

Hybridity and Double Consciousness in Diasporic Literature: A Critical Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intertwined themes of hybridity and double consciousness in diasporic literature, with a focused critique of Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*. It examines how the protagonist, Tara Banerjee Cartwright, manages her multifaceted identity as a South Asian immigrant in the U.S., using W. E. B. Du Bois's conception of double consciousness alongside Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity. The study reflects on how displacement, memory, gender norms, and family expectations influence Tara's evolving self-awareness, revealing the internal tensions that arise from inhabiting multiple cultural worlds. Moving beyond typical immigrant narratives, the novel situates itself within its literary and historical context to depict diasporic identity as a dynamic process of personal transformation and resistance to reductive notions of nation and belonging. The analysis highlights how *Desirable Daughters* offers significant contributions to postcolonial and diaspora studies through its complex portrayal of identity negotiation.

Keywords: Diaspora, hybridity, double consciousness, Bharati Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters*, identity, postcolonial, W.E.B. Du Bois, Homi Bhabha.

Introduction

Diaspora fiction often grapples with themes of displacement, identity formation, and cultural negotiation, portraying a self-shaped by the intersections of memory, geography, and belonging. Bharati Mukherjee, a writer whose own experience spans multiple cultures, centres these concerns in *Desirable Daughters* (2002). Her novel intricately explores the tensions between tradition and transformation, homeland and diaspora, offering a rich site for applying theoretical concepts such as W. E. B. Du Bois's "double consciousness" and Homi K. Bhabha's "hybridity."

When viewed through these critical frameworks, Mukherjee's narrative transcends a simple immigrant tale or family drama. Instead, it becomes a nuanced examination of fractured identities and the psychological complexities that diaspora produces. This paper delves into how Mukherjee's protagonist, Tara Banerjee Cartwright, embodies this layered diasporic consciousness, negotiating competing cultural scripts and expectations.

Theoretical Framework: W.E.B. Du Bois and Homi Bhabha

Du Bois and the Experience of "Double Consciousness"

In his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois articulated "double consciousness" as the psychological struggle faced by African Americans who must reconcile their own self-perception with the

external gaze of a society that marginalizes them. Du Bois describes this phenomenon as "a peculiar sensation...always looking at one's self through the eyes of others."

Though originally framed within the African American experience, this concept applies broadly to diasporic subjects who constantly mediate between inherited cultural identities and the pressures of their host societies. In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara experiences this double vision intimately, living in the interstice between her Indian upbringing and American realities, often caught in internal conflict as she measures herself by conflicting cultural standards.

Homi K. Bhabha and the "Third Space" of Hybridity

Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory reframes identity as fluid and perpetually negotiated, introducing the concept of the "Third Space" where new cultural meanings emerge across boundaries. According to Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), identity is formed in the overlapping "interstices" of cultural difference, where hybridity allows the subversion of colonial and essentialist identities.

Tara embodies this hybridity as she straddles the divides of Bengali tradition and contemporary American culture. Rather than a fixed identity, hers is an on-going synthesis—creative and unsettled. Mukherjee's portrayal celebrates this multiplicity, illustrating how Tara's life is a continual cultural negotiation rather than a binary opposition.

Bharati Mukherjee and the Diasporic Context

Born in Calcutta and later an American citizen, Mukherjee's own experiences shape her shift from earlier narratives of displacement to a more affirmative embrace of change and self-reinvention. She has famously declared herself "an American writer, writing about the American experience," signalling a refusal to be confined within ethnic or national labels.

Her work reflects the socio-historical realities post-1965, when American immigration policy welcomed many South Asian professionals who brought with them complex cultural heritages and aspirations. Mukherjee situates her stories like *Desirable Daughters* within this dynamic milieu, exploring the intersections of migration, identity formation, and cultural adaptation with profound subtlety.

Narrative Overview: *Desirable Daughters*

Desirable Daughters follows Tara Banerjee Cartwright, the youngest of three sisters from a respected Bengali family, now living in California. After separating from her Indian-American husband, Tara navigates life as a single mother while negotiating the demands of cultural tradition, gender expectations, and personal autonomy.

Her sisters represent different responses to diaspora: Parvati remains rooted in India's conventional values, Padma embodies American professional success, whereas Tara exists in between, conflicted and evolving. The plot thickens with the appearance of a mysterious man claiming kinship, forcing Tara to confront buried family secrets and further fracturing her sense of self. Through such tensions, Mukherjee foregrounds the diasporic condition as a complex, layered identity shaped by memory and longing as much as geography.

Double Consciousness in Tara's Identity

Tara vividly enacts Du Bois's notion of double consciousness, embodying the clash between traditional Indian expectations and American ideals of independence. Raised under prescriptive norms of conformity, she later embraces divorce, sexual freedom, and reinvention. Her assertion, "I am not Tara anymore. I'm someone new. I'm someone I've invented," epitomizes her continual self-creation.

Still, the past relentlessly reasserts itself—through family, cultural memory, and societal expectations—challenging her attempts at autonomy. Her selfhood is fractured and mediated by multiple perspectives: Indian relatives, American neighbours, her ex-husband, and most poignantly, her son. This liminal existence reflects the uncomfortable duality at the heart of double consciousness.

Hybridity and the “Third Space” of Tara

Tara's life exists in Bhabha's “Third Space,” a domain beyond simplistic cultural binaries. Her domestic environment houses Indian relics amidst Western routines, symbolizing her hybridized identity. Bhabha underscores hybridity's power to disrupt colonial identity norms, and Tara's lived experience illustrates this disruption vividly: she simultaneously performs the roles of dutiful Bengali daughter and self-fashioned American woman.

The novel's movement between India and America narratively embodies this hybridity, underscoring identity as a perpetual negotiation rather than fixed belonging.

Memory, Family, and Cultural Reclamation

Mukherjee weaves an ancestral backstory—the spiritual transformation of Tara Lata Gangooly, a child widow—into the fabric of the modern tale. This mythic parallel acts as a symbolic counterpoint to contemporary Tara's journey, underscoring how diasporic selves are constructed not through rupture but through layered reconnection.

By engaging with family history and memory, Tara's process evolves from denial to partial integration, signalling identity as a palimpsest: continuously rewritten by past and present.

Gender, Diaspora, and Female Agency

The diasporic condition in *Desirable Daughters* is deeply gendered. Tara's personal choices—divorce, nonconformity, parenting—challenge entrenched patriarchal norms both from South Asian tradition and diasporic communities. These assertions of agency are fraught and contested, shadowed by internal and external conflicts.

Mukherjee critiques the persistence of patriarchal values and portrays migration as insufficient alone for female liberation. True transformation requires an active, often difficult renegotiation of gender roles, with agency emerging through struggle rather than ease.

Mukherjee's Distinctive Literary Stance

Unlike contemporaries such as Salman Rushdie or Jhumpa Lahiri, who often dwell on exile and loss, Mukherjee emphasizes reinvention and empowerment within displacement. Tara's evolution, with its tensions and uncertainties, affirms the possibility of migration as a site of growth and self-redefinition.

Her narrative positions diasporic life not merely as hardship to endure but as fertile ground for reimagining identity and belonging.

Conclusion

Desirable Daughters stands as a seminal diasporic text that captures the multifaceted experience of migration and identity fragmentation. Through Du Bois's double consciousness and Bhabha's hybridity, the novel reveals Tara's identity as an ongoing negotiation in a space marked by contradiction and creativity.

Far from fixed or single, Mukherjee's portrayal embraces diaspora's fluidity and fractured subjectivity. Her work challenges narrow ideas of identity and belonging, offering a compelling meditation on memory, transformation, and selfhood in the modern world.

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