

FROM EXPATRIATION TO IMMIGRATION: TRACING THE EVOLUTION OF IDENTITY IN THE
FICTION OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the thematic evolution in Bharati Mukherjee's literary oeuvre, tracing the transition from expatriation to immigration as central to her exploration of identity, displacement, and cultural integration. Drawing upon her personal migration from Canada to the United States, Mukherjee's fiction reflects a shift from narratives of alienation and racial marginalization to those of transformation and self-assertion. Through close readings of *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, and *Jasmine*, the study foregrounds how Mukherjee's protagonists confront and negotiate the psychological and sociocultural challenges of migration. Their journeys, marked by dislocation, hybridity, and the shedding of static identities, encapsulate the dynamic processes of becoming within the diasporic context. The paper also situates Mukherjee's work within broader postcolonial and immigrant literary discourses, drawing on critical frameworks proposed by scholars such as Uma Parameswaran, Viney Kirpal, and Alastair Niven. Ultimately, the study argues that Mukherjee's fiction not only charts the immigrant experience but also redefines the contours of American identity and literature.

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee, Immigration, Expatriation, Diaspora, Cultural Identity, Postcolonial Literature, Transformation, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*

INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee's literary trajectory encapsulates a profound shift from narratives of expatriation to those rooted in the immigrant experience. This evolution is not merely thematic but mirrors her personal and political transformation as she moved from Canada—where she experienced cultural marginalization—to the United States, where she embraced a more assertive immigrant identity. Her fiction becomes a vehicle through which she articulates the psychological and cultural negotiations of diasporic subjects, while also challenging monolithic notions of identity, nation, and belonging.

FROM EXPATRIATION TO IMMIGRATION: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Expatriation in Mukherjee's early work reflects a fixation on the homeland, underscoring feelings of nostalgia, dislocation, and cultural estrangement. Immigration, on the other hand, signifies a conscious choice to adapt, integrate, and transform. This progression aligns with what George Steiner describes as the "modern figure of the immigrant writer," and with the concept of "immigrant sensibility" noted by Uma Parameswaran and Alastair Niven in contemporary Commonwealth literature. These theoretical frameworks inform this study's interpretation of Mukherjee's protagonists and their evolving relationship with cultural identity.

ALIENATION AND RACIAL ASSERTION IN CANADIAN CONTEXTS

Mukherjee's experiences in Canada inform the tone and content of her early novels. Despite her literary recognition, she often encountered racial prejudice and felt excluded from Canadian literary culture. *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and *Wife* (1975) are shaped by this sense of estrangement. Tara Banerjee Cartwright, the protagonist of *The Tiger's Daughter*, returns to India after seven years abroad, only to realize her alienation began long before her departure, rooted in colonial education and cultural dissonance. Similarly, Dimple in *Wife* undergoes a psychological breakdown as her attempts to conform to the American way of life clash with deeply internalized Indian values. The act of violence she commits becomes a tragic metaphor for her fragmented identity.

IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION IN AMERICAN NARRATIVES

Mukherjee's migration to the United States catalyzed a thematic shift in her writing. Her later works, especially *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) and *Jasmine* (1989), celebrate resilience, reinvention, and the immigrant's potential for self-fashioning. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist undergoes multiple metamorphoses—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, and Jane—each name marking a stage in her journey toward self-definition. Her transition from rural India to urban America is marked by trauma, including sexual violence and the death of her husband, but also by agency and empowerment. Mukherjee reframes immigration as an opportunity for rebirth, rather than a process of erasure.

SYMBOLISM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RECONFIGURATION

Mukherjee uses spatial and symbolic elements to depict the inner turmoil of her characters. The Catelli-Continental Hotel in *The Tiger's Daughter* represents both the refuge and the confinement of the expatriate. In *Wife*, Dimple's act of murder while watching television is not only a manifestation of psychological rupture but also a rejection of passive victimhood. Jasmine's journey from "unhousement" to "rehousement" in the United States represents her rejection of fixed cultural coordinates in favor of fluid identity reconstruction.

REJECTION OF EXPATRIATE MELANCHOLY AND EMBRACE OF IMMIGRANT VITALITY

Mukherjee's mature fiction distances itself from the melancholic introspection characteristic of expatriate literature. Unlike V.S. Naipaul, whose influence she acknowledged early in her career, Mukherjee does not dwell in disillusionment. Her immigrant characters embrace the present and reject cultural stasis. As Jasmine declares, she is "the flower of Ann Arbor, not of Trinidad," signaling a decisive break from nostalgia.

LITERARY POSITIONING AND THEMATIC DISTINCTION

Mukherjee situates herself not within the tradition of Indian English novelists but within American literary frameworks. Her thematic focus aligns more closely with writers like Bernard Malamud, in her attention to reinvention and ethical complexity in immigrant lives. In her essay "Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature," she critiques mainstream American fiction for ignoring minority immigrant experiences, a gap she seeks to address through her own narratives.

CONCLUSION

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction offers a nuanced portrayal of the immigrant's inner and outer worlds. Her protagonists undergo not only physical dislocation but profound psychological transformation. From the alienation of Tara and Dimple to the resilience and adaptability of Jasmine, Mukherjee's characters embody the dual challenges and possibilities of migration. Her works illuminate the mutable nature of identity and redefine belonging through the lens of postcolonial and immigrant literature. In doing so, Mukherjee contributes to a more inclusive and dynamic vision of American literature, one that reflects the realities of transnational experience.

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