

# Mobility and Identity Construction in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* "The Tree Wife and Her Rootless Namesake"

Katherine Miller

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## Article abstract

Identity politics permeate Bharati Mukherjee's texts, often finding resonance with recent feminist and geographical theory emphasizing the interrelatedness of space, place, subjectivity, and gender. In *Desirable Daughters*, the ancestral story of a young girl married to a tree and confined for life to her father's compound becomes a touchstone for the present-day characters, raising questions as to whether mobility truly offers these women a way of redefining their identities. The novel ultimately suggests that one's birthplace does form one's identity, and that identity performance remains constrained within the ideological determinants of home and community.

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# Mobility and Identity Construction in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* "The Tree Wife and Her Rootless Namesake"

KATHERINE MILLER

IN THE LAST TWENTY YEARS, feminist critics have developed theoretical constructions of identity that include a spatial component. Feminist geographers such as Doreen Massey, Linda Martin Alcoff, Linda McDowell, Alison Blunt, and Gillian Rose acknowledge the importance of spatial metaphors in theories that articulate the "social construction of gender difference" (Blunt and Rose 3). McDowell and Joanne P. Sharpe, in the introduction to *Space, Gender, Knowledge*, emphasize the significance of "gendered identities" and a "spatial imagination" to feminist research. Discussing the "politics of location," Blunt and Rose state that, for a woman, locating "an author(ity) in terms of her position in a complex and shifting matrix of power relations involves a fluid and fragmented sense of both identity and space" (14). The interweaving of feminist and geographical theories about the production of space and subjectivity opens new understandings of identity politics and the way "gendered space" is constructed and deconstructed in literary texts.

Bharati Mukherjee, a writer and scholar who has lived in India, Canada, and the United States, is uniquely positioned to examine the fragmentary nature of characters with "*multiply* constituted identities" (Sritala 302). Identity politics permeate Mukherjee's texts. Her novels, which include *Jasmine*, *Wife*, and *The Holder of the World*, explore the shifting identities of diasporic women, both in the present-day United States, Canada, and India, and in the past. In her earlier novels, nomadism and identity shifting intertwine; Samir Dayal describes the title character of *Jasmine* as "a perpetual nomad" who "shuttles between differing identities" (77). The mobile woman or nomad becomes, in Rosi Braidotti's

words, “the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity ... [who] expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without or against an essential unity” (22). If, as Doreen Massey argues, “spaces and places are not only themselves gendered, but ... also reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood” (179), then mobility allows the female characters to move beyond the traditional boundaries of female identity.

Mukherjee’s most recent novel, *Desirable Daughters*, opens with the story of Tara Lata, the Tree Wife. When her teenage fiancé is killed by a snake on her wedding night, five-year-old Tara Lata is spared the disgrace of life as “not quite a widow ... [but] a woman who brings her family misfortune and death” (12) by her father’s quick actions. He marries her to a tree. Tara Lata, the Tree-Bride, lives the remainder of her life in her father’s compound, emerging only when she is dragged off by the colonial police for her support of India’s freedom fighters. The life of Tara Lata becomes a touchstone for the narrator, also called Tara. The modern Tara is a wealthy Bengali Brahmin who has left India, divorced the husband chosen for her by her father, and immersed herself in a non-familial life in San Francisco. She has removed herself from the “spatial patterns” (McDowell 29) that seemingly determine her identity. In Mukherjee’s earlier works, characters redefined themselves with each new spatial pattern; however, in this novel, Mukherjee explores what happens to a gendered identity that has been “smashed by hammer blows, [and] melted down” (196). Does mobility/nomadism truly offer a female character a way of redefining her identity and her relationship to home, as Mukherjee suggests in *Jasmine*? Or do homes, both personal and communal, inescapably influence the nexus of identity construction? In *The Politics of Home*, Rosemary George examines the role of homes in gendered identity construction, arguing that “home is a way of establishing difference ... along with gender/sexuality, race, and class, [it] acts as an ideological determinant of the subject” (2). By separating herself from her family and community, Tara challenges some of the social and ideological markers that determine her identity; however, as Mukherjee demonstrates in this novel, identity determinants cannot be shed as easily as a snake’s skin.

As an English-speaking, Christian, casteless, middle-class woman born in Western Canada, the only identity markers that I share with Mukherjee’s narrator are gender and sexual orientation. However, as both a feminist and a widow, I am fascinated by Mukherjee’s detailed analy-

sis of cultural responses to women's social status. By juxtaposing the stories of the modern rootless Tara with the rooted Tara Lata, Mukherjee opens up the contradictions between feminist idioms and "*the stubborn potency of myth in the face of overwhelming change*" (19). Recounting the night of Tara Lata's marriage to the tree, Tara writes that

*A Bengali girl's happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrow of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her. Even constructing it from the merest scraps of family memory fills me with rage and bitterness.* (4)

This quotation introduces several issues that are important in the novel. The first is the association between gendered identities and home. After her marriage to a tree, Tara Lata spends the rest of her life "imprisoned" within her father's home. In contrast, the modern Tara is rootless. The second issue is the impact of history, community, and religion upon a woman's identity. Mukherjee makes several references to Tara's unique and inescapable situation as a wealthy Bengali Brahmin, divorced from a powerful and prominent member of the Indian community. As a police officer tells Tara, "If you're trying to hide your identity, let me tell you it won't work" (143). The third is the idea of identity construction itself; the modern Tara "constructs" the narrative of Tara Lata's life from "scraps of family memory," but she also attempts to reconstruct her own life within the nexus of gender, religion, caste, and class. In *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee explores "a complicated working out of the relationship between home, identity, and community that calls into question the notion of a coherent, historically continuous stable identity and works to expose the political stakes conceded in such equations" (Martin and Mohanty 195).

In Mukherjee's texts, female identity is often linked to an imprisoning home. Although Nalini Iyer argues that Mukherjee's novels examine "the need for immigrants to construct for themselves a narrative of home" (29), in *Wife, Jasmine*, and *The Holder of the World*, home is frequently associated with images of imprisonment. The title character of *Jasmine* moves away from defining herself solely by her community and home, referring to one place as a "fortress of Punjabiness" (148). Jasmine "shuttles between different identities" (Dayal 77), seeing America as a place where "nothing is rooted anymore. Everything was in motion" (*Jasmine* 152). This earlier novel, which validates the concept of a fluid identity linked to perpetual motion, ends with Jasmine, now called Jase, at the beginning of another identity transformation, fleeing to California with

a new lover. Perhaps it is significant that Tara lives in San Francisco, almost as far west as one can travel in the continental United States.

The modern Tara begins her story with “*that most American of impulses or compulsions, a ‘roots search’*” (17). She then describes her own childhood in Calcutta in the late fifties and early sixties with her two older sisters, Padma and Parvati. Named after goddesses, the “desirable daughters” of the title are, in Tara’s words, “*sisters three ... as like as blossoms on a tree*” (21). Using the metaphor of the family tree, Tara seems to imply that identity is essential, defined by one’s home, community, and culture. She calls attention to this belief, noting that

Bengali culture trains one to claim the father’s birthplace, sight unseen, as his or her desh, her home .... When I speak of this to my American friends — the ironclad identifiers of region, language, caste, and sub-caste — they call me ‘overdetermined’ and of course they are right. When I tell them they should be thankful for their identity crises and feelings of alienation, I of course am right. (33)

The opening story of the Tree Wife reaffirms the importance of region, language, and caste, specifically for a gendered identity. Tara Lata’s father marries his daughter to a tree because he believes that this is the only way in which she can escape “*her true fate ... a lifetime’s virginity, a life without a husband to worship as god’s proxy on earth, and thus, the despairing life of a woman doomed to be reincarnated*” (14). As a child, the modern Tara also feels bound by a world in which “every name declares your identity” (33-34).

Focusing on “the conflation of home and self” (George 19), Rosemary George and other humanist geographers reiterate the “indivisibility of humans from their environment” (Rose 46). Tara, however, appears to have escaped from the constraints of a predetermined identity, an identity limited by constraints of community and culture. In her retrofitted American home, contained within the “rhetoric of modern San Francisco” (78), Tara “feels not just invisible but *heroically* invisible, a border-crashing claimant of all people’s legacies” (79). Her overdetermined identity seemingly can be abandoned in the modern rhetoric of her new home. Yet, just a few pages later, Tara claims that she is “sick of feeling an alien” (87). These contradictions held in tension within her life are challenged when a modern version of a snake appears.

Claiming that her family existed in Calcutta inside an “impenetrable bubble” (44), Tara is shocked when the appearance of Chris Dey, supposedly her oldest sister’s illegitimate child, challenges her perceptions

of the past. Tara's son, Rabi (short for Rabindranath), brings Chris into the sanctuary of the house. Chris, who claims to be the son of Padma and a Christian doctor, betrays himself in several culturally specific ways — smoking a cigarette in front of an older woman, speaking a streetwise form of Bengali — as other than he seems. Although Tara claims to have lost what she calls her "Indian radar," she still uses social and cultural markers to structure her world. She tells a Sikh detective that Chris cannot be her nephew because he is "short, uneducated, rather crude, and Bengali-speaking" (141) while acknowledging that her judgements sound "racist" (141). In *Transnational Urbanisms* Michael Peter Smith claims that "individuals give meaning to their lives through the networks of communication in which they are involved and through which they constitute themselves [and] their identities" (9). By challenging Tara's beliefs about her social network (i.e. her family and her community), Chris Dey also threatens her identity. His appearance in Tara's world leads her to question her assumptions about her past. Although she knew that her sister was in love with Ronald Dey, Chris's purported father, Tara believed that "Ronald Dey was *not* possible" (31), that "any violations of the codes, any breath of scandal, was unthinkable" (32) for her family. The strict strictures of her Brahmin Bengali background still form Tara's beliefs, even within the rhetoric of her "retrofitted" American home.

Tara had thought that nothing could touch a Bengali Brahmin from Calcutta; Chris's presence destroys what she calls "that inherited confidence, the last treasure [she'd] smuggled out of India" (44). As the opening story of Tara Lata demonstrates, no one can shut out the poisonous snake that destroys people's lives; homes can be invaded. The houses in the novel metaphorically illustrate the socioeconomic status of the characters. Tara's first home was a "nineteenth-century Raj-style fortress ... set behind a wall topped with glass shards" (32-33). Similarly, the house she shared with her husband, Bish, was in a gated community in Ather-ton, California. These fortress-style homes maintain the illusion of safety, a protected space for the privileged. In Bombay, Parvati and her husband live in a fifteenth-floor apartment of a high-rise overlooking the Arabian Sea. These homes correspond to what Rosemary George calls the "private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture, and protection" (1). Speaking of the world of her childhood, Tara says, "The narrow world of the house and city felt as secure to me as it must have to Tara Lata in Mishtigunj" (23). Rejecting her position as a married woman, in which she could live inside "a gated community, endlessly on display at dinners and openings" (27), Tara divorces Bish,

leaves the protected sphere, and moves with Rabi to San Francisco. Although she loves her family and her culture, Tara “walked away from the struggle to preserve them” (181), searching for a “life apart from [her] husband’s identity” (200). After having her San Francisco house retrofitted by Andy, her “balding, red-bearded, former biker, former bad-boy, Hungarian Buddhist contractor/yoga instructor” (25) and also her live-in lover, Tara claims to feel “totally at home” (25).

By making these choices, Tara responds to the promise offered by American mobility and modern feminist idioms. In an article from *Burning Down the House*, K. Srilata discusses the figure of the New Woman, who expresses her agency “in terms of her public visibility, the clothes she wears, and her participation in the discourse of ‘free choice’ and its corollary, romantic love” (308). Tara’s rejection of protected space, her San Francisco image — which consists of old sneakers, shawls, and a “lank, California, retro-Beatnik haircut” (201) — and her sexually adventurous lifestyle, which culminates with her love affair with Andy, the ultimate ‘bad boy,’ a former biker, seems to situate her as a New Woman. Discussing Andy and Bish’s different approaches to love, Tara claims that Bish views love as “the residue of providing for parents and family, contributing to good causes and community charities, ... and being recognized for hard work and honesty” (27), while love for Andy means “having fun with someone, more fun with that person than with anyone else, over a longer haul” (27). The differing definitions emphasize that Tara chooses between duty, family, and community, represented by Bish, and the appeals of “free choice” and “romantic love” as represented by Andy. Although she claims that she is not a “modern woman” (27), Tara inhabits a world that her more traditional sisters criticize and reject. Even her name signifies her unique status: unlike Padma and Parvati, both named for Hindu goddesses, Tara is named for a goddess in Tibetan Buddhism, a goddess known as a “cheater of death” (Kinsley 167).

Mobility and modernity, however, do not free Tara from her community. Homi Bhabha argues that the “cultural construction of nationness [exists] as a form of social and textual affiliation” (292). Despite her desire to escape the restrictions of her community, Tara remains constrained within it by the gender markers of wife and mother. For example, the detective she consults about Chris Dey’s threats cautions her that she is a target because she is the wife of Bish Chatterjee. The detective, “Sgt. Jasbir ‘Jack’ Singh Sidhu, a tall Sikh with a trimmed beard and a thoroughly American manner and accent” (139), points out to Tara that in “the eyes of Indians” (143), Tara will always be linked to Bish. She

cannot escape her identity as the ex-wife of a prominent and extraordinarily wealthy member of the Indian community, and therefore a target for the Indian underworld. Although Tara may aspire to invisibility within the rhetoric of a modern rootless life in San Francisco, she remains firmly embedded within the social and cultural identity assigned by her gender, caste, and economic status. Ideological determinants, those "iron-clad identifiers of region, language, [and] caste" (33), cannot be easily abandoned.

Social and textual affiliations also define Tara's sisters' identities, even though, in Padma's case, she has also fled the family home and reconstructed her life. As the second sister, Parvati, writes, "[Padma] has always had a great capacity for starting over, for wiping her slate very clean" (106). Rosemary George states that "wiping the slate clean" is characteristic of immigrant narratives, that "Forgetting the past, burning or burying it, creates the illusion of providing an escape route into the present that looks ahead rather than behind" (178). Padma complicates Tara's quest for the truth about the past by denying the truth in Chris Dey's story and refusing to discuss the situation. Padma has escaped the gendered identity of daughter, wife, and mother: as a teenager she moved to Britain and then America, never returning to her parents' home; her marriage to a much older man seems a sham, designed to hide the fact that her closest emotional relationships are with homosexual male protectors. She rejects any claims from Chris Dey. Her husband, Harish Mehta, also "blotted out all that was inconvenient or didn't fit" (183). This focus on the future marks these characters as "true American[s]" (31). Padma is a typical Mukherjee heroine, shuttling between identities. Yet even though she speaks with hate about the past, she also tries "to lead a traditional Bengali life in New Jersey" (181). When Tara visits Padma in New York, she initially sees her as possessing "a firm identity resisting all change" (196), but upon closer examination Padma appears "fractured, like cracks under old glaze" (196). The stress of maintaining the appearance of a traditional, Brahmin, female identity in New York leaves Padma concerned only with her reputation, unable to focus upon the emotional and social ramifications of her past actions. Tara uses the metaphor of "fault-lines" to analyze the distinctions in her family, separating the "forward-looking from the traditional and the adaptable from the brittle" (133).

Tara also shuttles between identities. During the New York visit, Tara immediately slips into the role of "choto bon" (186), the youngest sister, a role facilitated by the familiar clothing, language, and food of her



past. Speaking Bengali with her sister, Tara thinks, "It was wonderful returning to my native language, rediscovering that mocking tone just shy of aggression. I liked the person I became when I spoke it" (176). Later, at a jewelry party, she resolves to be "the good little sister, the pliable Loreto House girl" (239) as she models her sister's sari designs with "an icy, walking-mannequin determination" (250). Identity becomes a role that Tara performs.

Judith Butler's work on identity performance is useful here. Arguing that gender is "performative," Butler claims that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (33). Identity, however, is performed within social spaces. Barbara Gabriel notes that Butler's "revisioning constructs gender identity not only as a performative accomplishment but also as one bound by rigorous social sanctions" (246). Claiming to be "too timid to feed [her] Ballygunge Park Road identity into the kitchen Garburetor" (78), Tara defines its multiple layers, many of them determined by place of origin:

That dusty identity is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case, confidently labeled by father's religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), subcaste (Kulin), mother-tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta), formative region of ancestral origin (Mishtigunj, East Bengal), education (postgraduate and professional), and social attitudes (conservative). (78)

Despite these definitions, she also claims to be "all things" (78), a person who "thrive[s] on this invisibility" (78). In Tara's polyvalent American society, the "dusty" identifying marks seem irrelevant. Yet, like the Tree Wife from the story, her fate remains tied to her identity.

Drifting between two lives and two identities leaves Tara vulnerable to threats, both as a modern woman who no longer lives behind the protection of fortress walls and as the former wife of a billionaire. In New York, she is chastised for "drifting between two lives" and told that she "mustn't let it go on any longer" (246). Shortly after Chris invades her home, Tara phones Parvati and hears of another form of home invasion, the story of a neighbour who was murdered by thieves within the Bombay apartment complex. One of the thieves was Parvati's housekeeper. Tara's own house is eventually destroyed by a powerful bomb, presumably set by members of the Indian underworld associated with the false Chris Dey, a "chameleon" who assumed the identity of Tara's real nephew. Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty point out that "illusions of home are always undercut by the discovery of the hidden demographics

of particular places" (196). The demographics of both Tara and Parvati's homes establish the sisters as targets by the marginalized members of their societies. In earlier novels, Mukherjee explores the lives of women marginalized by caste, class, and socioeconomic position. Tara and her sisters, on the other hand, are economically and socially privileged. Tara's marriage to Bish, the inventor of a computer bandwidth routing system, makes her "wealthy beyond counting" (23). Acknowledging her privilege, Tara says that in Calcutta, she and her sisters were part of "a blessed, elite minority" (29). Yet she also glosses over certain disparities. Her neighbourhood in San Francisco relies on the services of Palestinians, whose families are, as she says, "uniformly gifted in providing our needs and anticipating our desires" (25). Her community identity remains structured by the social networks of her childhood; when she goes to the police station to investigate Chris Dey's background, she refuses to discuss her situation with a Bengali speaker because he is Muslim. Quoting bell hooks, Rosemary George highlights the concept that "recognizing one's spatial privilege" doesn't always produce "'counter-hegemonic cultural practices'" (101). The news of the discovery of the real Chris Dey's body is relegated to the last pages of newspapers splashed with headlines about the sensational story of Tara, Bish, and Andy, and the bombing of Tara's house. Despite the mobility of modern life, community networks continue to define Tara and her sisters' identities, keeping certain individuals on the outside.

After the destruction of her San Francisco house, Tara returns to India. Reunited with her parents, she also returns to more culturally traditional concepts of home and community. Her father has sold the Calcutta house and moved to Rishikesh, entering the prescribed third phase of Hindu life as a Sannyasin. Searching through his grandfather's books, Rabi finds some verses by a Bengali saint: "*Have thou no home, what home can hold thee, /friend? The sky thy roof, the grass thy bed*" (297). Tara's mother immediately offers a contrasting belief, claiming that "Home is where you belong, Rabindra" (297). Yet this idea of belonging, for someone like Tara's American-born, English-speaking, homosexual son, is as complicated as it would be for the illegitimate Chris Dey. In a letter to Tara in which Rabi reveals his sexual orientation, he writes, "Some individuals in society are just fated to be on the outside" (165). When home is defined as a "private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy" and characterized by its exclusions, some individuals will always be outside.

Rosemary George claims that homesickness or the absence of home in immigrant fiction is accompanied either by "a yearning for the authen-

tic home" or "the recognition of the inauthenticity or the created aura of all homes" (175). Home and community are ideological determinants of identity; however, individuals respond to these determinants in different ways. Although Tara and Padma remain defined within the social networks of community, Padma attempts to recreate an authentic Bengali life in New York while Tara refuses to live as "a perfectly preserved bug trapped in amber" (184). Instead, Tara moves from home to home, constantly attempting to redefine the boundaries of home, identity, and community. At the end of the novel, returning to the story of Tara Lata, she calls the Tree-Bride "the quiet center of every story" (289). Her construction of her ancestor's life seemingly validates Tara's own quest to reconstruct her own identity. Yet this story suggests that one's birthplace does form one's identity, that identity performance can only be enacted within the limitations of an assigned space. In the final paragraph of the novel, Tara walks the same road traversed by the Tree-Bride in 1879. The surroundings dissolve into the same scene pictured in the opening paragraphs: "the trail ahead, as far as [she] can see, is lighted by kerosene and naphtha lamps held by the children of fruit and vegetable vendors sitting on the carts" (310). Claiming that this is a miracle, Tara implies that "Mishtigunj is a place of magic" (306) where the past is accessible and present. Yet the cultural and socioeconomic factors that led to the Tree-Bride's confinement within the family compound for seventy years and also to her involvement with Indian freedom fighters and her subsequent murder by the colonial police are all unaddressed. In the same way, the murder of the real Chris Dey and the bombing of Tara's house remain unresolved. The narrator's repetition of the phrase "*Bishey bish khai*, only poison delivers us from poison" (310) becomes the metaphoric equivalent of "Who are we to question God?" (303). The return to her roots, along with Tara's re-emerging relationship with Bish, calls into question the very notion of a performative identity and reinforces the "iron-clad identifiers of region, language, caste and subcaste" (33). Tara cannot escape her multiple layers of identity, what Martin and Mohanty call "the complicated working out of the relationship between home, identity, and community" (195). Although Tara increasingly feels that her "once-firm" identity has been "smashed by hammer blows, melted down and [is] reemerging as something wondrous, or grotesque" (196), the reconstructed identity remains firmly constrained within the ideological determinants of home and community.

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