



Diasporic Identity and Family Relationships in the Works of Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract

This paper examines the interrelationship between diasporic identity and family relationships in five novels by Bharati Mukherjee: *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife, Jasmine*, *Desirable Daughters*, and *The Tree Bride*. Drawing on diaspora theory and postcolonial conceptions of hybridity, the study argues that these two themes are not separable concerns in Mukherjee's fiction but mutually constitutive dimensions of a single exploration of the immigrant condition. The constraints upon the immigrant self are enacted primarily through the roles and expectations of familial life, so that the transformation of identity requires the transformation, and sometimes the rupture, of familial bonds. Through close textual analysis, the paper traces a clear trajectory across Mukherjee's career: from an early representation of diasporic identity as a predicament of estrangement and potential destruction, through the affirmative celebration of self-creation in *Jasmine*, to a mature synthesis in the later novels that reconciles transformation with the claims of ancestral continuity. The analysis gives particular attention to the gendered dimensions of this trajectory, arguing that Mukherjee's female protagonists bear a distinctive double burden, expected to preserve tradition while adapting to modernity, and that their varied fates map the full range of outcomes the diasporic condition makes possible. The paper concludes that Mukherjee's contribution lies in her reconception of the immigrant as an agent of transformation rather than a victim of exile, and in her sustained attention to women's agency in reconstructing both self and family.

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee; diaspora; diasporic identity; family relationships; hybridity; cultural negotiation; gender; Indian diasporic literature; immigrant experience; identity transformation

1. Introduction

Migration has become one of the defining conditions of contemporary existence, and the immigrant has emerged as a central figure through whom the anxieties and aspirations of a globalising world are articulated. To migrate is not merely to relocate physically from one nation to another; it is to undergo a profound psychological and cultural transformation that unsettles inherited notions of belonging, identity, and home. The diasporic subject inhabits a liminal space, poised between the world left behind and the world newly entered, and it is within this precarious in-betweenness that the drama of diasporic existence unfolds (Brah, 2018; Cohen, 2022).

Bharati Mukherjee stands among the most significant literary chroniclers of this immigrant condition. Writing from her own position as a woman who journeyed from Calcutta to North



America, she transformed the raw material of displacement into fiction of considerable psychological depth (Gabriel, 2017). Her novels do not merely record the external circumstances of migration; they penetrate the interior lives of characters wrestling with the loss of familiar moorings and the possibility of self-reinvention. In Mukherjee's imaginative universe, immigration is never a simple matter of adaptation to a new environment. It is instead a violent and generative process through which the self is dismantled and reconstituted.

Scholarship on Mukherjee has attended extensively to the theme of diasporic identity. Critics have examined the diasporic consciousness that pervades her novels (Jain & Kumar, 2018), the diasporic sensibility that informs her narrative vision (Singh, 2015), and the quest for identity that structures her most celebrated work (Patel, 2021; Rathod, 2023). Others have explored her engagement with the idea of home (Crespo Gómez, 2022), her resistance to cultural fragmentation (González-Oliva, 2015), and the social issues her fiction raises (Aarti, 2015). More recent work has extended this attention to her later novels, examining identity and psycho-social assertiveness in *Desirable Daughters* (K. P., 2021; Yasmin & Peerani, 2024).

Yet despite this substantial critical attention to identity, the relationship between diasporic identity and family relationships in Mukherjee's fiction has received comparatively less sustained analysis. Family is frequently treated as context or backdrop for the drama of identity rather than as a constitutive dimension of it. This paper argues that such separation is untenable. In Mukherjee's fiction, the family is the crucible in which identity is formed, contested, and remade. The constraints upon the immigrant self are enacted primarily through the roles of daughter, wife, and mother; the transformation of identity therefore requires the transformation of familial bonds. Conversely, the reconfiguration of the family is driven by the transformations its individual members undergo.

The present study accordingly examines both themes together and in their reciprocal relation, across five novels spanning the arc of Mukherjee's career. It argues that these works constitute a coherent and evolving exploration of the diasporic condition, and that the trajectory they trace, from rupture and destruction toward transformation and finally toward reconnection, is best understood by attending to the intimate interdependence of self and family.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

First, to examine the construction and transformation of diasporic identity in five selected novels of Bharati Mukherjee, analysing the processes of identity crisis, negotiation, and reinvention that her characters undergo.

Second, to analyse the depiction of family relationships in these novels, examining the impact of migration and displacement on marriage, parent-child relations, and the transmission of cultural tradition across generations.

Third, to investigate the interrelationship between diasporic identity and family dynamics, demonstrating that these two themes are mutually constitutive rather than separable.

Fourth, to explore the role of gender in shaping both identity formation and family relationships in the diaspora, with particular attention to women's agency in reconstructing self and family.

Fifth, to trace the evolution of Mukherjee's treatment of these themes across the arc of her career and to assess the significance of her contribution to Indian diasporic literature.

3. Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

How is diasporic identity constructed, transformed, and represented across the selected novels of Bharati Mukherjee?

How are family relationships depicted and reconfigured in the context of migration and displacement in these works?

In what ways are diasporic identity and family relationships mutually constitutive in Mukherjee's fiction, and how does each shape the other?

How does gender inflect the experiences of identity formation and family relationships in the diaspora, and what forms of agency do Mukherjee's female protagonists exercise?

How does Mukherjee's treatment of these themes evolve across the selected works, and what does this trajectory reveal about her vision of the immigrant condition?

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in close textual analysis. The method is primarily hermeneutic rather than empirical: it proceeds through detailed reading of the selected primary texts, attending to narrative structure, characterisation, imagery, and thematic patterning, and interpreting these features in light of relevant theoretical frameworks. The analysis is both thematic, examining recurrent concerns across the corpus, and comparative, tracing patterns of continuity and development across the arc of Mukherjee's career.

The comparative dimension of the method does not proceed by imposing an external schema upon the novels and sorting their contents into predetermined categories. It proceeds instead by attending to what each novel does, identifying the concerns that emerge from the texts themselves, and then tracing these concerns across the body of work to discern the patterns they form. The categories employed, the crisis of identity, the strategies of cultural negotiation, the fate of the family, the trajectory of female transformation, are categories that Mukherjee's fiction itself generates.

4.2 Selection of Texts

Five novels have been selected for analysis: *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), and *The Tree Bride* (2004). These works have been chosen on three grounds. First, they span the full arc of Mukherjee's novelistic career, permitting the tracing of development and change in her treatment of the central themes. Second, each engages substantially with both diasporic identity and family relationships, making them appropriate to the study's dual focus. Third, they encompass a significant range



of outcomes and perspectives, from the catastrophic failure of Wife to the affirmative transformation of Jasmine and the mature reconnection of the later novels.

Mukherjee's short fiction, including *The Middleman* and *Other Stories* (1988), and her non-fiction fall outside the delimited scope of this study, though they are referenced where relevant to the interpretation of the novels.

4.3 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is informed by three theoretical strands. The first is diaspora theory, which provides the conceptual vocabulary for understanding dispersion, homeland attachment, and the diasporic condition. Cohen's (2022) typology of diaspora forms and Brah's (2018) conception of diaspora space as a site where questions of belonging and identity are contested inform the study's understanding of the diasporic subject. Vertovec's (2022) account of transnationalism situates the diasporic experience within the broader dynamics of cross-border connection, while Jayaram (2019) provides context specific to the Indian diaspora.

The second strand is postcolonial theory, particularly the concept of hybridity. The study draws on the understanding of the space between cultures as productive rather than merely privative, a site in which new and unpredictable identities emerge that cannot be reduced to either originating culture. Mishra's (2021) critical retrospective on multiculturalism provides a corrective to any uncritical celebration of cultural mixture, cautioning against the assumption that hybridity is straightforwardly emancipatory.

The third strand is gender theory, which informs the study's attention to the specifically gendered dimensions of the diasporic experience and to the double burden borne by diasporic women, expected to preserve cultural tradition while adapting to the demands of the host society.

4.4 Scope and Limitations

The study is subject to several limitations. It is confined to five novels rather than Mukherjee's complete oeuvre, and its conclusions must be understood in light of this delimitation. It adopts a textual and interpretive approach rather than a biographical, historical, or comparative one, and does not undertake systematic comparison with other diasporic writers. And it is subject to the inherent subjectivity of literary interpretation: the readings offered here represent one perspective on complex texts rather than a definitive account.

A further limitation concerns the scope of the theoretical apparatus employed. The study draws selectively on diaspora, postcolonial, and gender theory rather than engaging exhaustively with any single framework, a choice made in the interest of keeping the analysis grounded in the particularity of the texts.

5. Conceptual Framework

5.1 Diaspora and Diasporic Identity

The term diaspora derives from the Greek *diaspeirein*, to scatter or sow across, and originally described the dispersion of Jewish communities beyond their homeland. Contemporary scholarship has substantially expanded the concept to encompass any community living outside its place of origin while maintaining connections to it. Cohen (2022) distinguishes



between several types of diaspora, including victim, labour, trade, and imperial diasporas, thereby capturing the varied circumstances that produce dispersion and resisting any single explanatory model.

Diaspora, so understood, is fundamentally relational and processual. A diaspora is not simply a population residing outside its homeland but a community sustained by a particular consciousness, a shared awareness of displacement and connection. This diasporic consciousness involves a double orientation, a simultaneous attachment to the place of origin and engagement with the place of settlement. Brah (2018) conceptualises this through the notion of diaspora space, a site in which questions of belonging, exclusion, and identity are continuously contested, and which is inhabited not only by those who have migrated but by those constructed as indigenous.

Vertovec (2022) situates the diasporic condition within the broader framework of transnationalism, emphasising the sustained cross-border connections that characterise contemporary migration. The Indian diaspora, in particular, has been shaped by successive waves of migration with markedly different characters (Jayaram, 2019). The nineteenth-century movement of indentured labourers to colonial plantations produced communities whose relationship to India was mediated by memory and ritual across generations. The later movement of educated professionals to the metropolitan centres of the West produced a diaspora of a different character, one marked by relative privilege but also by distinctive forms of cultural alienation. It is to this later wave that Mukherjee's characters predominantly belong.

Diasporic identity, within this framework, cannot be understood as a fixed essence. It is fluid, constructed, and continuously subject to transformation through the negotiation between cultural worlds. Its defining characteristics include instability and openness to change, ambivalence in the holding of contradictory attachments, and a heightened awareness of seeing oneself through multiple cultural frameworks.

5.2 Identity, Hybridity, and Cultural Negotiation

The concept of hybridity offers the most productive framework for understanding the constructive dimension of diasporic identity. Where assimilation implies the absorption of the immigrant into the dominant culture and acculturation implies selective adaptation that preserves elements of heritage, hybridity implies the creation of something genuinely new through the mixing of traditions. The hybrid subject is not merely caught between two cultures but actively combines and transforms elements of both to forge a distinctive identity. This conception has been influential in postcolonial criticism, where the space between cultures is understood as productive rather than empty, a site in which new and unpredictable identities emerge. Yet hybridity should not be uncritically celebrated. Mishra (2021), in his critical retrospective on multiculturalism, cautions against assuming that cultural mixture is straightforwardly emancipatory, noting the ways in which the rhetoric of hybridity can obscure persistent structures of inequality and exclusion. This caution is salutary for the reading of Mukherjee, whose celebration of transformation has itself attracted criticism for underestimating the structural barriers immigrants encounter (González-Oliva, 2015).



Cultural negotiation, the ongoing process through which immigrants work out their relationship to competing cultural frameworks, is the mechanism through which hybridity is achieved or fails to be achieved. This negotiation involves questions large and small, from fundamental matters of values to the details of dress, food, language, and social behaviour. Its success or failure has profound consequences: where negotiation succeeds, the result may be a productive synthesis; where it fails, the result may be paralysis, breakdown, or destruction. Mukherjee's fiction depicts both outcomes.

5.3 Family Relationships in Diasporic Literature

The family occupies a position of special importance in diasporic literature, functioning simultaneously as refuge and battleground. For immigrants navigating life in a foreign society, the family provides continuity, support, and cultural belonging, a domestic space in which the values of the homeland can be maintained. Yet the family is also the arena in which the strains of the diasporic condition are most intensely felt.

Migration produces significant structural change in family life. The extended family networks characteristic of traditional Indian society are disrupted, and the family is often reduced to its nuclear core. This transition has consequences: deprived of the extended network's support, the nuclear family bears an intensified emotional burden, becoming the primary locus of belonging and cultural transmission. The concentration of these functions within a small unit places new strains on its members.

Migration also transforms traditional hierarchies. Authority organised according to age and gender is disrupted as women gain access to education and employment and as the young, more adept at navigating the host society, acquire influence that challenges the authority of their elders. The renegotiation of gender roles within the family is a central dimension of this structural transformation, and one that Mukherjee's fiction explores with particular attention.

Critically, the family is where the immigrant's identity is formed and contested. The roles it assigns, daughter, wife, mother, son, husband, father, constitute the primary vocabulary through which selfhood is defined and constrained. This is why identity and family cannot be analysed separately: to transform the self is necessarily to renegotiate one's position within the family, and to renegotiate the family is to remake the selves it contains.

6. Bharati Mukherjee: Life, Literary Career, and Diasporic Vision

Bharati Mukherjee was born in Calcutta in 1940 into an educated Bengali Brahmin family. She travelled to the United States for graduate study, attending the University of Iowa, and subsequently lived in Canada and the United States. Her marriage to a writer of Canadian and American background represented itself a crossing of cultural boundaries, and her experiences in Canada, where she encountered forms of discrimination, and her later embrace of American identity profoundly shaped her understanding of the diasporic condition (Gabriel, 2017).

Her literary career spanned several decades and encompassed novels, short story collections, and non-fiction. Her novels include *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, *Desirable Daughters*, and *The Tree Bride*; her short fiction includes *The Middleman and Other Stories* (Mukherjee, 1988), which was widely acclaimed.



Mukherjee's diasporic vision was distinctive and, at times, contentious. She resisted the designation of expatriate, associating it with a posture of exile and nostalgic longing for the homeland, and sought instead to define herself as an American writer who embraced the transformative possibilities of immigration. She drew a sharp distinction between the expatriate, who remains oriented toward the homeland, and the immigrant, who commits to the new land and embraces the process of becoming part of it, identifying herself firmly with the latter.

This stance shaped the character of her fiction and set her apart from writers for whom the diasporic condition was primarily one of loss. Critics have noted her resistance to cultural fragmentation and her insistence on the possibility of belonging in the adopted nation (González-Oliva, 2015). Yet her position has also attracted criticism, particularly for what some readers perceive as an assimilationist demand that immigrants purchase acceptance at the cost of heritage. Her engagement with the very idea of home, as Crespo Gómez (2022) has explored in relation to her short fiction, is more troubled and ambivalent than her polemical statements sometimes suggest.

7. Representation of Diasporic Identity in Mukherjee's Works

7.1 Cultural Displacement and Alienation

Cultural displacement and alienation constitute the foundational experiences from which Mukherjee's exploration of diasporic identity proceeds. The immigrant who leaves the homeland experiences a fundamental disruption of the sense of belonging that comes from being embedded in a familiar cultural world. Deprived of the dense network of relationships, traditions, and shared meanings that once supported selfhood, the immigrant confronts a vertiginous uncertainty about who they are.

The alienation that results manifests in two directions. The immigrant is estranged from the host society, which may regard them with indifference or hostility and which assigns them a place within its own categories of meaning. But the immigrant is also estranged from the homeland, which they have left and to which they can no longer fully return. The diasporic subject is thus caught between worlds, belonging fully to neither. This double estrangement is a defining feature of the diasporic consciousness that critics have identified as pervading Mukherjee's fiction (Jain & Kumar, 2018; Singh, 2015).

The *Tiger's Daughter* offers the clearest early expression of this condition. Tara Banerjee, returning to Calcutta after years in America, discovers that she has become a stranger in her own country. The India she encounters is not the idealised homeland of her memory but a disorienting reality, and her inability to relate to the family and friends of her youth measures the distance she has travelled from her origins. The novel inverts the conventional narrative of the diasporic experience, focusing not on arrival in the host society but on the return to the homeland, and using this return to reveal a transformation that has already occurred. The homeland becomes a mirror in which the alteration of the immigrant's identity is reflected.

Crucially, Mukherjee's treatment of displacement is not confined to its painful dimensions. The condition of being removed from the familiar world, while disorienting, also frees the

individual from its constraints, creating space for new forms of self-understanding. This dual character of displacement, as both loss and liberation, is fundamental to her vision.

7.2 Identity Transformation and Self-Discovery

Identity transformation and self-discovery constitute the central action of Mukherjee's fiction. Her characters do not carry intact selves across borders; their identities are dismantled and reconstituted through the experience of migration. This conception of identity as fluid and constructed rather than fixed and essential underlies her entire exploration of the immigrant condition, and it is what makes diasporic transformation possible at all.

Jasmine offers the fullest realisation of this vision. The protagonist undergoes a succession of transformations as she moves across continents and through a series of identities, from Jyoti in a Punjabi village to Jasmine, then Jane, and other selves besides. The succession of names functions as a powerful symbol of the mutability of diasporic identity: each name marks a distinct phase of transformation, a distinct self assumed and then transcended. Scholarship has read the novel precisely as a narrative of the search for a new identity (Rathod, 2023) and as an expression of the diasporic quest for selfhood (Patel, 2021).

The novel's geographical structure reinforces this thematic concern. The protagonist's restless movement across space, from Punjab to Florida to New York to Iowa and beyond, parallels and enacts the mobility of her identity. Physical journeying and the journey of the self are inseparable, each successive location associated with a successive self.

Transformation in Mukherjee's fiction is never depicted as easy or painless. It is a violent process, involving the destruction of the old self as the precondition for the emergence of the new. The protagonist of Jasmine endures profound trauma, including violence and loss, and her transformations are purchased at considerable cost. Mukherjee refuses to sentimentalise this process, and it is precisely this refusal that lends her celebration of transformation its weight.

7.3 Assimilation, Acculturation, and Hybridity

Mukherjee's characters pursue varied strategies of cultural negotiation, and the outcomes of these strategies correspond closely to the strategies adopted. Assimilation, the attempt to be absorbed into the dominant culture through the abandonment of heritage, appears in various forms across her fiction but rarely as a successful path. Tara Banerjee's marriage to an American and her adoption of Western ways represent an attempt at assimilation, yet the result is estrangement without belonging: she loses her connection to India without securing a settled place in America.

The strategy of rigid preservation, the attempt to maintain the traditional culture intact against the pressures of the host society, fares no better. Dimple's initial attempt to fulfil the traditional wifely role in the alien environment of New York represents a version of this strategy, and its catastrophic failure suggests Mukherjee's scepticism about the viability of cultural rigidity in the diasporic context.

Hybridity emerges in her later work as the most creative and empowering mode of adaptation. The protagonist of Jasmine, drawing on the resources of multiple cultural contexts and refusing to be defined by any single framework, exemplifies the hybrid strategy. So too



does Tara Bhattacharjee in the later novels, negotiating between Indian heritage and American life without wholly abandoning either.

Yet the distinction between assimilation and hybridity in Mukherjee's fiction is not always as clear as her critical pronouncements suggest. Her insistence that the immigrant commit fully to the new land can appear to endorse precisely the assimilationist demand that her celebration of hybridity elsewhere resists. This tension runs through her work and has been a persistent focus of critical debate (González-Oliva, 2015). Mishra's (2021) caution against the uncritical celebration of cultural mixture is pertinent here: the rhetoric of hybridity can obscure the structural conditions that make transformation possible for some and impossible for others.

7.4 Gender and Identity in the Diasporic Context

Gender profoundly inflects the diasporic experience, and Mukherjee's consistent focus on female protagonists enables her to explore this dimension with particular acuity. Women occupy a distinctive and burdened position within diasporic communities. In many traditional societies they are regarded as the primary bearers of cultural tradition, entrusted with transmitting values and identity to the next generation, a role that assumes intensified significance in the diaspora where cultural preservation becomes a pressing concern. This expectation constrains women's freedom and subjects them to intensified scrutiny.

Simultaneously, migration opens possibilities: access to education, employment, and forms of independence unavailable in the homeland. The tension between these two dimensions, the burden of preserving tradition and the opportunity to claim new freedoms, generates a distinctive and often painful double bind for diasporic women.

Mukherjee's female protagonists share a common point of departure in the constraints of traditional Indian femininity, a framework that defines women through their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers and subordinates their desires to familial demand. Their subsequent journeys are shaped by their varying capacities to confront and transcend this framework. The outcomes differ dramatically, and this variation constitutes one of the most revealing features of her fiction, mapping the full range of possibilities that the diasporic condition affords women.

Critically, the resources available to each protagonist largely determine her fate. Dimple possesses almost none: no education fitting her for the host society, no employment connecting her to the world beyond her apartment, no community of support, no language of self-understanding adequate to her predicament. The protagonist of Jasmine possesses formidable resources of resilience and adaptability. This correspondence between resources and outcomes suggests that Mukherjee's celebration of female transformation is not a naive assertion of individual will but a recognition that transformation requires conditions.

8. Family Relationships in Mukherjee's Fiction

8.1 Marriage and Interpersonal Relationships

Marriage constitutes the site where the tensions of the diasporic condition are most acutely concentrated in Mukherjee's fiction, particularly for her female characters. The institution carries different meanings across cultures: in the traditional Indian context, marriage is often

arranged and structured by clearly defined roles that subordinate the wife and define her identity through wifely duty; in the host society, marriage is conceived in terms of romantic love, individual choice, and the equality of partners. The encounter between these conceptions generates the tension that drives much of Mukherjee's fiction.

Wife offers the most harrowing exploration of this tension. Dimple Dasgupta, raised with traditional expectations of marriage and wifely fulfilment, enters an arranged marriage and accompanies her husband to New York. Her marriage becomes a source not of fulfilment but of confinement and frustration, trapping her within a role she cannot fulfil while depriving her of meaningful connection. The disjunction between her romanticised expectations, drawn partly from popular culture, and the disappointing reality of her married life contributes to her growing disillusionment.

The domestic confinement Dimple experiences is central to her disintegration. Isolated in her apartment, cut off from engagement with the world beyond, she lacks the resources that might have enabled her to construct a viable identity. Her confinement to the domestic sphere, rooted in the traditional wifely role, denies her precisely the connections that transformation would require. Scholarship has attended to the trials and tribulations that Mukherjee's immigrants endure in this novel (Sasikanth & Sumalatha, 2015). Her psychological crisis culminates in a shocking act of violence against her husband, the ultimate breakdown of the marital relationship.

The trajectory across Mukherjee's fiction moves from this catastrophe toward the assertion of female autonomy. The protagonist of Jasmine moves through a succession of relationships, ultimately refusing to be constrained by any fixed marital arrangement. Tara Bhattacharjee's divorce in *Desirable Daughters* reflects the achieved autonomy of the mature diasporic woman, capable of determining her own path in the matter of marriage.

8.2 Parent–Child Relationships

The relationship between parents and children is transformed by the diasporic condition, as parents and children respond differently to the challenges of life in the host society. Immigrant parents, formed within the culture of the homeland, seek to transmit its values to their children, both as cultural continuity and as a means of maintaining their own identity. Their children, raised within the host society, often develop a more assimilated outlook.

For immigrant parents, this relationship is fraught with anxiety. The fear of losing their children to the host culture, of seeing them abandon the traditions of their heritage, generates conflict. Yet parents may simultaneously recognise the necessity of their children's adaptation and struggle to reconcile the desire to preserve heritage with the desire for their children's success.

For the children of immigrants, the relationship is likewise marked by tension. They may chafe against what they perceive as restrictive parental expectations, feeling torn between loyalty to their heritage and the desire to belong fully to the host society. This position, caught between the culture of the parents and that of the surrounding world, generates a version of the in-betweenness that characterises the diasporic condition.



In the later novels this theme assumes greater prominence. Tara Bhattacharjee, raising a son within American culture, confronts the challenge of transmitting heritage to a child growing up American. This shift in Mukherjee's concerns reflects the changing realities of the Indian diaspora itself, which by the time of her later work had produced a substantial second generation whose relationship to the ancestral culture posed new questions.

8.3 Generational Conflicts

Generational conflict arises from the different cultural orientations of immigrant parents and their children, and it dramatises the broader tensions of the diasporic condition within the intimate sphere of the family. Marriage constitutes a particularly significant site of such conflict: where parents may hold to the tradition of arranged marriage, children raised in the host society may reject it in favour of individual choice.

Gender roles constitute a second significant site. Immigrant parents may hold traditional expectations regarding the behaviour of their children, particularly their daughters, while daughters exposed to the different norms of the host society resist these expectations and seek greater autonomy. The gendered dimension of generational conflict is thus pronounced, and it features significantly in Mukherjee's fiction.

These conflicts are not merely disagreements about particular decisions. They are conflicts about the meaning of the diasporic condition itself, about whether migration entails preservation or transformation, continuity or rupture. The family becomes the arena in which these fundamental questions are contested.

8.4 Tradition versus Modernity in Family Structures

The tension between tradition and modernity structures family life in Mukherjee's fiction. The family serves as the primary institution through which cultural heritage is preserved and transmitted, the domestic sphere a space in which the culture of the homeland can be maintained against the pressures of the host society. Yet this preservation is neither simple nor uncontested.

The traditions of the homeland may conflict directly with the norms of the host society, forcing families to negotiate between preservation and adaptation. Some families cling rigidly to tradition, resisting the pressures of the surrounding culture. Others adapt and transform their traditions, selectively preserving certain elements while modifying others. Still others are torn, unable to resolve the tension between competing demands.

Mukherjee's later novels complicate the opposition between tradition and modernity by suggesting that they need not stand in simple conflict. *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* depict a protagonist who achieves autonomy without abandoning her connection to heritage, whose engagement with family history represents reclamation rather than rejection. The trajectory of Mukherjee's work thus moves toward a resolution of this tension, suggesting that female empowerment and cultural continuity may be reconciled.

9. Conclusion

This study has examined the interrelationship between diasporic identity and family relationships across five novels of Bharati Mukherjee, arguing that these are not separable themes but mutually constitutive dimensions of a single exploration of the immigrant



condition. The constraints upon the immigrant self are enacted primarily through familial roles, so that the transformation of identity requires the transformation of familial bonds; conversely, the reconfiguration of the family is driven by the transformations its members undergo.

The analysis has traced a clear trajectory across Mukherjee's career, from an early representation of the diasporic condition as a predicament of estrangement and potential destruction, through the affirmative celebration of self-creation in *Jasmine*, to a mature synthesis in the later novels that reconciles transformation with the claims of ancestral continuity. This trajectory is legible in both themes simultaneously, a convergence that itself constitutes evidence for their interdependence.

Mukherjee's contribution to Indian diasporic literature lies in her reconception of the immigrant as an agent of transformation rather than a victim of exile, and in her sustained attention to the gendered dimensions of the diasporic experience. Her fiction, unflinching in its recognition of the costs of migration yet affirmative in its vision of the immigrant's capacity for renewal, offers a distinctive perspective on the diasporic condition. Her exploration of women's agency in reconstructing both self and family constitutes a major contribution to the understanding of gender and migration.

Her work is not beyond criticism. Her treatment of India has been faulted as unsympathetic, her celebration of American possibility as underestimating structural barriers, and her conception of assimilation as demanding that immigrants purchase acceptance at the cost of heritage. These criticisms have force, though they apply more decisively to her earlier and middle work than to her later novels, in which the recuperation of heritage provides a corrective.

The enduring relevance of Mukherjee's fiction lies in the continuing significance of the questions it addresses. In an era of intensifying global migration, in which growing numbers of people live between cultures and negotiate the competing claims of heritage and adaptation, her exploration of identity, belonging, and transformation retains its urgency. Further research might productively extend this analysis to her short fiction, or undertake systematic comparison with other writers of the Indian diaspora, in order to situate her distinctive vision within the broader development of the tradition.

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