

Memory, Migration, and Female Subjectivity in Bharati Mukherjee’s ‘Desirable Daughters’

Anjila*¹, Dr. Shashi Goyal²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

²Professor, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

*Corresponding Author

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<p>Received: 17 Feb 2026; Received in revised form: 20 Mar 2026; Accepted: 26 Mar 2026; Available online: 02 Apr 2026</p> <p>©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords – Migration, Identity, Self-Reflection, Female Subjectivity, Diasporic Narratives.</p>	<p><i>This research paper examines the interrelated themes of memory, migration, and female subjectivity in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters. This study situates the novel within the context of diasporic feminist discourse, contending that Mukherjee depicts migration not only as a geographical shift but as a significant psychological and cultural metamorphosis that redefines women's identities. The protagonist, Tara Lata Chatterjee, illustrates how individual memory and familial history can influence our identities, even across national boundaries. Utilizing theories of diaspora and hybridity, the paper examines the role of memory as a mechanism of cultural continuity and a locus of tension for diasporic women. Tara's memories of her Bengali upbringing, family customs, and patriarchal expectations demonstrate the enduring influence of cultural memory on the formation of female identity. At the same time, her time in the United States, which included divorce, independence, and emotional isolation, shows how hard it can be to find autonomy in different cultural contexts. Mukherjee finally redefines female identity as flexible, negotiated, and continuously evolving in the context of global migration by focusing on Tara's path of self-reflection and development.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee holds a prominent role in modern diasporic writing due to her intricate depiction of migration and the evolution of identity. Her novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) looks at the cultural, emotional, and psychological effects of moving to a new country, especially from the point of view of women who are trying to balance their old customs with their new freedom. Mukherjee uses the tale of Tara Lata Chatterjee to look at how women's identities change and break apart in diasporic settings.

The story is about three Bengali sisters Tara, Padma, and Parvati, whose lives show how people react to both tradition and modernity in different ways. The sisters grew up in a strict upper-class Bengali home in Calcutta. Later, they went their separate ways, each showing a different level of conformity and disobedience. The story's main focus is on Tara's move to the United States, which creates a space where issues of cultural belonging, memory, and identity become very important. Diasporic writing often explores the conflict between the past and the present, as well as between the motherland and the host

nation. Mukherjee's work demonstrates this thematic interest by depicting migration as both a freeing and destructive phenomenon. Migration presents opportunities for reinvention and liberty; but, it also induces sentiments of displacement, nostalgia, and cultural ambiguity. Tara's existence in the United States thus transforms into a locus where these contradictory urges intersect. The novel also talks on how gender affects the lives of those who have moved to a new country. Women migrants frequently encounter a twofold challenge: they must acclimate to new social contexts while simultaneously safeguarding the cultural traditions of their communities. Consequently, female subjectivity in diasporic narratives often manifests as a contentious domain where individual aspirations converge with familial and societal anticipations. Mukherjee tackles these problems by mixing Tara's current experiences with recollections of her family's past. The story of the Tree Bride, an ancestor whose existence represents the historical conditions that shaped women's position in Bengali culture, is told over and over again. The novel shows how memory continues to shape identity even after moving by showing how the past and present interact. This study contends that *Desirable Daughters* depicts identity as a fluid process influenced by memory, migration, and defiance of patriarchal conventions. Through the frameworks of diaspora theory and feminist criticism, this study illustrates how Mukherjee redefines female subjectivity as fluid and perpetually remade within international contexts.

II. MEMORY AS A CULTURAL HERITAGE

Memory is a key part of *Desirable Daughters*; it connects the past and the present. Tara's story often goes back to the story of her ancestor Tara Lata, who was known as the Tree Bride. The episode tells the story of a young girl whose parents arranged for her to marry a tree so she wouldn't have to deal with the social disgrace of being a widow. The narrative recounts that "Tara Lata is five years old and headed deep into the forest to marry a tree" (Mukherjee 6).

The Tree Bride story becomes an important myth in the Chatterjee family. It shows how strong and morally decent women have always been supposed to be. Tara's recital of this story over and over again

shows how stories from the past affect the way people think today. Even though she lives in a modern American society, Tara's inherited memories keep her mentally connected to her cultural past. Mukherjee uses this story to show how patriarchal customs limit people. The narrative notes that "A Bengali girl's happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment" (Mukherjee 4). In traditional society, marriage is seen as a happy event, yet the idea of incarceration shows how women's lives are limited once they become wives. This remark underscores the gendered norms that delineate female identity within patriarchal societies. So, memory becomes a complicated force in the novel. It gives Tara a sense of cultural continuity and belonging, which is good. On the other hand, it reminds her of the social constraints placed upon women in earlier generations. Tara's identity is shaped by this tension between admiration for her cultural heritage and awareness of its limitations. The endurance of memory signifies overarching trends in diasporic experiences. Cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha posits that the past is perpetually reinterpreted in the present, transforming into an active element of identity construction rather than only a historical reference. Tara's comments exemplify this process, as she continually examines family history to comprehend her own role within it. Mukherjee also demonstrates that storytelling frequently serves as a mechanism for memory in diasporic contexts. People have told and retold the narrative of Tara Lata over the years, making it a symbolic story that tells the family's cultural past. Tara realizes that the past still has a huge impact on her life today. She adds that she has the memories and stories of people who came before her. This technique connects the main character's current experiences in America to the cultural traditions of Bengal by mixing personal identity with community memory. This is how memory helps Tara see her past and present self in a new light. The story of the Tree Bride's predecessors, which was formerly considered as a sign of virtue and sacrifice, slowly becomes a place for deep thinking. Tara starts to understand that the stories families tell each other do more than just keep the past alive; they also show the following generation what is right and wrong. Tara learns that living in a diaspora means always having to balance memory and change. She has to reevaluate the customs she

learned from her family in light of how society is evolving.

III. MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT

In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara's emotional and cultural life changes a lot when she moves. She moves from Calcutta to the United States, where she has to learn a completely new set of norms and hierarchies that don't apply to her anymore. Tara now has opportunities to be autonomous that she wouldn't have had in her traditional upbringing. But moving also makes people feel like they don't belong. Tara is trying to figure out new cultural codes while yet staying connected to her past. She talks about how hard it is to live between cultures and how frustrated she is of always having to explain India to Americans. "I am sick of feeling like an alien" (Mukherjee 87). This statement captures the fragmented nature of diasporic identity. Migration disrupts the notion of a stable and cohesive self, substituting it with many identities influenced by evolving cultural settings. Tara's experiences demonstrate the necessity for individuals in the diaspora to perpetually navigate between diverse social and cultural realms.

This process is complicated, which is similar to what cultural analyst Stuart Hall says: identity should be seen as a process that never ends, not as a fixed thing. Hall says that identity is "a production, which is never complete, always in process." Tara's life is a good example of how the self is continuously changing and negotiating. Mukherjee depicts migration as simultaneously liberating and disconcerting. In her strict Bengali community, Tara's divorce and independent lifestyle would not have been accepted. However, they are possible in the more individualistic culture of the United States. The lack of extended family networks and traditional cultural practices simultaneously induces emotions of isolation and ambiguity.

The novel therefore presents migration as a transformative experience that reshapes emotional and cultural frameworks. Rather than depicting diaspora as a straightforward journey toward freedom, Mukherjee emphasizes its complexities and contradictions.

The patriarchal systems that ruled Tara's early life had a huge effect on how women thought about

themselves in *Desirable Daughters*. Tara's Bengali family was very traditional and encouraged her to be submissive, humble, and execute her obligations as a wife. Her planned marriage is a fantastic example of how family power can sometimes be more important than personal choice. Tara reflects on the circumstances of her marriage, stating, "I married a man I had never met, 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" (Mukherjee 26). The focus on "bloodlines" shows how important social status and family reputation are in conventional marriage arrangements. Her memories of being married early on show how quickly she went from being a child to being an adult. Tara says, "My life was one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage" (Mukherjee 28). The word "thrown into marriage" suggests that something happened suddenly, which shows how women's lives are often shaped by things they can't control.

Mukherjee also demonstrates how intently society monitors women and how they behave. Tara adds, "Any violation of the codes, any breath of scandal, was unthinkable" (Mukherjee 32). This statement indicates how strict moral rules limit what women can do to protect their family's honor. Tara's mission is all about the fight between tradition and independence. She is battling against what men want from women by getting a divorce, but it also makes her feel terrible and out of place in her culture. Mukherjee complicates the concept of freedom by illustrating that being free does not necessarily imply that inherited traditions lack emotional influence. Simone de Beauvoir, a prominent feminist philosopher, asserted, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Tara's evolving identity exemplifies this process of becoming, as she gradually transcends the constraints imposed by patriarchal norms.

IV. HYBRIDITY AND THE DIASPORIC SELF

Mukherjee ultimately portrays identity as hybrid rather than fixed. Tara lives in America, where Indian traditions mix with Western modernization. This heterogeneous state contradicts the notion that identity is derived solely from a single culture or nation. Mukherjee, on the other hand, maintains that

people who live in the diaspora usually have a cultural position that is in between, where several influences affect the self in complex ways.

Tara's experiences show how adaptable diasporic subjectivity can be. She enjoys some aspects about American freedom and independence, but she still remembers and holds on to the cultural values she learnt as a Bengali youngster. Her memories of family customs, social conventions, and the story of her ancestor Tara Lata are still very significant to her. These cultural elements that mix together make a rich and complicated identity that can't be easily categorized into one group or the other. Tara's identity is derived from the interplay of these several cultural frameworks. The concept of hybridity is essential to diaspora theory and postcolonial studies. Cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha proposes the notion of the "third space," a theoretical domain wherein cultural significations are challenged and redefined through interaction. In this situation, identities are not just inherited; they are actively constructed through intercultural engagement. Tara's experience as a member of the diaspora exemplifies this negotiation process, as she gradually constructs an identity informed by both Indian traditions and American social norms. Mukherjee shows that having a split identity may lead to both creativity and conflict. Being hybrid allows Tara to question strict cultural norms and find new ways to be herself, especially when it comes to gender roles and her own independence. But having more than one culture can also make things confusing and generate problems for oneself. Tara is always striving to find a balance between wanting to be independent and the emotional pull of family traditions and memories.

Tara's mixed identity shows that diasporic selfhood is not a fixed point but a process that never stops changing. Mukherjee's tale shows that people in the diaspora build their identities by continually balancing the past and the present, the motherland and the hostland, memory and experience. Tara's tale highlights how being hybrid is a unique part of living in the diaspora. This helps people build new ways to belong that go beyond strict cultural lines.

V. CONCLUSION

Desirable Daughters provides a nuanced examination of the interplay between memory, migration, and gender in shaping female subjectivity within diasporic environments. Bharati Mukherjee uses the figure of Tara Lata Chatterjee to show that moving isn't just a physical journey; it's also a mental experience that changes who you are. The book shows how cultural memory still affects the lives of those who have moved away from their native country. Migration also opens up chances for people to change who they are, which goes against the way things have always been done. Tara's experiences demonstrate the intricacies of balancing ancestral customs with modern autonomy. Mukherjee posits that identity throughout the diaspora is neither static nor readily reconciled. Instead, it is always being rebuilt by the interplay of memory, migration, and individual decision. By putting the perspectives and experiences of women front and center, *Desirable Daughters* makes a big contribution to feminist and diasporic literary discourse. It is a powerful look at how cultural identity is changing in a world that is becoming more connected.

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