

RESEARCH ARTICLE**The Tara Continuum: Mapping the Evolution of Diaspora, Hybridity, And Matrilineal Memory in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction**

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Abstract:

This article examines the shifting landscape of South Asian female migration through the "Tara Continuum"—a thematic evolution of the protagonist across Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), and *The Tree Bride* (2004). Departing from traditional postcolonial narratives of tragic exile, the study maps a progressive trajectory of transnational identity using frameworks by Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Homi Bhabha. It traces the Tara figure's transformation from a paralyzed, alienated migrant in Calcutta to a self-assertive hybrid subject in America, and ultimately to a historicized agent empowered by her nineteenth-century ancestor, Tara Lata. By engaging with third-world feminist critiques from Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak, the analysis evaluates how Tara successfully challenges both Western orientalism and Eastern patriarchy. While acknowledging the critical limitations of Mukherjee's focus on upper-caste privilege, the article ultimately posits that the Tara Continuum reframes the diaspora from a site of displacement into a space of sovereign self-creation, offering a resilient and empowering blueprint for the modern transnational woman.

Keywords: South Asian Diaspora, Transnational Identity, Female Migration, Hybridity, Postcolonial Feminism

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Introduction: Bharati Mukherjee's Diasporic Vision**

Bharati Mukherjee occupies a distinct space in South Asian diasporic literature. Unlike many writers who portray leaving one's homeland as a tragedy marked by permanent grief and loss, Mukherjee embraces immigration as a challenging yet powerful opportunity for self-reinvention. She explicitly claimed this perspective in the introduction to her collection *Darkness*, stating: "I choose to describe myself as an American writer of Bengali Indian origin... my roots are here" (Mukherjee xv).

At the heart of Mukherjee's lifelong exploration of migration is the recurring character of "Tara." This article analyzes how the Tara figure evolves across three pivotal novels: *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), and *The Tree Bride* (2004). Rather than treating these protagonists as disconnected individuals, this study reads them as a linked progression of identity, which we term the "Tara Continuum." By tracing this evolution, we can see how Mukherjee's narrative focus shifts over time—moving away from the initial pain of displacement and toward the confident embrace of a dynamic, global identity.

Tara as a Symbol of Identity Crisis

The first stage of this evolving identity appears in Mukherjee's debut novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, through the character of Tara Banerjee. After completing her education in the United States and marrying an American, Tara returns to her native Calcutta. However, rather than the comforting homecoming she expects, she finds herself caught in an agonizing state of limbo, disconnected from both her past heritage and her present life.

Tara's experience perfectly exemplifies cultural theorist Stuart Hall's argument that identity is never a fixed product, but rather a continuous, often fractured process (Hall 222). She embodies this deep cultural divide. On one hand, she judges her politically volatile homeland through a newly acquired Western lens; on the other, she is haunted by memories of being exoticized and misunderstood in America. Mukherjee captures this painful sense of paralysis when Tara realizes just how detached she has become from her roots:

"She was angry that she had lost the ritualistic purity of her Bengali childhood... She was a Bengali girl who had ceased to be Bengali" (Mukherjee, *The Tiger's Daughter* 42).

Unable to ground herself in either culture, Tara feels entirely powerless, ultimately forced to accept that the "home" she nostalgically remembers is gone forever.

The Social and Political Pressures of Migration

To fully grasp Tara's trajectory, the analysis must extend beyond her internal psychological trauma to examine the broader socio-political frameworks governing migrant lives. This dynamic is best understood through sociologist Avtar Brah's concept of "diasporic space"—an intersectional arena where the narratives of those who migrate collide with the realities of those who remain in the homeland (Brah 181).

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In Mukherjee's fiction, these diasporic pressures are distinctly gendered. As Tara navigates the transnational divide between India and America, she is subjected to Western cultural stereotyping, assimilationist demands, and the rigid patriarchal expectations of her native community. Migration, therefore, is never merely a geographical relocation; it is a complex, fraught negotiation of identity. This friction is explicitly articulated in *Desirable Daughters*, where Tara reflects on the stifling gender roles dictated during her upbringing:

"We were expected to be pretty, gentle, and compliant... to step from the protection of our father's house into that of our husbands" (Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters* 21).

By actively subverting these traditional patriarchal mandates, Tara's exile transcends physical geography. She experiences a profound socio-cultural alienation, effectively cast out by her community for refusing to remain docile and silent.

Embracing a Hybrid Identity

As the continuum progresses into *Desirable Daughters*, the protagonist—now Tara Chatterjee—represents a crucial turning point. Her fractured identity shifts from a source of anguish into a wellspring of strength, a transformation that closely aligns with postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "hybridity." Bhabha posits that the intersection of two cultures generates a "Third Space"—a fluid, dynamic zone where individuals can forge a new identity that defies strict categorization as purely Eastern or Western (Bhabha 37).

Tara Chatterjee actively claims this middle ground. She divorces her wealthy, traditional Silicon Valley husband and builds a life with an American partner, yet she simultaneously nurtures a profound connection to her cultural heritage. Her diasporic experience is no longer framed as a tragic loss, but rather as a conscious, active process of self-creation. Mukherjee underscores this newfound agency and self-assurance when Tara declares:

"I am an American citizen, but my roots are in a different soil... I am the bridge, and I am the river" (Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters* 78).

By successfully negotiating the complexities of both worlds, Tara demonstrates that a hybrid identity is not a state of being divided, but rather a position of unique and dynamic empowerment.

The Development of Feminist Consciousness

Crucial to Tara's evolution across the continuum is her expanding feminist consciousness. Mukherjee's narrative actively dismantles the restrictive expectations imposed by both Eastern patriarchal structures and Western orientalist stereotypes. This aligns with postcolonial feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique against reducing "Third World women" to a monolithic, helpless category of victims (Mohanty 61). Mukherjee's protagonists explicitly resist such reductive framing.

Over the course of the novels, Tara transitions from a state of enforced docility to vocal self-assertion. In *Desirable Daughters*, she articulates this urgent need to forge her own voice:

"I had to learn to speak for myself, because the world I left behind and

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the world I came to were both perfectly content to keep me quiet" (Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters* 144).

Crucially, her emancipation is not framed as a byproduct of Western assimilation. Rather, it is a self-actualized independence achieved by reclaiming her own narrative agency.

History, Ancestry, and Healing

The culmination of the Tara identity continuum is realized in *The Tree Bride*. In this novel, the contemporary protagonist unearths the narrative of her nineteenth-century ancestor and namesake, Tara Lata. This exploration intertwines personal genealogy with national history, utilizing cultural memory as a restorative tool to heal the psychological fragmentation caused by transnational migration.

Tara Lata, married off as a child bride, subverted rigid societal expectations to emerge as a formidable anti-colonial freedom fighter. By recovering her ancestor's suppressed history, the modern Tara discovers a historical paradigm for her own resilience and survival. Mukherjee poignantly captures this transhistorical resonance:

"She was the first Tara, bound to a tree but spiritually unbound... and I am the modern Tara, still trying to learn the language of her freedom" (Mukherjee, *The Tree Bride* 112).

This ancestral linkage serves to anchor Tara's fluid, cosmopolitan existence. Ultimately, familial history ceases to be a site of melancholic nostalgia; instead, it transforms into a vitalizing source of strength, granting the modern diasporic subject the historical precedent to be radically independent.

Conclusion and Critical Evaluation

While evaluating Mukherjee's literary contributions, scholars such as Deepika Bahri have highlighted specific critical limitations. Notably, Mukherjee's protagonists predominantly emerge from privileged, upper-caste backgrounds (Bahri 55). Consequently, her narratives often bypass the severe economic hardships and systemic disenfranchisement experienced by working-class migrants and refugees. Furthermore, her earlier works often romanticize American assimilation, inadvertently downplaying the entrenched racial prejudices present within Western societies.

Notwithstanding these valid critiques, the "Tara Continuum" remains a highly significant contribution to contemporary transnational literature. The figure of Tara serves as a compelling embodiment of the global citizen. Her trajectory demonstrates that identity is not a static condition dictated by geography or birth, but rather a dynamic construct forged through cultural memory, adaptation, and personal resilience. Ultimately, Mukherjee provides an empowering paradigm in which the diasporic woman is no longer paralyzed between conflicting cultures, but instead emerges as the sovereign architect of her own destiny.

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