
**NARRATING THE SELF RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN BHARATI
MUKHERJEE'S DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS THROUGH GERARD GENETTE'S
NARRATIVE THEORY**

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* presents the inner conflict of an Indian woman caught between her inherited tradition and the demands of modern life. This paper interprets the novel through the theoretical framework of Gerard Genette's narrative categories to understand how Mukherjee uses narrative form to express cultural displacement and the reconstruction of self. The analysis focuses on Genette's five key concepts of order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice, exploring how each reflects the protagonist's fragmented identity and diasporic experience. The study reveals that Mukherjee's manipulation of structure and perspective mirrors the fluidity of memory and belonging. Through this narrative design, *Desirable Daughters* becomes both a story of transformation and a reflection on storytelling as an act of self recovery.

Keywords: narratology, Gerard Genette, Bharati Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters*, narrative structure, diaspora, identity, *Tree Bride*

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee occupies a distinctive place in postcolonial and diasporic literature. Her novel *Desirable Daughters* follows the story of three Bengali sisters who grow up in privilege but lead very different lives. Among them, Tara Bhattacharjee becomes the narrator of her own story. Living in San Francisco after her divorce, Tara looks back on her childhood in Calcutta and the values that shaped her early life. Through her reflections, Mukherjee examines the complex experience of belonging to more than one world.

The novel's narrative structure moves freely between times and places, combining personal memory with ancestral legend. Tara's story is told not as a straight line but as a

pattern of recollections that reveal how the past and the present remain intertwined. Gerard Genette's theory of narratology provides a useful framework for understanding this form. His ideas about narrative time, viewpoint, and voice explain how storytelling itself can express the shifting boundaries of identity. When applied to *Desirable Daughters*, Genette's concepts show that form and meaning are inseparable. Mukherjee's narrative design becomes a reflection of Tara's search for coherence in a divided life.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative method of close reading and textual interpretation. The analysis is based on Gerard Genette's five narrative categories discussed in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* published in 1980. These are order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice. Each category is applied to the text to show how Mukherjee's storytelling creates an experience of displacement, memory, and self discovery. Secondary sources by critics such as Deepika Bahri, Vijay Mishra, Eleonora Rao, and Sucharita Sarkar are used to support interpretation. The study seeks to connect the structural features of the novel with its thematic concerns of cultural transition and identity formation.

Order and the Work of Memory

Order refers to the relationship between the chronological sequence of events and the order in which they are narrated. In *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee disrupts linear time by blending moments from Tara's life in America with scenes from her childhood in India. The story unfolds through recollection and reflection rather than through direct progression.

This movement across time captures the way memory functions for someone living away from home. The past is not a closed chapter but something that returns unexpectedly in the present. Tara's narrative jumps between moments of joy, regret, and rediscovery, showing that memory does not obey the logic of the calendar. By rearranging time, Mukherjee presents identity as a continuous process that is shaped by remembering. Genette's idea of analepsis, or the backward movement of narration, helps explain how the novel's structure mirrors Tara's consciousness. Each return to the past allows her to reinterpret her life and make sense of her journey.

Duration and the Rhythm of Experience

Duration refers to how much narrative space is given to a particular event. In Mukherjee's novel, the rhythm of narration changes according to emotional intensity. Important moments in Tara's life are described in great detail, while long stretches of ordinary time are passed over quickly. When she recalls her marriage, her separation, or her discovery of her ancestral story, the pace slows and the narration becomes introspective.

This variation in rhythm highlights the psychological dimension of time. For Tara, the most significant experiences are not measured by years but by emotional weight. By allowing more space to moments of realization, Mukherjee transforms them into turning

points of consciousness. Duration therefore becomes a reflection of how memory selects and magnifies experience. Through these changes in tempo, Mukherjee recreates the rhythm of the mind itself.

Frequency and the Power of Repetition

Frequency concerns how often an event or idea is narrated. In *Desirable Daughters*, certain memories and images appear repeatedly. Tara returns again and again to the image of her family home, to her father's voice, and to the rituals of her youth. This repetition performs the work of remembrance. Each time she recalls an event, she gives it new meaning and reclaims it as part of her story.

Repetition also reveals the emotional texture of diaspora. For someone far from home, memory is both comfort and burden. The mind clings to familiar images as a way of preserving continuity. Through recurring descriptions and memories, Mukherjee shows that identity is formed not only by what is remembered but by the act of remembering itself. Frequency becomes a narrative echo that holds the self together.

Mood and the Experience of Perspective

Mood in Genette's framework refers to the control of narrative information and the point of view through which the story is told. The entire novel is seen through Tara's consciousness. Readers witness events as she interprets them, coloured by her emotions and uncertainties. This internal perspective gives the story its intimacy and its honesty.

However, it also limits the reader's understanding. Tara's account is not objective; it is shaped by nostalgia and guilt. Her sisters and family members appear through her subjective lens, which means the reader must navigate between sympathy and doubt. Mukherjee uses this limited perspective deliberately to express how perception is influenced by culture and memory. The reader becomes aware that Tara is constructing her own version of truth. The internal point of view thus reinforces one of the novel's central ideas: that selfhood is always a story told from within, never a fixed or final truth.

Voice and the Layers of Storytelling

Voice refers to who narrates the story and from what position. Tara speaks in her own voice, but she also retells stories of her ancestors, most notably that of the Tree Bride. This layering of voices creates a bridge between the personal and the historical. The embedded story of the Tree Bride functions as a symbolic reflection of Tara's journey. The Tree Bride's courage and devotion contrast with Tara's restlessness and search for independence. Yet both women share a desire for purpose and dignity. By including this ancestral story within her own narrative, Tara connects her fragmented modern identity with a tradition of endurance.

Through this device, Mukherjee shows that identity is not only individual but collective. The self is shaped by the stories passed down through generations. Tara's

narration of the Tree Bride also transforms her from a passive observer into a storyteller who actively interprets her heritage. In this way, voice becomes both a literary and a psychological tool of self discovery.

Narrative Form and the Idea of Diaspora

When considered together, these narrative strategies show that Mukherjee uses structure to embody the condition of diaspora. The non-linear order represents dislocation in time and space. Variation in duration conveys emotional intensity. Repetition becomes a way of preserving identity through memory. Internal perspective reveals the complexity of perception. The layered voice connects the personal with the collective past.

Through these techniques, *Desirable Daughters* turns form into meaning. The novel becomes not only a representation of migration but a performance of it. The story moves between continents just as Tara's thoughts move between past and present. Her narration reflects the effort to reconcile these movements, to make a coherent story out of scattered memories.

Critics such as Deepika Bahri and Vijay Mishra observe that postcolonial writers often express hybridity through fragmented structures. Mukherjee's novel confirms this view but also humanizes it. Her concern is not only cultural theory but emotional truth. By writing Tara as both narrator and seeker, Mukherjee invites readers to experience the texture of belonging and estrangement. The narrative form becomes the language of that experience.

The Tree Bride as a Mirror of Selfhood

The Tree Bride episode deserves special attention because it represents the moral center of the novel. The story of the ancestor who sacrificed her life for freedom becomes a source of inspiration for Tara. It is through the Tree Bride that she learns to view her own displacement not as loss but as possibility.

The ancestral narrative also raises a question about continuity. What does it mean to inherit a tradition when one lives in another world? Mukherjee answers this by showing that inheritance is not mere repetition but reinterpretation. Tara does not become the Tree Bride, yet she learns from her example how to find strength in connection. The embedded story thus becomes a metaphor for the act of narration itself. Through telling her ancestor's story, Tara discovers her own.

Conclusion

A study of *Desirable Daughters* through Gerard Genette's narrative theory reveals that Mukherjee's novel is not simply a tale of migration but a meditation on storytelling as identity. The structure of the narrative: its shifts in time, rhythm, repetition, and voice; mirrors the movement of a consciousness divided between worlds. Each formal choice serves to express Tara's effort to understand herself across distance and change.

By giving her protagonist control over narration, Mukherjee transforms storytelling

into an act of renewal. Tara's recollection of the past is not nostalgic but creative; it allows her to weave together fragments of memory into a pattern of meaning. The embedded story of the Tree Bride completes this process by linking personal history with cultural heritage. Through it, Tara realizes that identity is not found but made, and that narration itself can heal the fractures of displacement.

Desirable Daughters stands as an example of how narrative form can capture the experience of being between cultures. Mukherjee's art lies in turning the techniques of storytelling into the language of emotion and survival. Her novel reminds readers that to tell a story is to reclaim one's voice and to find coherence in the flow of time.

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