

Unveiling Gender Roles: Dynamics of Fluidity in Bharati Mukherjee's 'Desirable Daughters'

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Abstract

Gender, far from being static, is a dynamic construct shaped by societal and situational contexts. Throughout history, women have faced systemic discrimination and inequity, perpetuated by entrenched gender norms. These norms, often internalized unconsciously, vary across cultures and locations, subjecting women to diverse challenges and opportunities. "Desirable Daughters" by Bharati Mukherjee serves as a compelling narrative that challenges traditional gender roles, demonstrating their malleability in response to changing circumstances. Grounded in the principles of feminism, this research investigates the influence of environment on gender roles. Through textual analysis, we explore how the characters in the novel navigate and resist societal expectations, shedding light on the nuanced interplay between gender, culture, and social norms.

Keywords : Gender Role, Bharati Mukherjee, Desirable Daughters, Narrative, Feminism.

Introduction

Gender roles are often seen as unchanging because they've been around for a long time and have been followed for centuries. But in the 20th century, there were lots of new ideas, including feminism. One big idea from feminism is challenging these set gender roles. This research aims to highlight these gender expectations. It has two main goals: first, to examine these fixed gender roles, and second, to show that they're not fixed at all, but rather flexible and dependent on circumstances. This research is important because it adds to the field of feminism by showing that gender roles are more about society's ideas than anything inherent. It's unique because it looks at gender roles as something shaped by where people live, rather than something natural.

Gender and Society

Gender roles have always been a source of conflict. According to important thinkers like Simon de Beauvoir and Judith Butler gender is something created by society, not something inherent. They argue that it's a made-up idea that's taught to people. On the other hand, "sex" refers to biological differences. These terms have often been used to make one gender seem superior to the other, and feminists now reject both of them. Early feminist movements fought for basic rights, and in the third wave of feminism, there's a push to reverse traditional gender

roles. Traditionally, gender roles were seen as fixed and divided between men and women. This divide has caused a big gap between the genders, with each expected to stick to their roles.

Understanding gender roles as fluid and relative requires reexamining the concept of gender itself. Gender isn't based on concrete facts but is instead a social construct. However, society often struggles to accept this idea due to sexism and a lingering belief in male dominance. Beauvoir, in "Second Sex," argues that women have historically been seen as subordinate, labeled as the "other" and denied equal status to men. Similarly, Butler suggests in her work that gender is continually constructed, with individuals adopting particular traits regardless of biological differences.

To support this perspective, a feminist approach is employed, focusing primarily on the challenges faced by women in traditional societies. When we discuss the oppression of women, we're referring to their marginalization and the denial of basic human rights. Issues such as polygamy, child marriages, male dominance, and limited opportunities illustrate this marginalization. The novel being analyzed provides evidence of this, particularly through the character of Tara Chatterjee, who is subjected to a childhood marriage ritual where she is symbolically wedded to a tree deep in the forest.

Patriarchy and Women's Right

This incident highlights the cruelty and injustice of patriarchy, showcasing gender bias and the denial of women's rights. It also demonstrates the limited choices women have, as their consent is often disregarded in crucial life decisions. This reflects how women are often treated as outsiders, marginalized and deprived of agency. The novelist also emphasizes the societal expectation that a woman's ultimate fate is to become a wife. Furthermore, the practice of arranged marriages is depicted, a common custom in traditional societies where women have little say in their own futures. The novel mentions four arranged marriages, including those of the protagonist's sister and herself. The first chapter illustrates the father's firm belief in adhering to tradition, as he arranges marriages for his daughters in line with societal expectations.

Another instance is when Tara, the protagonist, finds herself married to a stranger without her prior knowledge or consent. Her dissatisfaction with the marriage is evident, yet she feels compelled to conform to traditional roles as a daughter and wife. These occurrences shed light on the challenges faced by women, their lack of autonomy, and the pressure to conform to societal norms despite their own desires and preferences.

In her seminal work, "The Second Sex" Beauvoir argues that women have historically been treated unfairly and seen as inferior in society. One glaring example of this injustice is the burden of dowry placed on the father of the bride. This often results in the father being relegated to a lower status, as exemplified by the disrespectful attitude of the father of a deceased groom, who delivers an insulting message to the bride's family. Consequently, women find themselves trapped in the grip of a male-dominated society, where their fathers and brothers must sacrifice

their pride. This oppression extends beyond just the women themselves; their entire families are stigmatized in society.

The family of the groom, on the other hand, is accorded high status simply because they are associated with the male counterpart. This underscores the dominance of men, as evidenced by the demand for hefty dowries. For instance, the father of the groom demands immediate payment of dowry, disregarding the plight of the bride and even referring to her as "wretched" and the supposed cause of their son's death.

Male domination isn't solely rooted in economic disparity; it's deeply ingrained in societal norms and power dynamics. Even in cases of misfortune, women are unfairly blamed. For instance, in the novel, brides like Tara and the Tree-bride are scapegoat when their grooms are bitten by snakes. The father of the bride is left pleading for mercy, emphasizing their innocence and begging forgiveness for any inadvertent pain caused. This example vividly illustrates the extent of mental and emotional oppression faced by women and their families simply due to their association with the bride.

Identity for Women

Beauvoir's ideas highlight the lack of individual identity for women within both family and society. They often experience identity crises, finding their identity solely in relation to men, and their autonomy is compromised. In traditional societies, women are primarily defined by their roles as daughters and wives, expected to obey their fathers and later their husbands. They're viewed as outsiders when not attached to a male counterpart. This is exemplified by Jai Kreshan's concern for his daughter's fate being tied to marriage, symbolized by his decision to marry her off to a tree.

Similarly, Nayer argues that the traditional role of women centers around marriage and homemaking. Their identity is intertwined with their relationship to men, leaving them vulnerable if they're alone, divorced, or unmarried. Women without male companionship face social ostracization and a lack of security, as depicted in Tara's experience post-divorce, where she finds herself abandoned by her social circle despite her expectations of support.

Butler discusses in her book "Gender Trouble" how gender norms are enforced through restrictive choices, leading to trouble for individuals who deviate from these norms. These limitations, imposed at various levels, reinforce power dynamics, making it difficult to challenge traditional gender roles. Society's unwillingness to accept the fluidity of gender roles creates daily challenges for individuals.

The Concept of Freewill

In the novel, Chapter Two highlights the constraints on choices faced by characters like Tara and Padma. Tara's father refuses a movie offer, isolating them from the political happenings in Calcutta and reinforcing the insular nature of their household. Padma's desire to become a film star is stifled by her father's denial, affecting not only Padma but also Tara, who

sees her sister's dreams crushed by patriarchal control. Geetha delves into the societal roles assigned to both men and women, emphasizing how these roles are ingrained and followed unconsciously. Gender expectations dictate specific behaviors, with any deviation challenging the established patriarchy. For instance, the elder sister Parvati's delay in marriage would be seen as a failure of her father's control, while her love affair leads to rumors of pregnancy, further illustrating the societal pressure to conform to gender norms. These examples underscore the pervasive limitations on women's choices imposed by patriarchal structures, which reinforce traditional gender roles and stifle individual autonomy.

Society dictates individual roles without any biological or inherent basis, leading to stark differences in character when individuals like Tara relocate to America. There, she experiences newfound freedom, breaking free from the confined roles imposed by traditional Indian society. Engaged in volunteer work and living independently with her son Rabi in Cole Valley, Tara embodies a transformed identity, distinct from her previous role in India. This subversion of gender roles is evident in her unconventional living arrangements as a divorced woman living with her partner, a concept deemed unthinkable in Indian society where divorced women are often stigmatized.

Butler (1990) echoes this sentiment, asserting that gender roles are constructed by laws, practices, and institutions, explaining Tara's radical transformation in America. Here, women enjoy independence and autonomy, liberated from the need for male protection. Tara's newfound independence reflects this cultural shift, as she lives alone and embraces her autonomy.

Beauvoir (1949) similarly argues against confining women to domestic roles, suggesting that traditional gender roles are fluid and reversible. Chapter eleven of the novel illustrates this fluidity through Padma and Harish's role reversal in America. Harish's appreciation for Padma's strength and beauty, coupled with his domestic activities, challenges traditional gender norms. Tara attributes this shift to the evolving needs and circumstances of modern America, rather than any inherent biological or sociological basis.

In the post-feminist era, women are expected to make autonomous choices and reject limited societal roles. Their status is determined by performance rather than predetermined roles. This is exemplified by the evolution of characters like Tara Lata, Tara's great-grandmother, who, despite being married off in childhood, later becomes a symbol of independence and resistance. Tara Lata's journey from a young bride to a compassionate figure who opens her home to the needy illustrates the transformative power of individual agency in reshaping gender roles.

Parvati's story mirrors Tara's in its defiance of traditional norms. From the outset, Parvati's unconventional approach to life is evident. She boldly informs her father of her love for a boy, a move that challenges societal expectations for a traditional girl. Rejecting the suitors chosen by her father further underscores her independence and refusal to conform to societal norms.

Butler's (1990) assertion that gender identity is shaped by historical treatment of women is exemplified in Parvati's story. Social conditions and family environment play pivotal roles in shaping individual personalities. When characters like Parvati relocate to America, they undergo profound transformations, adapting their personalities to fit their new surroundings. Tara herself notices a change in her husband's behavior, observing that he becomes more traditional when in India compared to their life in Bombay. This dynamic illustrates that both male and female characters evolve in response to changing social circumstances. It underscores the notion that individuals are products of their environment, and gender distinctions are constructed phenomena that can be reshaped by shifts in societal norms and conditions.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, it's evident that gender inequality is largely a myth. Both men and women possess unlimited potential, but their ability to realize this potential depends on their social environment. The novel demonstrates that when characters change their social settings, they also change their roles, challenging the idea of women as "other." Gender inequality isn't inherent; rather, it stems from limited choices for women rather than any inherent differences in abilities. The novel illustrates that societal conditions and environments play a significant role in shaping gender roles, emphasizing the fluid and relative nature of gender. This research sheds light on the fact that the roles assigned to men and women are products of societal norms rather than biological determinism. It highlights the need to examine gender issues from different perspectives. This opens up new avenues for further research into understanding the complexities of gender dynamics in society.

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