

## Empowered Journey: Exploring Agency of South Asian Females in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

Nagendra Bahadur Bhandari  
*Tribbuvan University, Nepal*

### Abstract

---

Immigration entails a complex process of negotiation on multiple fronts that interrogates the gender roles and self-perception of South Asian females who have been brought into a patriarchal cultural context in their home country. Negotiations, both as a female and an immigrant, are connected with the ability to make decisions about the course of their lives. This article takes a critical look at Mukherjee's (2006) novel *Desirable Daughters*, which unravels the processes of negotiating the gender roles of Padma and Tara, two sisters from South Asia who have immigrated to the United States. The main focus is on how the changing social and cultural environment of the diaspora influences the workings of their female agency, that is, their ability to make decisions. This analysis draws on Goller and Harteis' (2017) concept of human agency, which connects an individual's actions with their personal disposition, along with Bandura's (2006) conceptualization which acknowledges the influence of external factors in the work of human agency. The cultural and social norms of the Western diaspora significantly enhance the sisters' decision-making abilities as they take the initiative to make crucial decisions about their lives independently. However, the workings of their agency are manifested in diverse ways, reflecting their distinct personalities.

### Key words

---

Female agency, subjectivity, South Asian immigrant, diaspora, cultural negotiation

## Introduction

Female immigrants of South Asian origin are involved in the cultural negotiations that shape their gender roles in the different cultural and social practices of the diaspora in Western countries. In their home countries, prevailing patriarchal cultural norms restrict their autonomy and social interactions. This limits their capacity to shape the course of their lives independently. However, they find themselves in a new socio-cultural environment that offers them greater degrees of freedom regarding gender-based roles within the diaspora. This shift also opens opportunities for education and employment, enhancing social engagement and financial independence. These opportunities grant them more liberty within the diaspora than they previously had in their home country. However, the practices of othering, such as biases due to race and gender, as well as the urge to maintain cultural ties with their origins, hinder them from wholeheartedly adopting Western lifestyles and gender roles. Mukherjee, a South Asian female immigrant writer, examines into the circumstances faced by these women in the United States in her narratives.

Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2006) portrays the diasporic experiences of three South Asian sisters—Padma, Tara, and Pravati—as they negotiate their lives in the United States. The eldest, Padma, resides in New Jersey with her husband, Harish Mehta, and works as a presenter on an Indian television show. She upholds traditional South Asian identity in public. Pravati, another sister, returns to her home country after her education in the United States, leading a conventional South Asian female lifestyle. By contrast, Tara's journey involves self-interrogation and transformation. Initially leading the life of a traditional South Asian female, she later adopts a Western lifestyle, leading to divorce and cohabitation. The sisters exhibit distinct attitudes toward their gender roles. This study examines how the diaspora's socio-cultural context influences the agency (the capacity for decision-making) of Padma and Tara. Goller and Harteis' (2017) concept of human agency, which interlinks personal traits and actions, along with Bandura's (2006) framework encompassing external societal and cultural elements, are employed to scrutinize this influence. The changing diasporic socio-cultural circumstances enhance the decision-making capabilities of these two sisters; however, they exercise their agency in diverse ways because of their differing inherent characteristics. This study examines the internal heterogeneities among female immigrants from South Asia and their diverse approaches to performing gender roles, which have been relatively unexplored in diaspora studies.

## Diaspora Scholarship and Female Immigrants

In diaspora studies, the issue of female immigrants emerged in the 1980s (Campt & Thomas, 2008). The focus on personal experiences and internal heterogeneities (Safiran, 1991; Brah, 1996; Mehta, 2015) has led to the exploration of gender-related concerns in diaspora scholarship. Numerous studies (Aitchison, Hopkins, & Kwan, 2007; Bottomley, 1992; Brown, 1998; Christou, 2011; Gangulay, 1992; Elmhirst, 2000; Leurs, 2015) have explored the political, historical, and cultural dimensions of female immigrants. These studies challenge the notion of the diaspora as a homogeneous group, revealing the distinct experiences of female immigrants (Puwar & Raghuram, 2003). Similarly, Al-Ali (2010) examined the internal diversity within immigrant populations, emphasizing the necessity for distinct viewpoints tailored to different subgroups of immigrants. In this context, connection with the homeland culture remains pivotal in the gender roles of female immigrants.

Feminist approaches connect gender disparities within immigrant communities with the cultural legacy of their home countries (Campt & Thomas, 2008). Immigrants from countries with patriarchal cultural practices bring cultural residues of their origins, contributing to the disparities between male and female immigrants. The patriarchal notion of “women as carriers of culture and men as carriers of labor power” (Kalra, Kaur, & Hutnyk, 2005, p. 52) is a factor contributing to gender discrimination among immigrant groups. This notion regards women as conveyors of their cultural heritage who influence the preservation and perpetuation of patriarchal cultural practices within immigrant families (Anthias, 1992; Anthias, 1998; Rayaprol, 1997). Furthermore, women’s body and sexuality have been exploited to construct and uphold distinct ethnic identities within the diaspora (Al-Ali, 2007; Werbner, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Practices such as the “exchange of brides” between various diaspora groups of the same origin but residing in different countries, or between diaspora communities and their countries of origin (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 66), highlight the exploitation of female bodies in shaping ethnic identity. The burden of maintaining cultural ties with one’s country of origin falls largely on female immigrants. This cultural expectation inadvertently subjects South Asian female immigrants to patriarchal norms.

The debate over whether diasporic experiences strengthen or challenge patriarchal power dynamics is a contentious issue in diaspora studies. Several studies indicate that women sometimes struggle to fulfill the traditional role of preserving their ethnic identities within diasporic communities (Sawyer, 2008). Additionally,

female immigrants who resist conventional patriarchal norms are often labeled as “traitors” or subjected to social exclusion (Kalaria et al., 2005, pp. 59–60). Similarly, Gupta’s (1997) research on Indian female immigrants in the U.S. revealed that these women had fewer freedoms than their counterparts in their home country. Within their households, female immigrants often adhere more closely to the cultural practices in their country of origin than those living in their native country. However, Clifford (1997) challenged Gupta’s assertion by suggesting that female immigrants gain more autonomy as they participate in income-generating work, leading to increased flexibility and tolerance, even among male immigrants. These immigrant communities selectively uphold certain “fundamental values of... religion, speech and social patterns, and food, body, and dress protocols” (Clifford, 1997, p. 259) while adapting to their new environment. The diasporic context offers female immigrants an empowering social and cultural arena, but they tend to follow some cultural practices of their country of origin, that seem to be influenced by patriarchy.

Gender dynamics within immigrant families are not shaped solely by the patriarchal customs of their home countries. Instead, these dynamics are intertwined with a range of intricate factors; such as political, generational, economic, and institutional contexts. Brah (1999) explained that the reconfiguration of these social dynamics is not simply a matter of imposing patriarchal structures from the country of origin onto the destination country. Instead, both aspects undergo modification as they interact with specific policies, institutions, and forms of expression. Likewise, Gilroy (2000) clarified that female immigrants, through education and awareness, experience positive transformations in their own lives and even influence women in their home countries (pp. 126–127). Some female immigrants are also engaged in transnational social initiatives such as healthcare, education, and raising awareness in their home countries (Godin, 2018; Hewitt, 2011). Along with this social engagement, the postmodern concept of fluid and fragmented human subjectivity also affects the examination of female immigrants.

The ideas of hybridity, multiplicity, and plurality discussed by Bhabha (1994) challenge the uniform narratives of diasporic experiences and underscore differentiated individual experiences. This perspective deconstructs the binary distinction between home and host countries, highlighting the constant shifts between spaces and cultures. Wesling (2008) linked such conceptualizations of diasporic subjects to queerness in sexuality. She suggests that just as queerness involves ambiguity and adaptable resistance against established sexual norms, immigrants disrupt the conventional notions of home, host countries, and culture.

Within this framework, the subjectivities of female immigrants develop within the transnational realm of the diaspora, transcending traditional male-female and home-host country divisions. Nevertheless, this viewpoint overlooks the practical aspects of migration and settlement in host countries.

A range of factors, including politics, economy, and culture influence the position of female immigrants in the diaspora; Sawyer (2008) illustrates how notions of race shape “heterosexuality and normative masculinities and femininities,” influencing how individuals navigate their own experiences (p. 88). Understanding the enactment and negotiation of power dynamics within and between immigrant communities requires an intersectional examination of race, culture, and gender (Bezabeh, 2017). Similarly, Campt (2005) contends that reducing the diaspora solely to racial issues neglects other forms of power dynamics related to gender, class, and generation. Relationships across generations within immigrant families also affect gender and sexuality (Bauer, 2000; Dwyer, 2000; Samuel, 2010). Thus, these studies have overlooked the dynamics of female agency in the changing social and cultural contexts of the diaspora.

Scholarship on female immigrants within the diaspora primarily centers on their relationship with the cultural norms of their home country. Scholars have various perspectives in this regard. Some argue that female South Asian immigrants, originating from patriarchal cultures, are often exploited to preserve ethnic identity and cultural links. Conversely, others contend that these women’s access to education and employment empowers them to challenge the patriarchy. Along with their ties to their home countries, certain studies have explored how female immigrants develop diverse and flexible identities within the transnational diaspora. Conversely, another group of scholars emphasized a comprehensive approach that integrates social, cultural, political, and economic factors to address women’s issues in the diaspora. Within this context, the nexus between diasporic existence and the exercise of female agency; their capacity to make and implement choices; remains an unexplored area that requires further investigation.

### Conceptualizing Human Agency

Human agency refers to individuals’ ability to make choices and take actions that influence their lives and surroundings (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). Goller and Harteis (2017) presented two perspectives on human agency: one views agency as the actions that individuals undertake, whereas the other views agency as an innate characteristic. The first viewpoint links personal

choices and actions thereby emphasizing the role of decisions and actions in shaping an individual's life (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Vähäsantanen, 2013). In this sense, human agency concerns decisions and actions that lead to outcomes that impact various aspects such as work, practices, and personal identity (Goller & Harteis, 2017, p. 4). The second perspective, agency as a personal trait (Bryson, Pajo, Ward, & Mallon, 2006; Eraut, 2007; Goller & Harteis, 2014), centers on an individual's inherent inclination to make choices and engage in actions based on those choices. This viewpoint suggests a distinction between those who are more action-oriented and actively engage in agentic actions and those who are less prone to such behaviors. This differentiation broadly categorizes individuals into two groups: agentic and nonagentic or less agentic individuals. Agentic individuals take proactive measures to seize control over their lives and environment, whereas those who are less agentic tend to react and adapt to external circumstances without exerting as much control (Goller & Harteis, 2017, p. 5). Importantly, this distinction does not imply that less agentic individuals lack agency; rather, they exercise agency to a lesser extent than their agentic counterparts do. These two perspectives are not conflicting, but rather complementary and mutually reinforced.

However, humans are not autonomous and are guided not only by their free will. Rather, they are inextricably connected to cultural, environmental, and social factors that constantly influence their choices and actions. Bandura (2006) recognizes both external and internal elements of human agency. This implies that human agency can only be comprehended in relation to an individual's real-life circumstances and surroundings (Goller & Harteis, 2017, p. 7). People's decisions and actions are directly linked to their social, historical, cultural, and physical contexts (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Shanahan & Hood, 2000; Tornau & Frese, 2013). The changes in these factors also influence whether a person is inclined to display agency or not (Dweck & Legett, 1988). Some factors encourage individuals to exert agency, while others discourage them from doing so.

In recapitulation, there are essentially two main perspectives on human agency: agency as actions undertaken by individuals and agency as an inherent trait of humans. The first describes human agency as the choices and actions that individuals take to gain control of their lives and surroundings. The second perspective refers to the personal qualities that enable individuals to make decisions and act on them. These two aspects of human agency are interdependent and complementary. Furthermore, they are closely linked to the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which humans exist. Changes in environmental factors also influence the extent to which humans display agency. Such changes have taken

place in the lives of South Asian female immigrants in the United States, who come from societies where gender roles are influenced by patriarchal values. Open and liberal Western values shape gender roles and exercises of agency within the diaspora. In Mukherjee's (2006) novel *Desirable Daughters*, the two South Asian female immigrants, Tara and Padma, adapt their notions of agency in distinct ways in the diaspora, unlike Pravati who settles in India.

### Three Sisters Exemplifying Human Agency

Among the three sisters, Parvati epitomizes the gender roles prescribed in traditional Indian society. Unlike her siblings, she settles in India alongside her husband, Aurobino Banerji, in a typical upper-class environment. She assumes the role of a conventional wife and mother, taking care of her financier husband and their two children. Her daily routine revolves around managing the household, which includes procuring provisions such as "goat meat", "poultry", "Parsi baker", "fish", and "vegetables" (Mukherjee, 2006, p. 77). Additionally, she dedicates her time to nurturing her sons, embodying the archetype of a traditional Indian daughter-in-law by dutifully receiving and abiding by her in-laws upon their visits (p.77). Her daily activities revolve around fulfilling the traditional roles of caretaker and homemaker within her family and, prioritizing their well-being. Her conformity with these traditions reflects her less assertive and pliant character. Her actions and personality are deeply influenced by the traditional socio-cultural context in which she resides in India unlike her two sisters Tara and Padma who settled in the United States.

Tara and Padma undergo different processes of negotiation within the diaspora. Padma, the older sibling, relocates from India to the U.K. and eventually to the U.S., where she discovers an environment that enables her to pursue her aspirations in acting and modeling. She is involved in agentic actions, as her journey to the diaspora seems to be self-initiated and goal-directed. Moreover, she was very adventurous as a child, even during her traditional upbringing in India. Unlike Padma, Tara agrees with her father's decision to marry Bish, an Indian immigrant who takes her to the United States. The differences in their individual traits and circumstances of immigration contribute to the sisters' distinct exercise of agency within the diaspora.

### Tara's Transformation

Tara undergoes three distinct phases of transformation during her life in the diaspora. Initially, she finds contentment in fulfilling the traditional gender expectations of a South Asian woman, taking care of her home, children, and spouse. However, exposure to prevailing Western values and lifestyles dissatisfies her with this conventional role. In the subsequent phase, she embarks on a quest for personal autonomy and a liberated existence, ultimately resulting in her divorce. Throughout this phase, she embraces Western ideals and ways of life. However, over time, she starts to yearn for the heritage and customs of her past. This longing prompts the beginning of the third phase, in which she reexamines her earlier life and reconnects with her South Asian cultural heritage and origins.

Initially, Tara embraces the traditional role expected of a South Asian wife while living in the diaspora. This involves taking care of household duties and striving to make the husband happy. She caters to her husband and his friends with “pakoras and freshening drinks” while they are watching football matches on T.V. (Mukharjee, 2006, p. 65). Her husband Bish proudly presents her as a devoted wife, caring mother, and respectful daughter-in-law to his parents. Despite the changes in the social and cultural environment of the new country, Tara's gender roles remain unaffected. According to Spivak (1996), this situation where female immigrants like Tara seem to lack the ability to critically engage with civil society and attain independent “subjectship of the civil society” is explained as a deficiency in “critical agency” (p. 252). However, over time, Tara's perspective transforms. She gradually becomes more aware of her circumstances and starts to critically evaluate her position.

Tara's exposure to different gender roles in the diaspora, which emphasize equal values for women's choices and desires, leads her to interrogate her conventional role. American female magazines raise issues such as, “*Does your husband know how to satisfy you?* First time I have heard ‘husband’ and satisfy in the same sentence... Do women marry the best lovers they ever had?” (Mukherjee, 2006, p. 86) also contribute to her journey in this direction. She then begins addressing her husband by his first name—an act that defies the societal norms of typical Indian upbringing in which taking a husband's first name is considered cultural taboo. Similarly, she decides not to adorn her head with vermilion, a cultural symbol in the South Asian Hindu tradition that signifies a woman's marital status. Additionally, she opts not to wear a sari frequently, a garment commonly worn by South Asian females, even within the diaspora. These changes in her behavior and attire manifest her deter-



mination to deconstruct traditional gender roles. This endeavor paves the way for the development of critical agency and self-expression.

Her critical agency renders dissatisfaction to her initial perception that life with her husband Bish “is the life I’ve been waiting for” and that immigrating to the U.S. will offer her “liberating promise” and a “wider world”(p. 81). This transition signifies a notable shift in her manner: from a compliant and submissive daughter and wife to a self-assured woman, determined to shape her choices and path. At this juncture, she comprehends the societal expectation that “each woman must orchestrate her own controversy and be the focal point of her intricate romantic entanglements” (p. 83). With this realization, she makes the crucial decision to divorce her husband and lead an independent life.

Her choice to pursue divorce marks a substantial transformation in Tara's character moving beyond reliance on her father and husband to dictate the course of her life. She begins to evaluate her circumstances and make independent decisions. This is evident when she articulates her reasons for seeking divorce.

It was because of the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled. I wanted to drive, but where would I go? I wanted to work, but would people think that Bish Chatterjee couldn't support his wife? (p. 82)

Her aspiration for a self-reliant existence, mirroring that of American women, ultimately forces her to dissolve her conventional marriage. She perceives her husband's role as unsupportive. She elaborates that during his time in Atherton, “as he became better known on the American scene—a player, an advisor, a pundit” with an image of an emerging business person, at home, he is “a traditional Indian” and spends “fifteen hours a day in office, sometimes longer” (p. 82). His devotion to work and adherence to traditional values obstruct her pursuit of an independent life.

After her divorce, she takes on the role of a single mother, caring for her ten-year-old son, Rabi. In addition, she volunteers as a kindergarten teacher, which boosts her interactions with mainstream American society. Importantly, she does not prevent her son Rabi from meeting his father Bish. This demonstrates her secure understanding of her relationship with her son and her wise recognition of the importance of the father-son bond in a child's upbringing. Furthermore, she engages in multiple relationships, as she admits, “Did you think my world ended when I left Bish? ... I never told you about Andy, or Pramod, or Mahesh, or Donald—but couldn't you have guessed?” (p.193). She begins to live with Andy.

Her connection with Andy exposes her to various facets of love; she recalls that during her “childhood and adolescence, love... seemed no different from duty and obedience” (p. 29). Conversely, with Andy, she comes to understand that love means “enjoying time with someone else,” and this individual is special because their companionship promises “more enjoyment... than with anyone else” (p. 29). Her inclination toward a love founded on “personal choice and romance,” while moving away from the kind of love that centers on “duty, family, and community, as embodied by Bish” (Miller, 2004, p. 68), reflects her transformed perspective on life.

Her cohabitation with Andy and engaging in casual sexual relationships with multiple males indicate “an Indian woman’s successful overcoming of culturally deep-rooted norms prescribing strict regulation of women’s sexuality” (Lahiri, 2010, p. 124). She overcomes the social mores that regulate the female body and sexuality in traditional South Asian societies. Through these liberating actions, she takes charge of her own choices about her sexuality and body. Similarly, she exhibits greater acceptance of her son’s homosexuality than her husband Bish. By allowing her son the freedom to navigate his own path, she provides him with autonomy which was lacking in her conservative South Asian upbringing. As Bose (1993) points out, such an approach “functions as a measure of her increasing detachment from traditional sexual mores and... her assimilation in the new world through her rapid Westernization” (p. 60). It is important to note that these actions should not be interpreted as the mere assimilation of immigrants into the host culture. Instead, they reflect a transformed sense of self that empowers them to take charge of their life decisions.

She displays strong determination in her choice and refuses to reconsider her Western-influenced lifestyle, even when her sisters Padma and Parvati react negatively. Parvati sees her relationship with Andy as an “American adventure” and reminds her that “I hope you aren’t doing bad things to yourself like taking Prozac and having cosmetic surgery. Please, please, do not become that Americanized” (Mukherjee, 2006, p. 105). Parvati’s disapproval is clear, and she views Tara’s divorce as a disgrace for the family. Padma, though not as openly critical as Parvati, still shows her displeasure by keeping the divorce secret from her friends, wanting to avoid questions that might harm their social standing. She confides in Tara that, “[w]e don’t even mention your divorce to friends and relatives here. I don’t mean that we lie or that we are ashamed of anything, but we don’t let the wrong questions come up” (p. 97). Despite being aware of these negative perceptions, Tara does not reconsider her decision to divorce. In fact, her divorce

symbolizes “her journey to develop an autonomous, independent identity away from the bound tradition of India” (Parween, 2022, p. 253), which embodies a different image than that of the old Tara Lata.

Tara finds a connection with the story of her great-grandmother Tara Lata and uses it as inspiration to shape her own path. She often recalls the tale of Tara Lata, who remained celibate after her fiancé’s death and married a tree to uphold cultural and family honors. For modern Tara, this story becomes a way to evaluate her situation as a South Asian woman and motivates her to forge an independent life abroad. By reflecting on her past, she gains the emotional and psychological strength to move forward independently. She asserts that “Tara Lata Gangooly had turned the tragedy of her husband’s death and a lifetime’s virginity into a model of selfless saintliness. My story was different, perhaps even an inversion” (Mukherjee, 2006, p. 280). She differentiates herself by refusing to conform to the same self-sacrificing ideals, instead making decisions based on her own critical judgment of her past and present.

Tara critically evaluates not only her South Asian cultural roots but also Western practices. Her reaction to her son Rabi’s education surfaces with her dissatisfaction with the American education system. She says that “America made children soft in the brain as well as the body,” and she adds that such an education system weakens “the moral fiber” and children grow up “without respect for family and tradition” (p. 154). In contrast, she prefers the educational system she experienced during her own upbringing in India, which prioritized ethics, family principles, and customary beliefs. At a glance, she seems to be returning to her cultural roots, which relegate females to a marginal status. Nevertheless, her assessment of the American educational system reveals the emergence of her critical perspective, preventing her from fully embracing the practices of either her home or host country. Instead, she becomes critical and makes judgments based on her own conscience.

Dissatisfied with Western social and cultural practices, she reconnects with her cultural heritage to find solace. In the U.S., an underworld attack on her home leaves her emotionally shaken and socially vulnerable. Bish, her ex-husband, suffers severe injuries; her house is destroyed, and the media sensationalizes the incident. At this point, she responds positively to her sister Parvati’s invitation to visit India and their parents, and she resorts to Indian spirituality to overcome her mental disturbance and says, “Some force, whether biological or cosmic, more powerful than individual will... incarnates us in the physical form... It is the strength I have come to believe” (p. 279). She believes in a greater force that

shapes our existence and that is more potent than individual will. During her trip to India, she realizes a strong bond between her parents and Bish. She finds a new copy of her father's spiritual book with the inscription "To Dr. Motilal Bhattacharjee, my esteemed father-in-law... loving son-in-law, Bishwapiya" (p. 300). Moreover, her mother claims that "you've moved away from... but your husband has not" (p. 304). She realizes that Bish still receives love from her parents due to his dedication to Indian culture, even after the divorce. Her mother notes Tara's divergence from tradition but acknowledges Bish's commitment. Traveling to her ancestral village Misthigunj, she seeks a link to her cultural roots and aims to reconstruct Tara Lata's story. This quest helps her discover her own life's meaning in a new cultural and temporal context. Tara embraces echoes of her cultural heritage and remains receptive to the voices of the past. However, she does not revert to traditional South Asian gender roles without being critical. Her return to her roots signifies her discontent with Western norms.

Briefly, Tara initially leads a life without the critical agency of articulating her own desires or making decisions about her life in the diaspora. She takes care of her husband and child. In this respect, she reflects Camp and Thomas' (2008) idea that gender disparity in cultural origin shapes female immigrants' status in the diaspora. Similarly, her experience aligns with the concept of Kalra et al. (2005) that female immigrants maintain their culture while males earn. However, her gradual transformation into an independent woman and her divorce defy such notions. After her divorce, she moves to San Francisco, lives on her own, is involved in multiple relationships, and begins to cohabit with Andy. This lifestyle seems to affirm Gilroy's (2000) idea that females gain awareness and are transformed in the diaspora. Unlike Gilroy's (2000) assumption, she fails to make a positive contribution to the lives of women in her home country. Moreover, her vacillations between her home and the host cultural spaces seem to substantiate Bhabha's (1994) idea that the cultural negotiations in the third space of the diaspora render fluid and multiple cultural identities for immigrants. However, this notion fails to encompass the gradual transformation of her agency from timid and submissive to assertive and independent female. Being independent, her agency imparts a critical awareness for assessing the situation. She becomes critically aware of the Western values and lifestyles of the diaspora, which she embraces after abandoning her traditional gender roles. After being disillusioned with the Western lifestyles, she returns to her South Asian cultural roots to find emotional and psychological solace. Unlike Tara, her sister Padma's diasporic existence takes on different trajectories of transformation in her agency.

### Padma's Nurturing Maturity

Padma displays a strong and fervent personality, often acting without caution and embracing risks, in sharp contrast to Tara's demeanor. These differences become evident in their approaches to marriage and relocation. Tara's marriage is arranged by their parents, whereas Padma independently chooses to wed Harish. Likewise, in matters of migration, Tara accompanies her husband Bish to a new country, whereas Padma ventures into the diaspora multiple times on her own, first to the U.K. and later to the U.S. Since young age, Padma has exhibited a resolute and proactive disposition that sets her apart from her siblings. Tara recalls: "passion like Didi's [Padma's] is foreign to our family; [a] reckless unknown" (Mukherjee, 2002, p. 31). This passion is evident in her clandestine relationship with Ron Dey. In various aspects of her life, such as lifestyle, marital choices, and career decisions, Padma deliberately defies traditional cultural norms expected of a South Asian woman.

Padma exercises agency by making independent decisions within the diaspora. Initially residing in England, she realizes her interest in acting cannot flourish there; she admits that "London was full of the fabulously bright young Indian girls. No one noticed me in London; I had to go to New York" (p. 229). She perceives London as a hub for academically gifted "fabulously bright girls," where her pursuit of a career in media and film, due to her Indian heritage, goes unnoticed. Recognizing that her modeling and acting talents find a more fitting home in America, Padma seeks a socio-cultural environment conducive to her passion.

In her home country, the traditional norms and decisions made by her father obstruct her from pursuing theatrical aspirations. As a young girl entrenched in such a situation, she lacks the courage to challenge her father's choices. However, she channels these suppressed desires through participation in cultural events and soap operas in the diaspora. She engages as an actress for local schools and community centers, primarily within the Indian cultural sphere. Additionally, she contributes to the community channel by creating a vernacular soap opera offering an Indian perspective on American life. The shift in the social and cultural context of the diaspora provides her with the opportunity to pursue her desired career path. She explores a diverse range of interests while connecting with fellow compatriots. Tara observes that Padma's social circle predominantly consists of Indians; "she [Padma] and Harish socialize almost exclusively with Indians... she has become more Indian than when she left Calcutta" (p. 73). She also designs and sells Indian clothing. The exploitation of cultural origins does not signify the acceptance of tra-

ditional gender roles. Instead, it is her calculated decision to exploit her origin as a survival strategy. Her journey from her homeland to the diaspora has granted her the opportunity to attain freedom and establish her identity through a “reversal of identity,” symbolizing a shift of power “from male to female” (Parween, 2022, p. 254). In this context, the transformation of the socio-cultural surroundings within the diaspora empowers Padma to exercise her agency.

She has subverted traditional gender dynamics in her marital relationship. Unlike the conventional South Asian family structure, her husband, Harish Mehta, is actively involved in household responsibilities, enabling her to focus on professional and social endeavors. She also provides significant financial support to her family. Her husband Harish lacks a steady career and relies on her earnings. “Her [Padma's] radiance helped him [Harish] wipe out his past... and his multiple failures to establish himself as an entrepreneur, consultant, money manager, and venture capitalist” (p. 192). Interestingly, their roles are reversed in household dynamics: Harish takes care of domestic tasks, while Padma is occupied with various external responsibilities. This challenges conventional South Asian expectations, where the wife traditionally manages the home and the husband is the primary earner. Padma is fully aware of this departure from the norm, as she points out: “Harish was so lucky, she repeated... How many Indian families do you know, Tara, where the wife goes out to work and the husband stays at home?” (p.190). Thus, Padma engages in actions that defy the usual cultural boundaries expected of a typical South Asian woman. However, it is important to note that despite these deviations, there are moments when she adheres to conventional South Asian behaviors.

Padma's attitude toward her cultural origins remains ambivalent. While living in the diaspora, she strives to embody the image of a true Indian. Her public attire and involvement in Indian cultural events illustrate her connection with her cultural heritage. Additionally, this attachment becomes evident in her strong disapproval of her sister Tara's divorce, aligning with the South Asian cultural belief that a divorced woman brings shame. Padma's commitment to her cultural origins is also reflected in her efforts to meet her parents' expectations by assuming the role of a traditional daughter. Unlike her sister Tara, Padma is diligent in staying in touch with her parents through calls, cards, and letters. She even remembers and wishes for special occasions such as their wedding anniversary, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. She adheres to the value of close family ties in South Asian cultures. Despite her devotion to these traditional values, her marriage to Harish Mehta, a non-Bengali divorcee with adult children, challenges her family's cultural norms.

Her union with someone outside her community and caste contradicts established customs that favor parental involvement in the decision of marriages. By making these choices, she rejects her homeland's cultural standards and exercises her personal agency. In this sense, the diaspora enhances her decisive power, which remains critical to both her home and host cultural practices.

The function of Padma's transformed agency is reflected in her critical understanding of American women's Western way of life which she does not fully embrace. She continues to be critical when interrogating Tara, her sister:

Tara, what kind of life are you having out there if you're underweight and exhausted? I know, I know, these so-called experts constantly complain about the diet's excessive fat content, and females like you who ought to have more common sense must be paying attention. I tell you, all of those scrawny so-called specialists in white coats ought to be locked away. (p.194)

She criticizes the way American nutritionists and doctors advise women to be mindful of their weight and shape, for which they should follow strict dietary guidelines. Such stereotypical notions of the female body impose social and cultural obligations on females to maintain their bodies, which Padma criticizes. In this sense, Padma not only transgresses South Asian gender roles but also remains critical of American social practices.

Padma's agency, which seems more active than that of her sister Tara, even in her home country, becomes critical and calculative in the diaspora. In contrast to Swayer's (2008) assertion that immigrant females are unable to replicate their ethnic identity, Padma consciously exploits her cultural heritage and upholds a stereotypical South Asian female ethnic image in public as a survival strategy and to garner respect among the South Asian immigrant community. Thus, she contradicts Gupta's (1997) finding that women who immigrate have less independence than those who stay in their own countries. Without external interference, she makes decisions on important matters in her life. Her lifestyle and attitudes contradict the notion of Kalra et al. (2005) that females are cultural preservers and males are breadwinners in the diaspora. She works outside the home and provides financial support for her family, in contrast to typical South Asian households. She frequently rejects the patriarchal cultural traditions of her native nation. In this regard, she supports Brah's (1999) contention that gender relations in the diaspora cannot be solely influenced by the patriarchy of the home country. Political, generational, economic, and institutional contexts are just a few complicated concerns

related gender relations in the diaspora. She gains the analytical and critical thinking skills necessary to evaluate her surroundings and comes to judgments that best serve her passion and purpose. In these processes, she resembles and differs from her sister, Tara, in many respects.

### Conclusion

Women's agency refers to their capability to make decisions and take action in their lives. Various factors, such as culture, education, and employment opportunities influence women's capabilities in this regard. These factors have caused substantial changes in the lives of South Asian immigrant women living in the United States. These transformations have different effects on the agency of the two sisters, Tara and Padma, whose distinct personalities also contribute to their agency. Tara's journey is marked by a shift from a compliant daughter and submissive wife to an independent woman capable of making decisions about her life while living in the diaspora. However, at the end of the novel, she grapples with ambiguity regarding her newfound independence. Unlike Tara, Padma develops a critical and practical mindset while negotiating in the diaspora. She selectively exploits the cultural practices of her home country and embrace aspects of her host country's lifestyle to meet her immediate needs. The transformations in the agency of these sisters are intricately tied to external social and cultural elements, as well as their individual dispositions. The functioning of female agency in the diaspora is a complex and multifaceted process, influenced by a combination of individual, economic, cultural, and social factors. Briefly, women's agency in the diaspora undergoes diverse and intricate transformations shaped by both internal and external influences. These changes are mediated by individual traits and are contingent upon economic, cultural, and social contexts.



## References

- Aitchison, C., Hopkins, P., & Kwan, M., (Eds.). (2007). *Geographies of Muslim identities: Diaspora, gender and belonging*. London: Ashgate.
- Al-Ali, N. (2007). Gender, diasporas and post-Cold War conflict. In H. Smith & P. Stares (Eds.), *Diasporas in conflict: Peace-makers or peace wreckers?* (pp. 39 – 62). Tokyo, United Nations University Press.
- Al-Ali, N. (2010). Diasporas and gender. In K. Kim & M. Sean (Eds.), *Diasporas: Concepts, intersections, identities* (pp.118 – 122). London: Zed Books.
- Anthias, F. (1992). *Ethnicity, class, gender and migration*. London: Aidershot.
- Anthias, F. (1998). Evaluating 'Diaspora': Beyond ethnicity? *Sociology*, 32(3), 557–580. doi: 10.1177/0038038598032003009
- Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency. *PERSPECTIVES ON PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE*, 1(2), 164 –180.
- Bauer, J. L. (2000). Desiring place: Iranian “refugee” women and cultural politics of self and community in the diaspora. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 20 (1&2), 180– 209.
- Bezabeh, S.A. (2017). Africa’s unholy migrants: Mobility and migrant morality in the age of borders. *African Affairs: The Journal of the Royal African Society*, 116 (462), 1–17. doi: 10.1093/afraf/adw046
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bose, B. (1993). A question of identity: Where gender, race, and America meet in Bharati Mukherjee. In E. S. Nelson (Ed.), *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical perspectives* (pp. 47-64). London: Routledge.
- Bottomley, G. (1992). *From another place: Migration and the politics of culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brah, A. (1996). Cartographies of diasporas: Contesting identities. London: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9780203974919
- Brah, A. (1999). The scent of memory: Our own, strangers and others. *Feminist Review*, 61(1), 4–26. doi: 10.1080/014177899339261
- Brown, J. N. (1998). Black Liverpool, black America, and the gendering of diasporic space. *Cultural Anthropology*, 13(3), 291–325. doi:org/10.1525/can.1998.13.3.291
- Bryson, J., Pajo, K., Ward, R., & Mallon, M. (2006). Learning at work: Organisational affordances and individual engagement. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 18(5), 279–297. doi: 10.1108/13665620610674962
- Campt, T. (2005). *Other Germans: Black Germans and the politics of race, gender, and memory in the Third Reich*. MI: University of Michigan Press.

- Camp, T., & Thomas, D. A. (2008). Gendering diaspora: Transnational feminism, diaspora and its hegemonies. *Feminist Review*, 90, 1– 8. doi:10.1057/fr.2008.41
- Christou, A. (2011). Narrating lives in (e)motion: Embodiment, belongingness and displacement in the diasporic spaces of the home and return. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 4 (4), 249–257. doi: 10.1016/j.emospa.2011.06.007
- Clifford, J. (1997). *Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, 95(2), 256–273. doi: 10.1037/0033-295X.95.2.256
- Dwyer, C. (2000). Negotiating diasporic identities: Young British south Asian Muslim women. *Women Studies International Forum*, 23(4), 475– 486. doi: 10.1016/S0277-5395(00)00110-2
- Elmhirst, R. (2000). A Javanese diaspora? Gender and identity politics in Indonesia's transmigration resettlement program. *Women Studies International Forum*, 23 (4), 487–500. doi: 10.1016/S0277-5395(00)00108-4
- Eraut, M. (2007). Learning from other people in the workplace. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33(4), 403–422. doi: 10.1080/03054980701425706
- Eteläpelto, A., Vähäsantanen, K., Hökkä, P., & Paloniemi, S. (2013). What is agency? Conceptualizing professional agency at work. *Educational Research Review*, 10, 45–65. doi: 10.1016/j.edurev.2013.05.001
- Gangulay, K. (1992). Migrant identities: Personal memory and the construction of selfhood. *Cultural Studies*, 6 (1), 27–50.
- Gilroy, P. (2000). *Between Camps: Nations, cultures and the allure of race*. London: Routledge.
- Godin, M. (2018). Breaking the silences, breaking the frames: A gendered diasporic analysis of sexual violence in the DRC. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44 (8), 1390–1407. doi: 10.1080/1369183x.2017.1354166
- Goller, M. & Harteis, C., (2014). New skills for new jobs: Work agency as a necessary condition for successful lifelong learning. In S. Billett, T. Halttunen & M. Koivisto (Eds.), *Promoting, assessing, recognizing and certifying lifelong learning: International perspectives and practices* (pp. 37–56). New York: Springer.
- Goller, M. & Harteis, C. (2017). Human agency at work: Towards a clarification and operationalization of the concept. In M. Goller & S. Paloniemi (Eds.), *Agency at work: An agentic perspective on professional learning and development* (pp. 85–103). New York: Springer.
- Goller, M. (2017). *Human agency at work: An active approach towards expertise development*. New York: Springer.
- Gupta, M. D. (1997). “What is Indian about you?” A gendered, transnational approach

- to ethnicity. *Gender and Society*, 11(5), 572–596. Retrieved April 14, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/190340>
- Hewitt, L. (2011). Framing across differences, building solidarities: Lessons from women's rights activism in transnational spaces. *Interface: A journal for and about social movements* 3 (2), 65–99.
- Kalra, V.S., Kaur, R., & Hutnyk, J. (2005). *Diasporas and hybridity*. London: Sage.
- Lahiri, S. (2010). Where do I come from? Where do I belong? Identity and alienation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. *South Asian Review*, 31(1), 118–140. doi: 10.1080/02759527.2010.11932732
- Leurs, K. (2015). *Digital passages: Migrant youth 2.0. Diaspora, gender and youth cultural intersections*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. doi: 10.5117/9789089646408
- Mehta, S. R. (Ed.). (2015). *Exploring gender in the literature of the Indian diaspora*. New castle, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Miller, K. (2004). Mobility and identity construction in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* "The tree wife and her rootless namesake". *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 29(1), 63–73.
- Mukherjee, B. (2006). *Desirable Daughters*. New Delhi: Rupa.
- Parween, S. (2022). "Women in an alien land"- Nuances of diasporic identity and survival in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*. *Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities*, 2(6), 247–251. doi: 10.55544/ijrah.2.6.33
- Puwar, N., & Raghuram, P. (Eds.). (2003). *South Asian women in the diaspora*. London: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781003086758
- Rayaprol, A. (1997). *Negotiating identities: Women in the Indian diaspora*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Safian, W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora* 1 (1), 83–99. doi: 10.1353/dsp.1991.0004
- Samuel, L. (2010). Mating, dating and marriage: intergenerational cultural retention and the construction of diasporic identities among South Asian immigrants in Canada. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. 31 (1), 95–110.
- Sawyer, L. (2008). Strong engendering "race" in calls for diasporic community in Sweden. *Feminist Review*, 90, 87–105. Retrieved May 12, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40663940>
- Shanahan, M. J., & Hood, K. E. (2000). Adolescents in changing social structures: Bounded agency in life course perspective. In L. J. Crockett & R. K. Silbereisen (Eds.), *Negotiating adolescence in times of social change* (pp. 123–134). Madrid: Cambridge University Press.
- Spivak, G. (1996). Diaspora old and new: Women in the transnational world. *Textual*

*Practices*, 10(2), 245–269.

- Tomau, K., & Frese, M. (2013). Construct clean-up in proactivity research: A meta-analysis on the nomological net of work-related proactivity concepts and their incremental validities. *Applied Psychology*, 62(1), 44–96. doi: 10.1111/j.1464-0597.2012.00514.x
- Vähäsantanen, K. (2013). *Vocational teachers' professional agency in the stream of change*. Jyväskylä : Jyväskylä University.
- Werbner, P. (2002). The place which is diaspora: Citizenship, religion and gender in the making of chaotic transnationalism. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28 (1), 119–133.
- Wesling, M. (2008). Why queer diaspora? *Feminist Review*, 90 (1), 30–47.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1997). *Gender and nation*. London: Sage.

*Biographical Note:* **Nagendra Bahadur Bhandari**, Ph.D., serves as an Associate Professor at the Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, under Tribhuvan University, Nepal. His research focuses on diasporic literature, cultural studies, and gender studies. He has authored numerous research articles and has been a presenter at various national and international symposiums, discussing topics within his areas of expertise. Email: nagendra@pncampus.edu.np

---

Received: November 6, 2023

Revised: April 17, 2024

Accepted: April 22, 2024

---