manasha, the snake goddess, who causes people to question their lives. This is the same goddess believed to be responsible for the death of the Tree Bride's original groom. Tara takes Rabi to Tara Lata's home in Mishtigunj. As Tara and Rabi walk through the remains of the house, she is able to hear the events from the day of the arrest. Tara tells Rabi to remember the moment because it is a miracle.

To conclude, *Desirable Daughters* is a book about 'roots- search' and as said by the novelist, searching for roots is a very New World phenomena. Tara's desperation to know the truth of her sister's past leads her to the story of Tree Bride to whom Tara finds herself connected in many ways. Her assimilation into the American soil remains incomplete as she feels a kind of pull by her Indian roots. America has given her the

much-needed freedom of living for herself but she could not detach herself from her roots completely. In the end of the novel Tara's return to her parent in Rishikesh highlights the revival of faith in the tradition and culture that she has given up for the sake of free life style. She finally reconciles with her Indianness and again attaches herself with her Indian traditions.

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