This paper analyses various difficulties that occur in arranged marriages, the different perceptions of marriage, the plight of divorced women and finally aims to signify the relevance of marriage in the current scenario where marriages are opposed. Bharati Mukherjee depicts marriage as the medium of exploitation rather than a desirable heavenly bliss. In Desirable Daughters Tara, the protagonist ventures to widen her horizons in matters of marriage, love and sex, redefines her roles as wife and mother. Desirable Daughters is the story of a traditional Brahmin family on the brink of its dissolution. This story follows the lives of the Bhattacharjee sisters—Padma, Parvati and Tara—as they struggle to come to terms with their culture and identities in a rapidly changing world. The book opens with our narrator, Tara, the recently divorced youngest Bhattacharjee sister, leading a comfortable upper-middle-class existence with her teenage son and her new lover. But when a violent stranger explodes into her life, it is to her sisters and her ex-husband Tara turns for comfort and renewal, unravelling the mysteries that threaten to destroy her family in the process. Tara after undergoing severe and hard experiences understands the real meaning of ‘family’.

In Indian patriarchy, marriages are imposed on girls. Girls are not allowed to love a man or marry a man of their choice especially of other caste. This issue is raised in case of Padma the eldest daughter who establishes liaison with Ronald Dey, but could not marry him because

“... any violation of the codes, any breath of scandal, was unthinkable.” (1). Tara reports about her early life in Calcutta, “our bodies changed, but our behavior never did. Rebellion sounded like a lot of fun.... My life was one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage”.

Tara’s unsuccessful marriage is the outcome of imposed marriage. She married a man she had never met. She married Bish because her father told her to get married. She says, “I married a man I had never met, whose picture and biography and bloodlines I approved of, because my father told me it was time to get married and this was the best husband on the market”. However, it is not at all a proper justification to “surrender ... to the whims of fate and the manipulation of the marital market place ... what do they know of the needs of modern woman?” – so she argues. Here the novelist advocates
for freedom to choose one's life partner and cautions the readers against the disasters caused by imposed marriages. In Bharati Mukherjee’s other novel *Wife* the protagonist Dimple is asked to marry a man of her parents’ choice. Finally, the dreams and illusions of married life shatter her mental stability. She becomes a neurotic, aborts her baby and kills her husband.

Many commentators have claimed that marriage is a cause of women’s oppression, and an institution that inhibits psychological growth. It has been portrayed as the foundation of a patriarchal society. A further criticism is that marriage is based on sexual inequality, and is therefore a kind of bondage for both husband and wife. Another point of view is that marriage turns a woman into a wife and expects the wife’s place to be in the home. The renowned feminist author Germaine Greer ridicules marriage in her best seller *The Female Eunuch* (1970). She asserts: “if independence is a necessary concomitant of freedom, women must refuse to marry” (2). She provides detailed reasons why “women ought not to enter into socially sanctioned relationships, like marriage, and that once unhappily in they ought not to scruple to run away”. She mocks at the idea that a woman might find love and security in marriage, and advises married women, if not entirely satisfied with their lot, to consider abandoning the marriage. *The Female Eunuch* undoubtedly has a major impact on the lives of many women. Its powerful rhetoric persuades women to see marriage in a different light—to see themselves as the victims trapped in oppressive marriages. Undoubtedly many women are encouraged to view their marriages with skepticism, and accept divorce as a sensible means of escape from the oppressive situation in which they found themselves.

Tara faces the enigma of modern women after her settlement in America. She undergoes transformation from a desirable daughter to an advanced American lady. Like the New Woman she is caught in the struggle between tradition and modernity. As a protean heroine she braves the New World to seek her individual identity. She makes adventure in dress, food and fashion. She gives divorce to her husband because the promise of life as an American wife has not been fulfilled while she knows well that divorce is a stigma for a woman in Indian society. She wants to drive herself to work, and be economically independent. She also enjoys sexual freedom with Andy.

Divorce numbers have risen in a climate of growing hostility to marriage and the traditional family. A fundamental argument against marriage is that it is an outdated institution which needs to be replaced by more suitable and sensible arrangements. Behind the decline in numbers is a serious and ongoing ideological challenge to the relevance and meaning of marriage. A growing body of literature, both academic and popular, has challenged the relevance of marriage in the modern world. The thinking behind the ideological challenge is important for it has influenced the way society views both marriage and divorce. As long as society holds a high view of marriage, mass divorces cannot take root. However, when marriage becomes devalued in the eyes of society, the gateway to numerous divorces is opened wide. If marriage is a flawed, irrelevant institution then divorce becomes a sensible option for those who are in unhappy marriages.

Bharati Mukherjee never fails to bring out the plight of divorced single women in this novel. Men find divorced women extra attractive, especially married men. “A divorced Indian woman, released inside a room of married Indian men was kitten in a dog pound.” (3). Tara the divorced lady remembers their voices. “You divorced ladies have not yet lost your charm. You have only grown more desirable. Divorced ladies must be oversexed.” (3). After she has left Bish, all of his oldest friends find out her new address and come to her house one by one, (Pramode Sengupta, Mahesh Trivedi and Ranjit Shah) saying that she cannot stop him from talking to Christopher Dey, the illegitimate child of her sister Padma. Children born outside marriage like Chris and children of divorced parents suffer without family. This happens because of the profound changes incurred in the structure of the family.

It is now commonly believed that cohabitation allows a greater sense of freedom, offering sexual and emotional closeness without the restrictions imposed by marriage. Live in relationship is a union of convenience for those who want something more than is offered by marriage. Despite all the gloss, it creates a great sense of insecurity. So a loving couple joins in marriage for their mutual happiness and benefit. While both partners are happy with the relationship, the marriage is valid; when one or both partners become tired of the relationship, or when the relationship does not satisfy their inner needs, then the marriage has lost its meaning and should come to an end. Indeed, it is wrong for a couple no longer in love to stay married; the idea that parents should stay together for the sake of their children
is a nonsense based on the old-fashioned ideas of duty and responsibility. Divorce has thus become not the antithesis of marriage but an essential aspect of the marriage system. It is the only way an individual can remain happily married – by changing partners – as his or her needs change in the course of a lifetime.

Being an immigrant, Bharati Mukherjee suggests live in relationship as a remedy. But later in the last part of the novel, she makes everyone realize that it will not bring any desirable change in the society. Tara wants to be different from her sisters. She has become completely American in her way of thinking and divorced her husband. She lives a love life with Andy without marrying him. She feels that love is indistinguishable from status and honours. “Love” she observes, “is having fun with that person than with anyone else, over a longer haul.”(3). But when she gets involved in Chris problem and goes to the Police, Andy does not encourage this and leaves her saying good bye. She pleads to him that she needs him but he makes an exit paying little attention to her. In the moment of crisis, the live-in-lover like Andy will not be with the woman to share her sufferings. One cannot expect the commitment of the husband from the person whom they have live in relationship. As remarriage has fallen out of favour and increasing numbers of children are living only with their mother, the concept of the single-parent family has come into being. So divorce does not break a family but creates a single-parent family. The next step in the evolution of the family was for the single mother to live with a boyfriend, commonly referred to as her ‘partner’, to form a cohabiting family. Experience has proved these relationships to be short-lived and some divorced women and their children are involved in a sequence of such relationships. Sheila Ruth examines this crucial predicament in her article, “The Effects of Sexism in Women’s Private Lives” in the edition Issues in Feminism (2001) under the caption ‘Living with Oneself’. She states:

Women have two alternatives married or . . . What? Unmarried? Unhusbanded? Single? In our society each of these terms has the ring of “wrongness.” . . . the wrongness assigned to the state, . . . The crucial question (although our culture would disagree) is not whether we are married or unmarried or after-married, but whether we are whole or not whole, whether we are living fully and well or not. If we can be successful at living with ourselves, then the matter of whether or not we live by ourselves becomes secondary (though not unimportant). . . . When a person comes to see that there is good in the individual experiencing of life, that there is joy in doing what is personally meaningful, then that person is prepared to live with herself alone or in company. . . . A woman, as well as a man, must foster and maintain her own personal integrity and viability whatever her circumstances or relationships and however much she may love another or commit herself (4).

Tara desires to know about the boy who claims himself as her nephew. The arrival of the mysterious son and her search for details lead her to the process of self-awareness within her. In spite of her compulsion to move towards complete freedom from traditional roles, Tara cannot be separated from her roots. She nurtures Indian family norms and feels isolated and incomplete after being divorced. Presence of Bish gives her inner solace which she lacks in Andy’s company. She feels emptiness after separation from Bish because in her mind Bish continues to be her husband and soul-mate. At the end she reunites with her ex-husband Bish, who gets severely injured while saving her from a fire accident. She can also not avoid her motherly duties towards Rabi, her son.

Recognising the vital importance of marriage for social responsibility and stability, and the corresponding dangers of non-marriage, the final step in the redefinition of the family is to acknowledge the idea that parenting is necessarily associated with marriage. Clearly people become parents without being married, and clearly children do not need to be brought up by their biological parents. Indeed, many children are brought up in the childcare centers or by foster parents. In an interview Bharati Mukherjee answers to the interviewer’s question, ‘How do you use personal experience as a writer? How do the experiences of your characters in Desirable Daughters (3) draw on your own life, if at all? And her answer is this:

I don’t think of myself as an autobiographical writer. I have never kept a journal; I don’t even carry a notebook with me, as many writers do. However, without my actively trying to remember, some images that affected me in the past or lines I overheard long ago float into my consciousness as I am writing. There are some parallels between Tara and me. Like Tara, I am one of three sisters. Like Tara, I had a sheltered girlhood in Calcutta. Like the three Bhattacharjee sisters, my sisters and I came to the U.S. and chose very different lifestyles. I started this novel with the idea that I wanted to write about three women who find themselves far from their hometown, and who, then, have to rethink what “home” means, and re-invent—each in her
own way—a space where she feels she most belongs. The adventures of the Bhattacharjee sisters are totally imagined (5).

Mukherjee’s reply points out that the writer in her was obviously ruminating about the institution called ‘marriage’ with its complementary ‘family’ system. The readers can find that this reflection recurs in her other novels also.

The sociological attempt to redefine the family is essential to the success of those who promote divorce as the remedy for unhappy marriages. For many people the thought that divorce breaks the family causes them to have second thoughts. This is because the family is fundamental to the human condition and all people, parents and especially children, have an innate need to be part of a family. In order to justify divorce as the remedy for unhappy marriages it is necessary to convince people that by divorcing they do not break their family, but rather create a new reconstituted family. This has been achieved by redefining the family and removing its link to marriage. So the family of father, mother and children based on marriage is portrayed as the only one of a number of equally valid options. Divorce simply creates a different type of family and usually one that is less stifling than the traditional family. Bharati Mukherjee imbibes the best of Indian and western cultures through her struggle as a practitioner of feminist credo in which the social and legal aspects of marriage are not central to one’s existence in personal and social acceptance, but finds family to be an indispensable social institution.

References