



International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORIES (IJELLT)

ISSN: 3107-6505

Vol.:2: Issue: 6: 2026.

(International Peer Reviewed and refereed English Journal)

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Literary Theories

Cultural Negotiation and Adaptation in Bharati Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters: A Reflection

Dr. G. Varalaxmi, Associate Professor, Department of English, Government Degree College
Maripeda, Mahbubabad, Telangana.

Abstract: Diasporic literature has emerged as one of the most significant literary discourses of the twenty-first century, foregrounding questions of migration, identity, cultural hybridity, belonging, and transnational experiences. Among contemporary Indian diasporic writers, Bharati Mukherjee occupies a distinctive position for her nuanced portrayal of immigrants who continually negotiate between inherited cultural traditions and the demands of their adopted societies. Unlike earlier diasporic narratives that emphasize nostalgia and exile, Mukherjee's fiction celebrates transformation, adaptation, and the reconstruction of identity. Her novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) presents an insightful exploration of cultural negotiation through the experiences of Tara Chatterjee, an Indian immigrant in the United States who confronts multiple identities shaped by gender, family, migration, and globalization. This paper examines how cultural negotiation functions as a dynamic process rather than a fixed condition in the novel. Drawing upon the postcolonial theories of Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and James Clifford, the study argues that Mukherjee portrays identity as fluid, performative, and continuously reconstructed within transnational spaces. The article further demonstrates that adaptation in *Desirable Daughters* is not synonymous with cultural assimilation but involves selective preservation, reinterpretation, and transformation of cultural values. Through Tara's personal journey, Mukherjee illustrates that diasporic identity emerges through constant dialogue between tradition and modernity, home land and host land, and memory and lived experience. Ultimately, the novel redefines cultural adaptation as an empowering process that enables immigrant women to negotiate multiple worlds without surrendering their agency or cultural heritage.

Keywords: diaspora, cultural negotiation, adaptation, hybridity, identity, transnationalism.



Global migration has significantly reshaped literary production during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As increasing numbers of individuals move across national boundaries for education, employment, marriage, or political reasons, literature has increasingly reflected the complex realities of displacement, cultural encounters, identity crises, and transnational belonging. Diasporic literature no longer confines itself to themes of exile or nostalgia; instead, it explores how migrants continuously negotiate multiple identities while adapting to new social, political, and cultural environments. Among Indian diasporic writers writing in English, Bharati Mukherjee occupies a unique place because of her optimistic representation of immigrant transformation. While many diasporic writers portray migration as a painful loss of homeland, Mukherjee frequently presents it as an opportunity for self-renewal and personal liberation. Her protagonists actively reshape themselves through encounters with new cultures, demonstrating resilience rather than victimhood. Consequently, adaptation in Mukherjee's fiction becomes a process of creative reconstruction rather than passive assimilation.

Desirable Daughters is one of Mukherjee's most critically acclaimed novels published in 2002. The novel intertwines three generations of Bengali women, beginning with the legendary figure of Tara Lata, a nineteenth-century child bride who symbolically marries a tree to avoid widowhood, and extending to the lives of three modern sisters—Tara, Padma, and Parvati—whose choices reflect different responses to modernity, migration, and globalization. The narrative primarily follows Tara Chatterjee, who leaves India, settles in California, divorces her husband, and gradually reconstructs her identity independent of traditional patriarchal expectations. Mukherjee captures the complexity of identity through Tara's introspection about her place in the world, "In America, I have learned to float between worlds, never quite belonging to one or the other. I am neither fully Indian nor fully American, but something else. Need something in-between" (4).

Unlike conventional immigrant narratives that privilege nostalgia for the homeland, *Desirable Daughters* emphasizes mobility, flexibility, and intercultural dialogue. Tara's experiences demonstrate that identity is neither biologically inherited nor culturally predetermined. Instead, identity develops through continuous interaction between memory, migration, and lived experience. Her journey reflects the evolving realities of globalization, where individuals inhabit multiple cultural worlds simultaneously. The concept of cultural negotiation occupies the centre of the novel. Cultural negotiation refers to the ongoing process through which individuals reconcile conflicting cultural values, beliefs, languages, traditions, and social expectations while constructing meaningful identities.

For immigrants, negotiation often involves balancing the customs of the homeland with the practices of the host society. Rather than choosing one culture over another, diasporic individuals frequently create hybrid identities that incorporate elements of both.

Mukherjee portrays this negotiation through everyday experiences involving family relationships, marriage, language, religion, gender roles, parenting, and professional life. Tara neither completely rejects her Indian heritage nor wholly embraces American individualism. Instead, she selectively appropriates values from both societies, demonstrating that adaptation is an active and ongoing process of cultural reinterpretation. Her identity evolves through reflection, experience, and personal choice rather than through rigid adherence to inherited traditions. This perspective closely aligns with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which challenges essentialist understandings of culture. Bhabha argues that cultural interaction produces a "Third Space" in which new identities emerge through negotiation rather than imitation. In this liminal space, identities remain fluid, provisional, and continually reconstructed. Tara's experiences exemplify this process, as she inhabits multiple cultural worlds without belonging exclusively to either.

Similarly, Stuart Hall's influential theory of cultural identity emphasizes that identity should be understood as a process of "becoming" rather than "being." According to Hall, identities are continuously shaped by history, memory, and cultural representation rather than existing as fixed or stable entities. Tara's journey illustrates this theoretical insight by revealing how migration transforms both personal identity and cultural consciousness. The novel also resonates with Avtar Brah's notion of "diaspora space," where migrants and non-migrants interact to produce new social and cultural formations. Rather than presenting diaspora merely as geographical displacement, Brah conceptualizes it as a site of intersecting histories, identities, and power relations. Tara's life in the United States exemplifies such a diaspora space, where Indian traditions, American lifestyles, and global cultural influences intersect to produce complex forms of belonging.

Furthermore, James Clifford's understanding of diaspora as movement rather than permanent exile provides another useful framework for interpreting Mukherjee's narrative. Clifford argues that diasporic identities are characterized by mobility, multiple affiliations, and ongoing cultural exchange. *Desirable Daughters* reflects this contemporary understanding by depicting migration as an evolving process that continually reshapes individual and collective identities. Gender further complicates cultural negotiation in the novel.

As an immigrant woman, Tara negotiates not only national and cultural differences but also patriarchal expectations inherited from both Indian and American societies. Her divorce, independent lifestyle, and evolving relationships challenge conventional notions of femininity while simultaneously questioning rigid definitions of tradition. Mukherjee thereby demonstrates that adaptation is deeply gendered, requiring women to navigate multiple systems of authority and cultural expectation.

This article argues that *Desirable Daughters* re-conceptualizes diaspora through the lens of cultural negotiation and adaptation. Rather than portraying migration as a narrative of loss, Mukherjee presents it as an ongoing dialogue between cultures that enables immigrant women to redefine themselves. Through Tara Chatterjee's transformation, the novel illustrates that identity is neither singular nor static but fluid, hybrid, and continuously negotiated. In doing so, Mukherjee contributes significantly to contemporary diasporic literature by challenging essentialist notions of culture and foregrounding the creative possibilities of transnational existence.

The contemporary discourse on diaspora has shifted significantly from earlier conceptions of exile, displacement, and nostalgia to more dynamic understandings of mobility, transnationalism, and identity formation. Rather than perceiving migration merely as a physical relocation from one nation to another, contemporary theorists regard it as a continuous process of cultural interaction that reshapes both individuals and communities. Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* exemplifies this transition by portraying migration not as a permanent rupture with one's homeland but as an opportunity for self-transformation through cultural negotiation and adaptation. The novel illustrates how diasporic subjects inhabit multiple cultural worlds simultaneously and construct identities that remain fluid, hybrid, and continually evolving. One of the most influential theoretical concepts for understanding Mukherjee's fiction is Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that cultural identity is not rooted in fixed origins or essential traditions; instead, it emerges in what he terms the "Third Space of enunciation." This Third Space represents an in-between cultural zone where meanings are constantly translated, negotiated, and reinterpreted. Rather than reproducing either the culture of origin or the culture of settlement, immigrants create new identities that combine elements of both cultures (Bhabha 37–39).

Tara Chatterjee's experiences exemplify this hybrid existence. Although she remains emotionally connected to her Bengali heritage, she also embraces the values of individual freedom, professional independence, and personal choice that characterize her American environment. She neither rejects India nor completely assimilates into American culture. Instead, she occupies an intermediate cultural position where both identities coexist in productive tension. Mukherjee thus challenges binary oppositions such as East and West, tradition and modernity, or homeland and diaspora by presenting identity as an ongoing process of negotiation. Bhabha further argues that hybridity destabilizes cultural purity by demonstrating that all cultures evolve through contact and exchange rather than remaining isolated or homogeneous (Bhabha 112). This insight is particularly relevant to *Desirable Daughters*, where cultural identity is portrayed as a dynamic process shaped by globalization, migration, and transnational mobility. Tara's identity cannot be understood solely in terms of her Indian upbringing or her American residence; instead, it emerges through the interaction of both cultural systems. Her hybrid identity reflects Bhabha's assertion that cultural meaning is always produced through dialogue rather than inherited unchanged.

Another important theoretical framework is Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity. Hall challenges essentialist understandings of identity by arguing that identities are not fixed possessions but ongoing productions. According to Hall, cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (Hall 225). Identity continually changes as individuals reinterpret their histories, memories, and social experiences. Rather than representing an authentic or original self, identity is constantly reconstructed through cultural representation and lived experience. Hall's theory illuminates Tara's gradual transformation throughout the novel. At the beginning of *Desirable Daughters*, Tara defines herself largely through inherited social roles as a daughter, wife, and mother within a traditional Bengali family. However, migration, divorce, and independent living gradually compel her to question these inherited identities. Her evolving sense of self demonstrates Hall's contention that identity is never complete but remains continuously in formation. Tara's personal development reflects the diasporic condition in which selfhood is shaped by multiple histories and cultural influences rather than by a single national tradition.

Hall also emphasizes the importance of memory in constructing diasporic identity. Memories of the homeland do not simply preserve an authentic past; rather, they are continually reconstructed in relation to present experiences (Hall 226). Mukherjee employs this narrative strategy throughout *Desirable Daughters*. Tara's recollections of her childhood in Kolkata, family rituals, and ancestral history are repeatedly juxtaposed with her contemporary life in California. These memories function not as nostalgic returns to a lost homeland but as interpretive resources through which she negotiates her present identity. Memory therefore becomes an active process of cultural reinterpretation rather than passive remembrance. The concept of diaspora space, developed by Avtar Brah, further enriches the understanding of Mukherjee's novel. In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Brah argues that diaspora should not be viewed merely as geographical dispersal but as a complex social space where migrants, natives, histories, and identities intersect (Brah 181). Diaspora space is characterized by continuous encounters among different cultures; producing new forms of belonging that transcend national boundaries.

California in *Desirable Daughters* functions as such a diaspora space. Tara's interactions with immigrants from diverse backgrounds, her relationships with Americans, and her continued engagement with Indian traditions create a multicultural environment where identities remain fluid and relational. Her home itself becomes a symbolic site of cultural negotiation, containing Indian religious objects alongside American lifestyles, traditional customs alongside modern practices. Mukherjee thus portrays diaspora as a lived social reality in which cultural boundaries become increasingly permeable. Brah further argues that diaspora identities are shaped by intersections of gender, class, race, and history rather than by ethnicity alone (Brah 183). This observation is particularly significant for interpreting Tara's experiences. Her negotiations involve not only national identity but also gender expectations inherited from patriarchal traditions. As a divorced immigrant woman living independently in America, Tara simultaneously challenges conventional notions of femininity while preserving aspects of her cultural heritage. Her identity therefore reflects multiple intersecting forms of negotiation rather than a simple transition from one culture to another.

James Clifford's influential work on diaspora similarly rejects static notions of migration. Clifford argues that contemporary diasporas are characterized by movement, travel, and multiple attachments rather than permanent exile. Diasporic communities sustain connections with several places simultaneously, producing identities that are inherently transnational (Clifford 302–05). Migration thus becomes a process of circulation rather than one way displacement. Mukherjee's narrative embodies Clifford's conception of transnational identity. Tara maintains emotional, familial, and cultural connections with India even while establishing a meaningful life in the United States. Telephone conversations, family visits, ancestral memories, and cultural practices continually connect the two geographical spaces. Rather than choosing between India and America, Tara inhabits both symbolic worlds simultaneously. Mukherjee thereby demonstrates that globalization has transformed diaspora into a condition of multiple affiliations rather than singular national belonging.

The notion of cultural negotiation itself has become central to contemporary migration studies. Cultural negotiation refers to the active process through which migrants reconcile conflicting cultural expectations while constructing meaningful identities. Unlike assimilation, which implies the abandonment of one's original culture, negotiation involves dialogue, adaptation, and selective appropriation. Individuals preserve certain cultural values while modifying others according to changing social contexts. Mukherjee consistently privileges negotiation over assimilation. Tara neither abandons her Bengali identity nor remains confined within traditional cultural norms. Instead, she chooses which aspects of each culture contribute to her evolving selfhood. This selective adaptation reflects a mature understanding of multicultural citizenship in which identity remains flexible rather than exclusive. In Indian culture where Indian women are not daring enough to call their husbands by name, it is an act of assimilation, where Tara welcomes slowly. "His American friends call him Bish. I, of course, as a good Hindu wife-to-be, could not utter any of his names to his face. But we're progressive people; after crossing the dark water to California I called him Bishu, then Bish" (Mukherjee 23).

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Equally significant is the concept of adaptation. Earlier migration theories often regarded adaptation as complete assimilation into the host culture. Contemporary theorists, however, understand adaptation as a reciprocal process involving accommodation, reinterpretation, and creative transformation. Adaptation allows immigrants to participate in new societies without erasing their cultural histories. Tara, in her attempt to assimilate into American society through her marriage, suburban lifestyle, and her son Rabi's American upbringing, experiences persistent discomfort.

She reflects, “I thought I could slip into America like a new skin, but the fit was never perfect. There were always seams, places where the old life showed through” (102)

In *Desirable Daughters*, adaptation operates at multiple levels. Linguistically, Tara becomes proficient in American English while retaining familiarity with Bengali expressions. Socially, she adopts American norms of independence while preserving strong family ties. Emotionally, she learns to value personal autonomy without entirely rejecting communal responsibilities. Such adaptations demonstrate that cultural identity is neither lost nor preserved intact; instead, it is continually reconstructed through everyday experiences. Another crucial dimension of Mukherjee's theoretical vision is her rejection of victimhood narratives commonly associated with immigrant literature. Unlike writers who emphasize alienation and cultural loss, Mukherjee frequently celebrates migration as a source of empowerment and renewal. Adaptation in her fiction becomes an act of agency through which individuals actively shape their destinies. Tara's transformation illustrates this optimistic vision by portraying migration as an opportunity for intellectual, emotional, and cultural growth rather than merely as displacement.

Consequently, *Desirable Daughters* reflects the broader theoretical developments within postcolonial and diaspora studies that emphasize hybridity, transnationalism, cultural negotiation, and fluid identity. Through the combined insights of Bhabha, Hall, Brah, and Clifford, the novel reveals that identity is not inherited but continually produced through interaction, movement, and lived experience. Mukherjee thus presents diaspora as a creative cultural condition in which adaptation becomes the foundation for personal empowerment and the reimagining of selfhood in an interconnected global world.

In *Desirable Daughters*, Bharati Mukherjee explores cultural negotiation as a continuous process through which immigrants redefine their identities while balancing the traditions of their homeland with the realities of their adopted country. The protagonist, Tara Chatterjee, embodies this process as she negotiates between her Bengali upbringing and her independent life in the United States. Unlike conventional immigrant narratives that emphasize cultural loss or alienation, Mukherjee presents migration as an opportunity for self-discovery and transformation. Tara's journey begins within the conservative framework of an upper-middle-class Bengali family, where marriage, obedience, and family honor shape a woman's identity.

Her arranged marriage to Bish Chatterjee initially reflects the traditional expectations imposed upon Indian women. However, after migrating to California, Tara gradually questions these inherited norms. Her decision to seek divorce and establish an independent life symbolizes not merely personal rebellion but a conscious negotiation between traditional Indian values and Western ideals of individual freedom (Mukherjee).

Rather than portraying Tara's transformation as a complete rejection of her cultural roots, Mukherjee emphasizes selective adaptation. Tara continues to value her family, respects her cultural heritage, and remains emotionally connected to India. At the same time, she embraces personal autonomy, professional independence, and self-expression. This balanced negotiation illustrates Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, wherein new identities emerge within the "Third Space" through interaction between different cultural systems (Bhabha 37–39). Tara's identity is therefore neither exclusively Indian nor completely American; instead, it is a dynamic synthesis of both cultures.

The contrasting lives of Tara's sisters, Padma and Parvati, further reinforce Mukherjee's exploration of cultural adaptation. Padma, who settles in New York, attempts to preserve traditional Indian customs despite living abroad, whereas Parvati remains largely committed to conventional domestic life in India. Tara occupies an intermediate position between these two extremes. Her experiences demonstrate that cultural adaptation does not require abandoning one's heritage but involves interpreting cultural traditions according to changing personal and social circumstances. Mukherjee says, "Padma wore her Indianness like a costume, something to be put on for effect and taken off when it no longer served her purpose" (33). This observation underscores the commodification of culture in the diaspora, where heritage is used as a tool for social capital rather than embraced as a lived experience. Uma Parameswaran argues that Mukherjee "exposes the hollowness of cultural nostalgia when it is divorced from genuine engagement with one's roots" (34). Padma's assimilation, therefore, is less about integration and more about strategic self-presentation, revealing the complexities of identity in a multicultural context.

An important symbolic dimension of the novel is the story of Tara Lata, the legendary ancestor after whom Tara is named. Forced into an unconventional marriage with a sacred tree to avoid widowhood, Tara Lata transforms an act of social oppression into one of resilience and spiritual strength. Mukherjee employs this ancestral narrative as a metaphor for women's capacity to negotiate restrictive cultural structures without losing dignity or agency.

Just as Tara Lata adapts to the limitations imposed upon her, the contemporary Tara negotiates the challenges of migration, divorce, and multicultural existence. The parallel suggests that adaptation has always been integral to women's survival across generations. Family relationships also become sites of cultural negotiation. Tara's interactions with her son Rabi reveal the generational tensions common within diasporic communities. Raised in America, Rabi possesses cultural assumptions markedly different from those of his mother. Their relationship reflects Stuart Hall's observation that cultural identities are continually reconstructed through historical and social experience rather than inherited unchanged (Hall 225). Tara recognizes that preserving Indian traditions requires flexibility rather than rigid adherence, allowing cultural values to evolve across generations.

Mukherjee further illustrates adaptation through Tara's engagement with American society. She develops friendships beyond the Indian diaspora, adopts new social practices, and embraces the multicultural environment of California. Yet she continues to cherish memories of Kolkata, family rituals, and Bengali customs. These dual attachments exemplify James Clifford's concept of diaspora as a condition of multiple affiliations rather than permanent exile (Clifford 302). Tara belongs simultaneously to India and America, demonstrating that diasporic identity is transnational rather than territorially fixed.

The novel also foregrounds the intersection of gender and migration. Tara's negotiation extends beyond cultural differences to include patriarchal expectations operating in both Indian and American societies. Her decision to live independently after divorce challenges conventional assumptions regarding marriage, femininity, and family responsibility. Mukherjee portrays adaptation as an act of female agency through which women actively redefine their social roles instead of passively accepting inherited identities. In this respect, Tara's journey reflects Avtar Brah's concept of "diaspora space," where gender, ethnicity, history, and migration intersect to produce new forms of identity (Brah 181).

Ultimately, *Desirable Daughters* redefines cultural negotiation as a creative and empowering process. Mukherjee rejects the binary opposition between tradition and modernity, demonstrating instead that diasporic identity emerges through dialogue, adaptation, and continuous self-reflection. Tara's transformation illustrates that successful adaptation does not erase cultural memory but reinterprets it within new social contexts. Through her nuanced portrayal of immigrant experience, Mukherjee argues that identity is fluid, hybrid, and constantly reconstructed in response to changing cultural realities.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* offers a compelling representation of cultural negotiation and adaptation within the context of contemporary Indian diaspora. Through the experiences of Tara Chatterjee, Mukherjee moves beyond traditional narratives of exile and displacement to present migration as a transformative process that enables individuals to reconstruct their identities in response to changing cultural environments. Tara's journey demonstrates that identity is not fixed or inherited but is continually reshaped through interactions with diverse cultural, social, and historical forces.

The novel rejects simplistic binaries such as East versus West, tradition versus modernity, and homeland versus host land. Instead, it presents culture as fluid, dynamic, and open to reinterpretation. Tara neither abandons her Indian heritage nor fully assimilates into American society. Rather, she selectively integrates values from both cultures, creating a hybrid identity that reflects resilience, agency, and self-determination. This process of negotiation affirms Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the Third Space, where new cultural meanings emerge through interaction rather than opposition. Likewise, Stuart Hall's notion of identity as an ongoing process of "becoming" is reflected in Tara's continuous personal evolution.

Mukherjee also foregrounds the gendered dimensions of diaspora by illustrating how immigrant women negotiate cultural expectations alongside issues of marriage, family, independence, and personal freedom. Tara's transformation from a conventionally raised Bengali woman to an autonomous individual illustrates that adaptation is not merely geographical but intellectual, emotional, and psychological. Her experiences reveal that migration can become a site of empowerment where women challenge patriarchal norms while maintaining meaningful connections with their cultural heritage. The patriarchal structure of the family, embodied by their father, imposes strict norms on the sisters, particularly regarding marriage and duty. Tara recalls, "Our father had mapped out our lives before we were born, as though we were territories to be claimed and governed"

(20).

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The ancestral narrative of Tara Lata reinforces this central argument by linking historical resilience with contemporary female agency. Across generations, women negotiate restrictive social structures through courage, adaptability, and self-reinvention. Mukherjee thus situates cultural negotiation within a broader historical continuum, demonstrating that adaptation has always been essential to women's survival and self-definition.

Furthermore, the novel contributes significantly to contemporary diasporic literature by portraying globalization as a catalyst for intercultural dialogue rather than cultural homogenization. Tara's transnational existence reflects the realities of an increasingly interconnected world where belonging is no longer confined to a single nation or identity. Instead, diasporic subjects inhabit multiple cultural spaces simultaneously, transforming migration into a source of creative possibility. Tara's character illustrates that staying rooted in one's culture does not change. Mukherjee writes, "Parvati was the keeper of our traditions, but even she had learned to bend, to let the modern world seep into the cracks of the old" (73). This observation highlights the dynamic nature of tradition, which evolves even in the context of cultural preservation. Anupama Jain argues that Mukherjee's portrayal of the sisters "demonstrates that identity is not static but a constant process of negotiation, shaped by both heritage and environment" (13). The three Indian sisters whose experiences highlight the interplay between their Indian heritage and assimilation into American culture, illustrate how identity evolves through negotiation with cultural, familial, and personal influences.

In conclusion, *Desirable Daughters* illustrates that cultural negotiation is not a sign of fragmented identity but a constructive strategy for living in multicultural societies. Bharati Mukherjee ultimately argues that adaptation should be understood as a process of cultural enrichment, enabling individuals to preserve meaningful aspects of their heritage while embracing new opportunities for growth and self-expression. The novel remains an important contribution to Indian diasporic fiction because it redefines identity as fluid, hybrid, and continuously negotiated within the evolving landscapes of globalization and transnationalism.

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