

Memory and Narrative Time in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* - A Narratological Study

Preetha R¹, Dr. J. Balasubramaniam²

^{1,2}Department of English, Government Arts College, Ooty, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Narrative time plays a significant role in shaping the structure and meaning of Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*. The novel departs from a linear chronological pattern and frequently shifts between present experiences and memories of the past. These temporal movements contribute to the representation of personal identity, family history, and cultural memory. This paper examines the use of narrative time in the novel through Gérard Genette's narratological framework, particularly his concepts of order, duration, and frequency. The study focuses on the function of analepsis and memory based narration in the construction of meaning. Through close textual analysis, the paper argues that narrative time serves as a structural device through which the protagonist reconstructs her identity and negotiates the relationship between past and present. The analysis demonstrates that temporal discontinuity is central to the narrative design of the novel and contributes significantly to its exploration of diasporic experience and self-understanding.

Keywords

Bharati Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters*, Narrative Time, Memory, Analepsis, Narratology

1. Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction is widely recognized for its exploration of migration, identity, cultural displacement, and transformation. Among her novels, *Desirable Daughters* occupies a significant place because of its detailed portrayal of an Indian immigrant negotiating multiple cultural identities. The narrative follows Tara Chatterjee Bhattacharjee as she reflects upon her family history, childhood experiences, and present life in the United States. One of the most distinctive features of the novel is its temporal structure. Rather than presenting events in chronological order, the narrative moves repeatedly between past and present, creating a complex relationship between memory and experience.

Narrative time has emerged as an important area of study in narratology. Gérard Genette's theory of narrative discourse provides a systematic framework for understanding how narratives manipulate time through order, duration, and frequency. According to Genette, narratives rarely follow the exact chronological sequence of events. Instead, they often employ temporal shifts that influence the reader's understanding of characters and events. In *Desirable Daughters*, such temporal shifts are closely connected with Tara's attempts to understand herself and her cultural inheritance. The present study examines the role of narrative time in *Desirable Daughters*. It focuses particularly on the use of memory, analepsis, and

temporal discontinuity. The paper argues that narrative time is not merely a structural feature but a significant narrative strategy through which Mukherjee explores identity and self-reconstruction.

2. Genette's Theory of Narrative Time

Genette's narratology identifies narrative time as one of the fundamental components of narrative discourse. He proposes that the relationship between story and narrative can be analysed through three categories: order, duration, and frequency. Order refers to the relationship between the chronological sequence of events in the story and their arrangement in the narrative. Duration concerns the relationship between story time and narrative time, while frequency examines the relationship between the number of times an event occurs and the number of times it is narrated.

Among these categories, order is particularly relevant to *Desirable Daughters*. Genette identifies analepsis as a retrospective movement through which the narrative returns to earlier events. Such temporal shifts allow the narrative to connect present experiences with past memories. Through analepsis, characters often reinterpret their experiences and reconstruct their understanding of themselves.

In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara's narration is characterized by frequent returns to childhood memories, family histories, and cultural traditions. These movements interrupt the chronological flow of the narrative and create a layered temporal structure. The past is not presented as a completed reality but as an active presence that continues to influence the present. Consequently, narrative time becomes closely associated with memory and identity formation. The novel also demonstrates how duration influences narrative emphasis. Certain events receive detailed attention while others are summarized briefly. The unequal distribution of narrative attention reflects the protagonist's emotional investment in particular experiences. Through these temporal strategies, Mukherjee transforms narrative time into a means of psychological exploration.

3. Memory and Analepsis in *Desirable Daughters*

Memory serves as the principal mechanism through which narrative time operates in *Desirable Daughters*. Much of the narrative develops through Tara's recollections of her childhood in Calcutta, her family background, and her experiences before migration. These memories appear not as isolated flashbacks but as integral components of the narrative structure.

The story frequently shifts from Tara's contemporary life in America to episodes from her past. These transitions illustrate Genette's concept of analepsis. The retrospective passages provide information about family traditions, social expectations, and cultural practices that shape Tara's understanding of herself. As the narrative progresses, memories become increasingly important in explaining her present circumstances.

The reconstruction of family history occupies a central place in these temporal movements. Tara repeatedly returns to stories associated with her ancestors and family lineage. These memories function as more than historical information. They provide a framework through which she interprets her own experiences. The narrative therefore demonstrates how personal identity is connected to remembered histories.

Analepsis also contributes to the representation of diasporic consciousness. Living in the United States, Tara frequently compares her present environment with memories of India. The movement between these two cultural spaces creates a dialogue between past and present. Through this dialogue, the novel explores questions of belonging, displacement, and cultural continuity. Importantly, memory in the novel is selective and interpretative. Tara does not simply reproduce past events. She revisits them from the perspective of her present experience. Consequently, memories acquire new meanings as her understanding evolves. This process illustrates that identity is not fixed but continually reconstructed through acts of remembrance and reinterpretation.

4. Narrative Time and Identity Reconstruction

The non linear temporal structure of *Desirable Daughters* plays a crucial role in the construction of identity. Through repeated movements between past and present, Bharati Mukherjee demonstrates that identity is not a fixed or stable condition but a process of continual reconstruction. Narrative time functions as the medium through which Tara Chatterjee Bhattacharjee examines her experiences, reassesses her memories, and develops a deeper understanding of herself.

The relationship between memory and identity is central to the novel. Tara's recollections are not presented merely to provide background information. Instead, they serve as interpretative tools that allow her to understand the significance of her present experiences. Each return to the past enables her to reconsider cultural values, family expectations, and personal choices. The narrative therefore suggests that identity develops through an ongoing dialogue between memory and experience.

Tara's life in the United States often prompts reflections on her upbringing in India. These reflections reveal the complex interaction between different cultural influences in the formation of identity. The temporal shifts between India and America create a narrative structure that mirrors Tara's divided yet interconnected sense of self. Her memories preserve connections with her cultural heritage, while her present experiences encourage new forms of self understanding. Through this interaction, identity emerges as a dynamic process shaped by multiple temporal and cultural contexts.

Narrative time also highlights the transformative nature of experience. Events that appeared insignificant or unquestioned in the past acquire new meanings when viewed from the perspective of the present. Tara's recollections demonstrate how personal understanding changes over time. The same experience may be interpreted differently at different stages of life. This continual reinterpretation emphasizes that identity is not determined solely by past events but by the meanings individuals assign to those events through reflection.

Another important aspect of identity reconstruction is the role of family memory. Throughout the novel, Tara repeatedly returns to stories about her ancestors, parents, and sisters. These narratives contribute to her sense of belonging and cultural continuity. At the same time, they provide opportunities for questioning inherited assumptions and social expectations. Narrative time allows these family histories to remain active within the present narrative, illustrating how identity is influenced by both personal memory and collective memory. The temporal structure of the novel further reflects the fragmented nature of diasporic identity. The movement between different times and places prevents the narrative from establishing a single, unified perspective. Instead, identity is presented as a combination of diverse experiences,

memories, and cultural affiliations. The fragmented chronology mirrors the complexity of Tara's selfhood and reinforces the idea that identity is continuously shaped by changing circumstances.

Genette's concept of analepsis is particularly useful in understanding this process. The retrospective passages in the novel do not interrupt the narrative unnecessarily. Rather, they provide essential insights into Tara's evolving consciousness. Through analepsis, the narrative demonstrates that the past remains an active force in the present. Memory becomes a means through which individuals negotiate their relationship with history, culture, and personal experience.

Furthermore, narrative time contributes to the psychological realism of the novel. Human consciousness rarely functions in a strictly chronological manner. Individuals frequently move between present perceptions and memories of the past. By adopting a similar temporal structure, Mukherjee creates a narrative that reflects the actual processes of memory and self reflection. The novel therefore achieves a deeper representation of psychological experience through its manipulation of narrative time. The analysis suggests that narrative time is not merely an organizational framework in *Desirable Daughters*. It functions as a narrative strategy that enables the exploration of identity, memory, and cultural transformation. Through the interaction of past and present, Mukherjee presents identity as an evolving process of interpretation and reconstruction. The novel demonstrates that selfhood is formed not only through lived experience but also through the continual reinterpretation of memory.

Thus, narrative time serves as one of the most important structural elements in *Desirable Daughters*. The frequent use of analepsis, memory based narration, and temporal discontinuity allows the novel to represent the complexities of diasporic identity. Through these temporal strategies, Mukherjee reveals how individuals construct meaning from their experiences and how identity develops through an ongoing engagement with the past.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of *Desirable Daughters* demonstrates that narrative time is a fundamental structural element in Bharati Mukherjee's narrative design. Through the extensive use of memory, analepsis, and temporal shifts, the novel moves beyond a simple chronological narration and develops a complex relationship between past and present. The temporal structure enables the protagonist to revisit personal experiences, family histories, and cultural memories, thereby transforming the narrative into a process of self exploration and identity formation.

The study reveals that memory functions as a central organizing principle in the novel. Tara's recollections are not merely retrospective accounts of earlier events but active interpretative processes through which she understands her present circumstances. The movement between different temporal levels allows the narrative to connect personal experience with cultural history and family tradition. Consequently, the past remains a living presence that continually influences the present.

The application of Genette's concept of analepsis provides valuable insights into the narrative structure of the novel. The frequent retrospective movements do not interrupt the narrative flow but contribute significantly to the development of meaning. Through analepsis, Mukherjee presents identity as a dynamic

and evolving construct shaped by memory, migration, and cultural experience. The temporal shifts reveal that selfhood is continuously reconstructed through reflection and reinterpretation.

The study further demonstrates that narrative time contributes to the representation of diasporic consciousness. Tara's movement between memories of India and experiences in the United States reflects the complex realities of cultural displacement and adaptation. The fragmented chronology mirrors the fragmented yet interconnected nature of diasporic identity. Through this narrative strategy, the novel illustrates how individuals negotiate multiple cultural affiliations while maintaining connections with their past. Narrative time in *Desirable Daughters* functions not merely as a technical aspect of storytelling but as a significant narrative strategy that shapes the thematic concerns of the novel. The interaction between memory and temporality enables Mukherjee to explore identity, migration, and cultural transformation with considerable depth. The study establishes that narrative time serves as an important mechanism through which the novel represents the complexities of human experience and the continuing process of identity reconstruction.

References

1. Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 4th ed., University of Toronto Press, 2017.
2. Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Cornell UP, 1978.
3. Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cornell UP, 1980.
4. Herman, David, Manfred Jahn, and Marie Laure Ryan, editors. *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory*. Routledge, 2005.
5. Mukherjee, Bharati. *Desirable Daughters*. Hyperion, 2002.
6. Prince, Gerald. *A Dictionary of Narratology*. Rev. ed., University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
7. Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.
8. Ryan, Marie Laure. *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*. University of Nebraska Press, 2004.
9. Toolan, Michael. *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2001.
10. Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. 4th ed., Routledge, 2023.