

# Explicating Tradition and Identity Crisis in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters and Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle

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**Abstract:** The passionate pursuit of national culture and traditions, while often creating a sense of discord and division, is the driving force behind finding the essence of nativism. Despite having traditional wealth, ethnic heritage, geographical advantages, and racial superiority, people are willing to die for a native cause. Being in search for native values as dictated by social moral psychology is what creates the question of identity and culture. Diaspora writings merge together the traditional culture from an adopted land and transform that of the immigrants into their inherited culture. Bharati Mukherjee's novel, *Desirable Daughters* unveils the struggle for self-definition and identity for modern educated women who are stuck between tradition and modernity; it tells a story about immigrants and how three sisters (Padma, Parvati, and Tara) maneuver their way through identity. Margaret Atwood is a renowned Canadian author whose primary focus is on gender, her works revolve around women looking for their lost identity in a patriarchal society. *Lady Oracle* (1976), is one such work which explores the complexity of reinvention while Joan Foster (the protagonist) attempts to recreate herself. This paper aims to discuss the impact that tradition has on identity formation in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*; it sheds light on the struggle that women face in terms of trying to balance their traditional values with their crisis of identity.

**Keywords:** Tradition, culture, patriarchy, identity-crisis, diaspora, expatriation, immigration.

## 1. Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee was an Indian-American-Canadian writer and professor of English at the College of California, Berkeley. She was the author of a number of novels and short story collections, as well as nonfiction books. In 1988, Mukherjee won the National Book Critics Circle Award for her collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*. In 1989, Mukherjee stated in an interview with Ameena Meer that she considered herself as an American writer, not an Indian writer living abroad. In 2013, Whittier College awarded her an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters (L.H.D.). Bharati Mukherjee is a well-known voice of the Indian diaspora. In her works, she depicts the experiences of Indian immigrants, especially of her female characters. She speaks frequently about the lives of Indian women in the USA and their pathetic state of changing and

adapting their lives and struggles. She has explored the issues of immigration and transformation very well. She shows the different paths of her characters such as emigration, transition, and immigration. She paints a picture of a cultural conflict between the Eastern and Western lifestyles, which leads to a psychological crisis for her female characters. Her novels usually show the importance of the feminist perspective of her female characters. She portrayed her female characters as the protagonists and heroes of her novels. She has tried to show how her female characters sacrifice their dreams, hopes, aspirations, wishes and desires for their true identity and how they overcome all hurdles. In her novels, she depicts her personal life experiences to show the transformation of American society.

Her writings accurately portray the challenges of her cultural location in West Bengal, India, and her migration from her homeland to Canada, where she was concurrently invisible as a writer. Her female figures are autobiographical representations of her expatriate experience. In her works, she depicts contemporary women's struggles to define themselves and achieve a freshly accepted selfhood, particularly in the context of cultural clashes, a topic that has taken on new significance in the age of globalization. She depicts the twisted psyches of immigrant women who have been surviving in the fight between Indian tradition and morals, which is embedded in their characters and their fascination with Western lifestyles. The majority of her writings deal with her transition from displacement to adoption and assimilation.

The novels *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975) reveal the problems of belongingness as real anguish and describe the primary concerns of nativism, locality, and identity, whilst *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* (2002) highlight the problems of diasporic culture. It was the beginning of the struggle for survival in an adopted place, according to Stuart Mall: "She abandons the belongingness of her earlier writings in favor of nostalgia and the concept of successful adoption in the New World."

*Desirable Daughters*, Bharati Mukherjee's sixth novel investigates the formation of consciousness. Tara, the

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protagonist, is a 36-year-old Indian-American woman. She is the eldest of three daughters born to a rich engineer. She is from a typical Bengali family who lives in Calcutta. She marries Bishwapriya (Bish) Chatterjee, a suitable groom chosen by her father, when she is 19 years old. Tara ignores traditional Indian life while in the United States. She divorces her wealthy husband after ten years because she believes her marriage does not provide her with the full status of an American woman. She relocates to San Francisco with her son, who is 12 years old. She begins working because she has already given up the luxuries of a wealthy man's wife. She has numerous short-term romances before settling on Andy, a Hungarian Buddhist builder. She considers him a live-in lover.

*Desirable Daughters* is a cerebral story about three Indian-born upper-class sisters, Padma, Parvati, and Tara, who live in the United States as Indian immigrants. Tara, the protagonist, is alienated from her native Indian tradition with her two sisters; the novel depicts her sense of immigration, lack of belonging, haunted memories, and quest for a new identity; however, it does not describe her nostalgia, urges to return to her native land. Her earlier works emphasize immigration as a process of gain rather than loss and displacement of national culture and tradition. The protagonist travels from alienation to adoption and assimilation. It's a feminist and diasporic ideology that's masterfully stitched together.

Tara, the main character, is the most 'un-Indian' of the three. She resides in San Francisco and is divorced from Bishwapriya Chatterjee, an Indian Silicon Valley dotcom millionaire who is ideal for all Indian immigrants, a sort of ethnic Bill Gates, for his contribution to the creation of a network of communication via the internet. Chester Yee, his friend, invents a computer-routing system that makes them wealthy.

Tara begins to feel at ease in her life, but Chris Dey appears and disrupts her tranquillity. He claims to be her eldest sister's illegitimate son. His presence in her life violates the secure assumptions that underpin her new life, at least in part. Her illustrious history seems to her like a gloomy cave. She also realized that even though she and her sisters were raised in the same environment and received the same education, their worldviews were vastly different. She wanders towards her ex-husband once Andy leaves her life. She believes, she misunderstood him. Tara and Bish are attacked in her home one night by an explosive planted by a man who identifies himself as Chris Dey. It was a devastating experience, and she returned to India to live with her parents, realizing that one's roots cannot be fully severed.

Mukherjee departs from her previous novels in *Desirable Daughters*. Tara wishes to rediscover her identity in the United States without erasing her previous identity. She strives to reconcile her Indian heritage with her current American existence. It is undeniably a difficult procedure, but she approaches it with calm and composure. She is aware that women in India have been oppressed, but they do not scream that they are victims. Indian women make steps to empower themselves within their constricted world. They are understanding, patient, and bright. Tara Lata Ganguly, one of her ancestors, was a saint and freedom fighter. She discovers

something new and inspiring in each generation of women in her family.

Padma, the eldest, lives in New Jersey but is completely Indian in her attire, cuisine, and profession as the television anchor of an Indian television program, set in Jackson Heights, Queens, and run by her Indian lover, while she remains married to a once successful man but now lives off her fame. She has become more Indian in the nearly twenty-five years she has been in the United States than she was when she left Calcutta. She is a multicultural performance artist for local schools and community centers.

Parvati is Indian to the point of allowing her husband's relatives to stay in their luxurious view of the city for weeks. Tara describes her sister's "very stressed out life" as "her easy life with servants, drivers, and other amenities at her disposal."

Mukherjee describes the identity crisis and traditional transformation in the course of crossing and recrossing the multiple borders of language, race, tradition, culture, and identity, much like her characters in diaspora, who have sentimental attachments to a distant homeland but no real desire for permanent return. She contends that in this age of diaspora, one's biological identity may not be one's only identity; adoption and assimilation accompany the act of displacement. Padma, Parvati, and Tara are three sisters who were born three years apart and share the same birthday. Their mother names them after the goddess in the hopes that they will all survive and prosper, which they do. "We are three sisters... as similar as three blossoms on a tree." (But we're not)," Tara says.

Tara is a well-educated modern woman who lives in San Francisco. She accepts the challenges of living in a foreign nation and never looks back. Instead of suffering from a lack of belonging, she looks forward to newness and survival. She wears Western attire instead of Indian traditional practices, has a relationship with Andy, accepts divorce, which is an unlucky term in the context of Indian traditional marriage, and gives her son, Rabi, a grant. She, like Bharati Mukherjee, goes through the process of adjusting to a new identity. Tara begins her journey from unhousement to rehousement of immigrants in this autobiographical exposition of the novelist. She, like Jyoti from *Jasmine*, is ready to accept all of the changes. She agrees with *Jasmine*: "I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward (*Jasmine*, 185)."

Tara is less likely to be Jyoti than Dimple of *Wife*, who, like *Jasmine* Tara, embraces the American way of life and prepares herself for a new identity. She differs from Dimple, who fails to cope with an alien environment; becomes miserable as a result of her immigrant experiences; kills her husband, and commits herself because she loses faith and confidence in her cultural and traditional displacements.

Despite her pleasant reaction to dislocation, Tara constantly feels odd. She is unable to change her inferior black race, nor can she influence Americans' attitudes about Indians. She, like other Indian diasporas, has feelings of alienation, a loss of belonging, and a crisis of new identity creation. She says, "I am seek of feeling an alien (*Desirable Daughters*, 87)." "I'm not the only Indian on the block. All the same I stand out, and I'm

convinced. I don't belong here. (Desirable Daughters, p. 79) .” She proudly embraces all of the changes but is victimized by racial discrimination, a common humiliating behavior practiced by every Indian in Western countries. Tara says, "I didn't have a single close friend in San Francisco...The Atherton wives treated me as a parish I didn't belong in India or in the Silicon Valley..." Tara's identity is modified as she goes through the assimilation process. Through Tara, Mukherjee explains her concept of changing identities. "The diaspora experience, as I intend it here, is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity that lives with and through, not despite, difference by hybridity," she argues. Diaspora identities are those that are continually creating and replicating new identities via transition and difference."

Tara's attempts to shed her native identity are futile; she is torn between Indian culture and the American value system, which puts her in a bind. She frequently believes that she is neither an Indian nor an American." She is an American in appearance yet an Indian in spirit. She realizes her identity is splintered, made up of numerous people who accept and reject aspects of both American and Indian culture. She becomes acquainted with the concept of numerous identities. She accepts her diversity as part of her tolerant capacity rather than fighting it. Tara continues to change and evolve in this fashion, but she is unable to shed her prior identity. In the novel, this is Taralata's divided assimilation. Tara's elder sisters, Padma and Parvati, changed Indian tradition in America and reshaped it for the world of adoption through her assimilation. With this novel, Bharati Mukherjee, already a highly recognized author and winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award, cemented her reputation as a brilliant writer whose works blend pride in her Indian background and thankfulness for the chances afforded by America. According to Jope Nyman, Bharati Mukherjee's fictions "rewrite the traditional immigrant story, imaginary new spaces, and form of identity as a result of travel and dislocation." Mukherjee stated in an interview with bookreporter.com that she works in the tradition of immigrant experience rather than nostalgia and expatriation. Tara in *Desirable Daughters*, on the other hand, is unable to entirely rebuild traditional gender norms. Tara's battle is described by Naman as "a desire to construct hybridity and form new forms of identity and culture in space."

Finally, she recognizes the importance of family bonds in developing one's identity. Tara wants to reconnect with her sisters, but they are unresponsive to her relocation. They keep criticizing her, but she remains steadfast and silent. Tara has learned to understand and tolerate others. She accepts her ex-husband with a new perspective. She also accepts her son Rabi's sexual orientation. According to Mukherjee, in a multicultural society, one must learn to be open and transform without losing one's original identity. Mukherjee's novel is noteworthy for expanding on a previous theme of immigrant life.

Margaret Atwood's first two novels are similar in tone, with one focusing on the comedic presentation of premarital manners and other themes of a mythic quest for identity, and each novel, as George Woodcock observed, "is the account of

a rite de passage," a story of self-realization and life realization. Both Marian McAlpin in *The Edible Woman* and the anonymous narrator in *Surfacing* begin to overcome illusions and delusions that were partly self-inflicted and partly culturally imposed by the end of their ordeals. Each eventually gains a broader view of herself and her situation as a result. Joan Foster, the narrator in *Lady Oracle*, is a comedic protagonist in quest of an identity who also suffers for her existence throughout the novel, and Atwood has given us another such character. Nonetheless, *Lady Oracle* is Atwood's third novel, and its topics differ from those of her previous works. As we will argue, Atwood subtly explores the complexities of fantasy, and the causes and consequences of self-deception, and effectively portrays the protagonist's dawning recognition of her largely self-imposed victimization and her first stumbling steps to escape that condition in *Lady Oracle*.

Gender and identity, religion and myth, the power of language, climate change, and power politics are among the subjects explored throughout Atwood's writings. Among her contributions to Canadian literature, Atwood founded the Gryphon Poetry Prize and the Writer's Trust of Canada, a non-profit literary organization that promotes Canada's writing community.

Joan Foster, the novel's protagonist, is a Gothic romance novelist who has spent her life running away from tough situations. The narrative alternates between flashbacks from the past and present-day settings. We watch Joan Foster as an overweight child whose mother continually criticizes her, and later, covering her career, her past as the mistress of a Polish count, and her liaison with a performance artist through flashbacks. In 1977, the novel shared the City of Toronto Book Award with Margaret Gibson's short story collection, *The Butterfly Word*.

In her essay "Quest for Identity," Charles Correa writes, "We develop our identity by tackling what we perceive to be our real problem....we find our real problem... we find our identity by understanding ourselves, and our environment." Joan Foster, too, faces worry and deprivation in a patriarchal culture. She is so secluded and alienated that she considers her friends, parents, and spouse strangers. She is overwhelmed by the troubles she sees around her, and she desires to be free of all human interactions. The novel delves into family ties and the impact of upbringing on adulthood. It also shows how a female feminist author adjusts to the challenges of the male-dominated literary tradition. Rosemary Sullivan and "Atwood investigate how societal forces interact with the individual." The protagonist is from a society in which women's beauty and success are solely determined by the shape of their bodies and their complexion. Joan, the heroine, is overweight and lacks the attributes of an ideal woman. Because she refuses to become the perfect daughter, wife, and woman in her society, she feels alone and deprived of her parents and society. Joan's parents constantly force her to conform to pre-determined social rules, but she refuses and revolts against them, and she develops a strong rebellious attitude against social exploitation, and she begins to use her body as a weapon to stand against her society and her family: "By this time, I was eating steadily, doggedly,

stubbornly, whatever I could get." The battle between myself and my mother was heating up; the contested territory was my body."

The narrator and novelist create the stuff of fantasies out of previous personal unhappiness and present disappointment. Reality becomes romance, and the creator of *Costume Gothics* attempts to keep the cycle going. Instead of anticipating new opportunities and fostering a different future. She is aware of what her reader desires and what is required: "I went to school with them, I was the good sport, I volunteered for committees, I decorated the high school gym with real HOWDY HOP and SNOWBALL STOMP signs, and then I went home and ate peanut butter sandwiches and read paperback novels while everyone else was dancing." Miss Personality, confidante, and loyal friend, I was. They told me everything."

The male-dominated culture expects women to conform to their prevailing societal conventions, but Joan disregards this belief system and rebels against the ideal of a woman. Unfortunately, the more she defied her society's gender conventions, the more she was reviled and humiliated. Most women adopt the ideal appearance that is appealing to men and society, and as a result, they become an object for men. And, in order to obtain this desired self, they quit eating in order to be skinny, because thinner ladies are an ideal image of women. So gaining weight is a strategy used by women to deal with gender inequity. Women gain weight to avoid being perceived as sexual objects. Atwood's writings address the use of the body as a weapon and protest. Through the use of war metaphors, Joan's weight gain can be regarded as a cause of rebellion: "I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes, I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining room table, in this, at least, I was undefeated."

There is a lengthy flashback to the heroine's history in the novel's second half. One of the most crucial aspects of the work is the protagonist's childhood mother-daughter bond. Joan is rejected, undesired, and unloved by her mother, who treats her poorly because she is overweight. Joan objects:

This was one of the many things my mother had forgiven me for. In the early photographs, I was simply overweight. I was attempting to swallow something: a toy, a hand, a bottle... I couldn't stand what's commonly referred to as baby fat. The film abruptly ended when I reached the age of six. This must have been the point at which my mum gave up on me... She had determined that I would not do it. I became aware of this quite quickly."

She was unable to make decisions for herself as a child, and this feeling persisted with Joan into adulthood, becoming the catalyst for her rebellion against her mother, who is portrayed as the novel's antagonist. Furthermore, Joan rejects the concept of femininity and refuses to become the type of woman her mother and society regard as ideal and perfect. Joan is repeatedly mentioned in the narrative as not fitting the description of an ideal female produced by a patriarchal society.

Joan prefers not to recall her humiliation as a large girl, and she refuses to admit the true cause of her prior failures. She is aware that she was at odds with her mother, and that the battleground was the dining table. Joan's mother became

increasingly hostile as she continued to gain weight and become physically unappealing. Joan's life is also unfinished in other ways. She still sees herself as "the Fat Lady," an image that haunts her nightmares and fuels her constant fear of being recognized by someone from her past. She is physically slender and lovely, but emotionally she is a bitter, self-contained adolescent. Her two names, one from her spouse and one from her aunt reflect the two sides of her personality. I was two individuals at the same time, with two sets of identification papers, two bank accounts, and two different groups of people who believed I existed; there was no mistake that I was Joan Foster...But I was also Louisa K. Delacourt (the role she plays in *Costume Gothics*). "She essentially leads two separate lives as a wide and a writer. But instead of being bigger or even equal to the sum of its components, her entire life is less than either. Because her concept of self is ambiguous and even self-defeating, she is easily defined by others."

The novel's third section depicts Joan's new characteristics of personality, which neither she nor the others in her life had previously observed. However, the action remains noteworthy. She has accepted herself, and her propensity to damage has an impact on her identity, with that new identity. She realizes she must return to Canada to clean up the mess caused by her "death," and she also comes to a more crucial realization. Joan Foster finally resolves, "I'm not going to write any more costume Gothics." "I think they were bad for me," she continues, "but I might try some science fiction." "I don't like the future as much as I do the past, but I'm sure it's better for you."

Joan's decision to stop working on *Costume Gothics* is essentially a recognition that she no longer needs to be a victim and that she will no longer inflict the myth of the victimized woman on herself and her readers. In order to come to grips with her life's calamity, she must confront herself with some challenging questions. Where do the fiction of Louisa end and Joan's life begin? This subject is exacerbated further by the fact that Joan Foster's intertwined authorial-autobiographical fantasies intersect with the imaginations of others. By the time Joan reaches adulthood, she realizes that all of her boyfriends are deceptive: "Every man I had ever been involved with...had had two selves," one of them evil. Atwood makes a conceptually important argument with those two-sided masculine characters, with consequences that Joan eventually recognizes. If a man has a dual role in the lives of women, a woman must also have a dual role. They must be victims or heroines - sometimes threatened, sometimes rescued. This dual dualism is especially prevalent in romantic novels. The Gothic hero's decision determines the heroine's happiness, and possibly her life.

The fourth stage of her self-discovery journey is impacted by her interactions with Arthur and their wedding. Joan falls in love with him despite his disdain for her, and they marry. Arthur knows nothing of Joan's previous existence as a fat child or her Gothic novel writings, and Joan herself doesn't tell him much. She loses her female individuality after their marriage and begins doing things that Arthur enjoys and remaking herself into an attractive lady. "Though I was tempted at times, I resisted the urge to confess, Arthur's tastes were spartan, and

my waley life and innermost self would have appalled him." It's like asking for a steak and receiving a murdered cow. I believe he suspected this; he certainly thwarted my few hesitant attempts at self-disclosure."

Joan is unhappy with her current identity, so she develops a new one. Her attitude in her marriage with Arthur is to be an ideal wife for her husband and ensure that he is satisfied and delighted with her. Joan begins writing poems to inspire Gothic romances, but she is dissatisfied with the success of her poetry collection, "Lady Oracle," because she is afraid that someone will discover her other self, her costume as a Gothic writer self, and her former fat self: "Now that I was a public figure, I was terrified that sooner or later someone would find out about me." She is concerned that the people around him would learn about her previous identities. So, she spreads the rumor that she drowned in Lake Ontario and flew to Italy. Joan wishes to put an end to her various identities in this manner. Indeed, the narrative depicts the protagonist's psychological and moral development from childhood to adulthood. As a result, the novel can be classified as a Bildungsroman.

Joan's endeavor to create several selves appears to be doomed in the end. Finally, she reveals, "I have always been terrified of being found out." She believes she has never been truly loved before. Her husband could only adore a fabricated Joan. Arthur, she acknowledges, "loved me under false pretenses." So, Joan Foster's narrative teaches us that in order to survive and adjust to this heightened environment, we must look within ourselves. This, in turn, provides us with a true and solid identity.

In order to protect herself and survive in a patriarchal society, the female protagonist of this story realizes that the people and their way of life are a threat to her actual self. She seeks to fight and forbids certain practices. When the young women reached this degree of self-awareness, they became aware of the "female

body," which plays an important part in their reintegration. As a result, Joan becomes conscious of her selfhood and accepts her gender identity.

Thus, both the protagonists, Bharati Mukherjee's Tara and Margaret Atwood's Joan Foster, tell us that a survivor is someone who welcomes change and transforms themselves to fit the circumstances. Their heroines debunk the notion of a single identity by attempting to balance the 'world of origin' and the 'world of adoption' through the process of identity construction and assimilation. Unlike other female writers who have viewed the condition of immigrants as one of conflict and adjustment, Mukherjee and Atwood provide a novel and challenging perspective that allows the immigrants to emerge from their defense and into the openness of assertion.

## 2. Conclusion

This paper presented the impact that tradition has in identity formation in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*; it sheds light on the struggle that women face in terms of trying to balance their traditional values with their crisis of identity.

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