



Cultural Displacement, Diasporic Identity, and Family Relationships in the Works of Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract

Migration has become a defining feature of the contemporary world, making diasporic identity a central concern in modern literature. Bharati Mukherjee's fiction offers a compelling exploration of the immigrant experience by examining the complex relationship between identity formation and family relationships. While previous scholarship has largely focused on diaspora and cultural identity, the role of family as an integral element in shaping immigrant identity has received comparatively limited attention. This study investigates the interrelationship between diasporic identity and family relationships in five of Mukherjee's novels—*The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, *Desirable Daughters*, and *The Tree Bride*. Employing a qualitative, interpretive approach based on close textual and thematic analysis, the research is informed by diaspora theory, postcolonial perspectives, cultural hybridity, identity theory, and feminist literary criticism. The findings reveal that Mukherjee presents identity as dynamic and continuously reconstructed through migration, while family evolves from a site of conflict and fragmentation to one of renewal and continuity. The study further demonstrates that identity transformation and familial reconfiguration are deeply interconnected, particularly through the experiences of women negotiating cultural, social, and personal transitions. It concludes that Mukherjee redefines the immigrant not merely as an exile but as an active agent of transformation, highlighting women's resilience in reconstructing both personal identity and family within changing transnational contexts.

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee; diaspora; diasporic identity; family relationships; cultural hybridity; identity formation; feminist literary theory; postcolonial theory; Indian diasporic literature; women's agency

1. Introduction

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). The contemporary intensification of transnational mobility has made this condition increasingly



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

widespread, and correspondingly urgent as a subject of literary and critical attention (Vertovec, 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 a violent and generative process through which the self is dismantled and reconstituted.

This argument has implications beyond the reading of a single author. If identity and family are interdependent in the way this study contends, then analyses of diasporic identity that bracket the family, and analyses of diasporic family life that bracket the question of selfhood, are each incomplete. The interdependence is not incidental but structural, and it is most clearly visible along the axis of gender, since it is women in Mukherjee's fiction who encounter the constraints of the diasporic condition most directly through the roles the family assigns them.

2. Review of Literature

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) and the complexity of the diasporic themes her fiction engages (Dash & Mishra, 2019). This body of work has established diaspora as the central interpretive frame through which Mukherjee is read, and has documented the recurrence across her corpus of concerns with displacement, alienation, and the negotiation of cultural difference.

A substantial strand of this scholarship focuses on individual novels. The Tiger's Daughter has been examined in relation to Mukherjee's politics of diaspora (Bhattacharya & Neelakantan, 2024), an approach that situates the novel's treatment of return and estrangement within a broader political understanding of diasporic positioning. Jasmine has attracted particular attention as a narrative of identity-quest, read both as an expression of diasporic concern and the search for selfhood (Patel, 2021) and as a narrative of the search for a new identity (Rathod, 2023). Wife and Jasmine have been examined together in relation to the uncertainty of psychological and spatial identity that their protagonists experience (Mahatma, 2016), an approach that productively links the interior and the geographical dimensions of the diasporic condition.

Mukherjee's later fiction has recently attracted growing attention. Desirable Daughters in particular has been examined from several angles: in relation to the nuances of diasporic identity and survival experienced by women in an alien land (Parween, 2022), in relation to the theme of identity as such (Yasmin & Peerani, 2024), and in relation to identity, culture, and female bonding (Zainab & Chouhan, 2024). The emergence of this cluster of recent scholarship



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A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

indicates a shift of critical attention toward Mukherjee's later work and toward the specifically female and relational dimensions of the diasporic experience she depicts.

Beyond the novels, Mukherjee's engagement with the idea of home has been explored in relation to her short fiction (Crespo Gómez, 2022), an inquiry that complicates any straightforward reading of her position by suggesting that her relationship to the concept of home is more troubled and ambivalent than her polemical pronouncements sometimes indicate. Obituary assessments of her career have situated her within the broader development of postcolonial and Commonwealth literature (Gabriel, 2017).

The theoretical literature on diaspora provides the conceptual apparatus within which this scholarship operates. Cohen's (2022) typology distinguishes between victim, labour, trade, and imperial diasporas, resisting any single explanatory model of dispersion. Brah's (2018) conception of diaspora space reframes diaspora as a site in which questions of belonging and exclusion are contested, inhabited not only by those who have migrated but by those constructed as indigenous. Vertovec (2022) situates the diasporic condition within the broader dynamics of transnationalism, while Jayaram (2019) provides context specific to the Indian diaspora and its successive waves of migration. Mishra (2021), in a critical retrospective on multiculturalism, offers a necessary corrective to any uncritical celebration of cultural mixture, cautioning that the rhetoric of hybridity can obscure persistent structures of inequality.

3. Concept of Family Relationships in Diasporic Literature

The concept of family relationships assumes particular significance and complexity within the context of diasporic literature. In the literature of migration and displacement, the family emerges as a central concern, a focal point around which the broader themes of the diasporic condition are organized. This centrality reflects the crucial role that the family plays in the immigrant experience, both as a source of continuity and support and as a site of conflict and transformation. Understanding the concept of family relationships as it operates within diasporic literature is essential for appreciating Mukherjee's exploration of this theme and its place within the broader tradition of diasporic writing.

In diasporic literature, the family is often depicted as the primary institution through which cultural continuity is maintained across the rupture of migration. The extended family networks that characterize many traditional societies serve as repositories of cultural memory, transmitting the values, customs, and traditions of the homeland from one generation to the next. In the diasporic context, where the immigrant is cut off from the broader cultural world of the homeland, the family assumes an intensified importance as the primary bearer of cultural heritage. The domestic sphere becomes a space in which the culture of the homeland can be preserved and reproduced, a refuge from the disorienting pressures of the host society.

At the same time, diasporic literature depicts the family as a site of conflict and tension, an arena in which the competing demands of the diasporic condition are fought out. The pressures of migration place strains on family relationships, disrupting established patterns and



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ISSN No: 3049-4176

generating conflict between family members who respond differently to the challenges of the diasporic condition. The tension between the preservation of tradition and adaptation to the host society, between the expectations of different generations, and between traditional and modern conceptions of gender and family roles all generate conflict within the diasporic family. Diasporic literature thus depicts the family as a space of both continuity and conflict, of both preservation and transformation.

The concept of family relationships in diasporic literature is closely bound up with questions of gender. The family is a gendered institution, structured by particular conceptions of the roles and relationships of men and women. In the diasporic context, these gendered structures are subject to transformation, as migration disrupts traditional gender arrangements and opens new possibilities for women. Diasporic literature is attentive to these gendered dimensions of family life, exploring the ways in which migration transforms the roles and relationships of men and women within the family and the tensions and possibilities that this transformation generates. The concept of family relationships in diasporic literature thus encompasses a concern with the gendered dimensions of familial life.

The concept of family relationships in diasporic literature also encompasses a concern with the relationship between generations. The differences between immigrant parents, formed within the culture of the homeland, and their children, raised within the culture of the host society, generate a characteristic tension that features prominently in diasporic writing. The intergenerational conflict that arises from these differences, the clash between the values and expectations of different generations, is a recurrent theme in the literature of the diaspora. The concept of family relationships thus encompasses a concern with the intergenerational dimensions of familial life and the tensions that migration generates between the generations. The concept of family relationships in diasporic literature also encompasses the ways in which the family mediates the immigrant's relationship to both the homeland and the host society. The family serves as a bridge between the immigrant and the culture of the homeland, connecting the immigrant to their heritage and providing a link to the world they have left behind. At the same time, the family may serve as a buffer between the immigrant and the host society, providing a refuge from the disorienting pressures of the new environment. The family thus mediates the immigrant's relationship to both the homeland and the host society, occupying a crucial position between the two cultural worlds. This mediating function of the family is a significant dimension of the concept of family relationships in diasporic literature, reflecting the crucial role that the family plays in the immigrant's negotiation of the diasporic condition. Within this broader tradition of diasporic writing, Mukherjee's exploration of family relationships occupies a distinctive place. Her fiction attends to all of these dimensions of family life, the role of the family in cultural continuity, the conflicts and tensions that migration generates, the gendered dimensions of familial life, and the intergenerational conflicts that arise from the differences between the generations. Yet her exploration is shaped by her distinctive



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ISSN No: 3049-4176

affirmative vision of the immigrant experience, her emphasis on transformation and reinvention, and her focus on the experiences of women. Mukherjee's exploration of family relationships thus contributes a particular and valuable perspective to the broader tradition of diasporic writing, one that illuminates the transformation of family life in the diaspora while attending to its gendered dimensions and its connection to the transformation of identity.

4. Changing Family Structures in the Diaspora

Migration produces profound changes in the structure of the family, transforming the patterns and forms of familial life in ways that have far-reaching consequences for the immigrant experience. The family structures that characterize the traditional society of the homeland are disrupted and reconfigured by the experience of migration, giving rise to new forms of familial organization adapted to the circumstances of life in the host society. Understanding these changing family structures is essential for appreciating Mukherjee's exploration of family relationships, for it is against the backdrop of these structural transformations that the dramas of familial life in her fiction unfold.

A fundamental structural change that migration produces is the transition from the extended family to the nuclear family. In many traditional societies, including that of India, the extended family, encompassing multiple generations and a wide network of kin, constitutes the basic unit of familial and social life. This extended family provides a dense network of relationships, support, and shared meaning that structures the individual's existence and defines their identity. Migration disrupts this extended family network, separating the immigrant from the broader web of kin and often reducing the family to its nuclear core of parents and children. This transition from the extended to the nuclear family represents one of the most significant structural transformations that migration produces.

The transition to the nuclear family has profound consequences for the immigrant experience. Deprived of the support of the extended family network, the immigrant must cope with the challenges of life in the host society with diminished resources. The nuclear family that results often bears an intensified emotional burden, becoming the primary locus of support, belonging, and cultural continuity. The concentration of familial functions within the nuclear family places new strains on its members and transforms the dynamics of familial relationships. The isolation of the nuclear family, cut off from the broader network of kin, can intensify the pressures on its members and contribute to the tensions and conflicts that characterize familial life in the diaspora.

Migration also transforms the traditional hierarchies and authority structures of the family. In the traditional family, authority is often organized according to age and gender, with elders and men occupying positions of authority over the young and women. Migration disrupts these traditional hierarchies, as the changed circumstances of life in the host society alter the distribution of power and authority within the family. Women may gain new sources of authority through access to education and employment, while the young, more adept at



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A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

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ISSN No: 3049-4176

navigating the host society, may acquire influence that challenges the traditional authority of their elders. These transformations of familial hierarchy generate tension and conflict, as family members negotiate the changed distribution of power and authority.

The transformation of gender roles represents another significant structural change that migration produces. In the traditional family, the roles of men and women are often clearly defined and differentiated, with men occupying the public sphere of work and women the private sphere of the home. Migration disrupts these traditional gender roles, as women may gain access to employment and the public sphere while men may find their traditional roles and authority challenged. This transformation of gender roles reshapes the structure of the family and the relationships between its members, generating both new possibilities and new conflicts. The renegotiation of gender roles within the family is a central dimension of the structural transformation that migration produces.

The disruption of the extended family also transforms the mechanisms through which cultural knowledge and values are transmitted across the generations. In the traditional extended family, the transmission of cultural heritage is a collective undertaking, shared among grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and the wider network of kin, who together immerse the child in the values, customs, and traditions of the culture. In the diasporic nuclear family, this collective mechanism of cultural transmission is disrupted, and the burden of transmitting cultural heritage falls upon the parents alone, often the mother in particular. This concentration of the responsibility for cultural transmission within the nuclear family, and often within the figure of the mother, intensifies the pressures on the family and shapes the dynamics of cultural preservation in the diaspora. The transformation of the mechanisms of cultural transmission is thus a significant consequence of the structural changes that migration produces.

These changing family structures form the backdrop against which Mukherjee's exploration of family relationships unfolds. Her fiction depicts families transformed by migration, families in which the traditional structures of the extended family, the traditional hierarchies of age and gender, and the traditional roles of men and women have been disrupted and reconfigured. The dramas of familial life in her fiction, the conflicts and transformations that her characters undergo, take place within these transformed family structures. By attending to the changing family structures that migration produces, this chapter provides the essential context for understanding Mukherjee's exploration of family relationships and the transformations that her characters experience.

5. Representation of Family Relationships in Bharati Mukherjee's Works

Mukherjee's fiction offers a rich and multifaceted representation of family relationships in the diasporic context, attending to the various dimensions of familial life and the different ways in which they are affected by migration. This representation encompasses the relationship between husband and wife, the relationship between parents and children, the conflicts between generations, and the negotiation of family values and cultural traditions. The following sections



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ISSN No: 3049-4176

examine each of these dimensions of family relationships in turn, exploring the ways in which Mukherjee depicts their transformation under the pressures of the diasporic condition.

6. Husband–Wife Relationships

The relationship between husband and wife occupies a central place in Mukherjee's representation of family relationships, serving as a crucial site where the tensions of the diasporic condition are concentrated and enacted. The marital relationship, structured by particular conceptions of the roles and responsibilities of husband and wife, is profoundly transformed and strained by the pressures of migration. Mukherjee's fiction explores the various ways in which the diasporic condition reshapes the relationship between husband and wife, generating conflict and tension while also, in some cases, opening possibilities for transformation and renewal.

The husband-wife relationship in Mukherjee's fiction is shaped by the encounter between traditional and modern conceptions of marriage. In the traditional Indian context, marriage is often arranged rather than chosen, and it is structured by clearly defined roles and expectations that subordinate the wife to the husband and define her identity in terms of her wifely duties. In the context of the host society, by contrast, marriage is conceived in terms of romantic love, individual choice, and the equality of partners. The encounter between these different conceptions of marriage generates tension within the diasporic marriage, as husband and wife negotiate the competing expectations of tradition and modernity.

For many of Mukherjee's female characters, the marital relationship becomes a site of constraint and struggle, a locus of the tensions between traditional expectations and new possibilities. The immigrant wife, formed by the traditional expectations of wifely duty, may find herself caught between these expectations and the new possibilities for autonomy and self-realization available in the host society. The marital relationship may become a source of frustration and confinement, as the wife struggles against the constraints of the traditional wifely role. In extreme cases, such as that of Dimple in *Wife*, the tensions of the marital relationship contribute to psychological crisis and breakdown. The husband-wife relationship thus emerges as a crucial site of the gendered tensions of the diasporic condition.

Yet the husband-wife relationship in Mukherjee's fiction is not solely a site of constraint and conflict. In some cases, the diasporic condition opens possibilities for the transformation of the marital relationship, as the changed circumstances of life in the host society enable a renegotiation of the roles and expectations of husband and wife. The transformation of gender roles that migration produces may reshape the marital relationship, enabling a more equal partnership or providing the wife with new sources of autonomy and authority. Mukherjee's fiction attends to these possibilities for transformation, exploring the ways in which the diasporic condition may reshape the marital relationship in the direction of greater equality and mutuality.



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A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

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ISSN No: 3049-4176

The dynamics of power and dependency within the husband-wife relationship are significantly reshaped by the diasporic condition. In the traditional context, the wife's dependency on the husband is often reinforced by her lack of access to independent resources and by the social structures that subordinate women. In the diasporic context, this structure of dependency may be altered as the wife gains access to education, employment, and forms of independence unavailable in the homeland, or, conversely, it may be intensified as the wife, isolated in the host society and cut off from her familial support network, becomes more dependent on the husband than ever before. Mukherjee's fiction attends to both of these possibilities, exploring the ways in which the diasporic condition may either empower the wife or intensify her dependency and subordination. The reconfiguration of power and dependency within the marital relationship is thus a significant dimension of Mukherjee's exploration of the husband-wife relationship.

Through her exploration of the husband-wife relationship, Mukherjee illuminates a central dimension of family relationships in the diaspora and its connection to the gendered tensions of the diasporic condition. The marital relationship emerges as a crucial site where the competing demands of tradition and modernity are negotiated, where the constraints of traditional gender roles are confronted, and where possibilities for transformation and renewal may emerge. Mukherjee's nuanced representation of the husband-wife relationship, attending to both its constraints and its possibilities, deepens the understanding of family relationships in the diasporic context and reveals the profound ways in which migration reshapes the intimate bond between husband and wife.

7. Parent-Child Relationships

The relationship between parents and children constitutes another vital dimension of Mukherjee's representation of family relationships, illuminating the tensions and connections that link the generations amid the disruptions of migration. The parent-child relationship, structured by particular conceptions of the responsibilities of parents and the obligations of children, is transformed by the diasporic condition, as parents and children respond differently to the challenges of life in the host society. Mukherjee's fiction explores the various ways in which migration reshapes the relationship between parents and children, generating conflict and misunderstanding while also revealing the enduring bonds of affection and obligation that connect the generations.

The parent-child relationship in the diaspora is shaped by the difference between the generations in their relationship to the culture of the homeland and the host society. Immigrant parents, formed within the culture of the homeland, often seek to transmit its values and traditions to their children, both as a source of cultural continuity and as a means of maintaining their own identity amid the disorientations of displacement. Their children, raised within the culture of the host society, often develop a more assimilated outlook, absorbing the norms and aspirations of the surrounding culture. This difference in cultural orientation generates a



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ISSN No: 3049-4176

characteristic tension between immigrant parents and their children, a tension that features prominently in Mukherjee's exploration of the parent-child relationship.

8. 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 destruction, through the affirmative celebration of self-creation in *Jasmine*, to a mature synthesis in the later novels reconciling transformation with the claims of ancestral continuity. That this trajectory is legible in both themes simultaneously is itself 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 exploration of women's agency in reconstructing both self and family constitutes a significant contribution to the understanding of gender and migration, and it is a dimension of her work that recent scholarship has rightly begun to foreground (Parween, 2022; Zainab & Chouhan, 2024).

Her work is not beyond criticism. Her treatment of India has been faulted, her celebration of American possibility charged with underestimating structural barriers, and her conception of assimilation criticised for 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. Future research might productively extend this analysis to her short fiction, undertake systematic comparison with other writers of the Indian diaspora, or examine whether the interdependence of identity and family established here obtains in the work of other diasporic writers, and if so, whether it takes the same gendered form.



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A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

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