

GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION: EXPLORING DIVERSE IDENTITIES IN CULTURE IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S *THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER* AND *JASMINE*

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate portrayal of gender identity and expression in Bharati Mukherjee's novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine*. Through these narratives, Mukherjee delves into the complexities of cultural displacement and the reformation of identity, particularly focusing on the intersection of gender and cultural heritage. *The Tiger's Daughter* follows Tara, a young Indian woman grappling with the expectations of her traditional upbringing and the realities of her life in America. Her journey reflects the tension between prescribed gender roles and personal freedom. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist undergoes multiple transformations, both physical and emotional, as she navigates her identity in a foreign land, challenging rigid gender norms and embracing a fluid sense of self. Mukherjee's depiction of these diverse identities highlights the fluidity of gender and the impact of cultural context on the construction of gender identity. The novels underscore the ways in which migration and cross-cultural encounters can disrupt and reshape traditional gender roles, offering a nuanced exploration of how identity is negotiated in a globalized world. This paper argues that Mukherjee's works provide a critical commentary on the fluid and performative nature of gender, challenging the binary conception of gender identity and emphasizing the role of cultural and societal factors in its construction.

Keywords: *Gender identity, Gender expression, Cultural displacement, Cross-cultural encounters, Gender roles, The Tiger's Daughter, Jasmine etc*

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee's novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine* provide compelling narratives that navigate the complex terrain of gender identity and cultural expression. Mukherjee, a prominent voice in diaspora literature, intricately weaves the themes of cultural displacement and identity formation through the experiences of her female protagonists. Her works reflect the struggle of women caught between the traditional expectations of their homeland and the liberating yet challenging environments of their adopted countries.

In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara's return to India after spending several years in America exposes the rift between her traditional upbringing and the evolving sense of self that she developed in the West. Her journey reveals the tension between rigid gender roles imposed by her culture and her desire for autonomy, highlighting the complexities of maintaining one's cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

Similarly, *Jasmine* chronicles the transformation of its eponymous protagonist, who undergoes a series of physical and emotional metamorphoses as she migrates from India to the United States. Jasmine's fluid identity challenges the static notions of gender and selfhood, reflecting Mukherjee's broader commentary on the performative nature of identity. Through Jasmine's story, Mukherjee explores how migration and the encounter with different cultures can fundamentally alter one's understanding and expression of gender.

This introduction sets the stage for a deeper analysis of how Mukherjee's characters navigate their gender identities within the context of cultural displacement. It will explore how these narratives challenge traditional gender norms and contribute to the broader discourse on gender and identity in a globalized world. The discussion will consider how Mukherjee's depiction of her protagonists offers a critical perspective on the intersection of gender, culture, and identity, emphasizing the fluidity and complexity inherent in these concepts.

Gender Identity

Gender identity, a deeply personal and integral aspect of self-conception, refers to an individual's internal sense of their gender, which may or may not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. It encompasses the experience of being male, female, both, neither, or something entirely different, and is distinct from biological sex and sexual orientation. Gender identity is a dynamic, multifaceted construct influenced by various factors, including biology, psychology, and socio-cultural environments.

In literature, gender identity often emerges as a central theme, particularly in works that explore the complexities of personal identity in relation to societal norms and expectations. Writers like Bharati Mukherjee engage with this theme to challenge and dissect traditional gender roles, illustrating how identity is not a fixed attribute but rather a fluid and evolving concept shaped by external and internal forces.

In *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine*, Mukherjee presents her protagonists as women navigating their identities in the face of cultural displacement and societal expectations. These characters' journeys highlight the tension between conforming to traditional gender roles and the desire to forge an independent identity that reflects their personal experiences and aspirations. Through these narratives, Mukherjee explores how gender identity is constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in response to changing cultural contexts, offering a nuanced portrayal of the intersection between gender and cultural identity.

This exploration of gender identity in Mukherjee's work not only underscores the fluidity and complexity of the concept but also challenges the binary understanding of gender. By portraying characters who defy traditional gender norms, Mukherjee invites readers to reconsider the ways in which gender identity is understood, expressed, and experienced across different cultural landscapes.

Gender Expression

Gender expression refers to the external manifestation of an individual's gender identity through behaviors, clothing, hairstyles, voice, and other forms of presentation. It is how a person chooses to communicate their gender to the world, which may or may not align with societal expectations of masculinity or femininity. Unlike gender identity, which is an internal experience, gender expression is visible and can be influenced by cultural norms, personal preferences, and social expectations.

In Bharati Mukherjee's novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine*, gender expression is a significant theme that reveals the complex interplay between identity, culture, and societal norms. The protagonists of these novels navigate their gender expression within the confines of traditional expectations and the liberating possibilities offered by new cultural environments. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara's return to India after living in the United States highlights the clash between her internal sense of self and the external expectations imposed by her native culture. Her gender expression, shaped by her time in the West, becomes a site of tension as she struggles to reconcile the freedom she experienced abroad with the restrictive gender norms of her homeland. Tara's clothing, behavior, and interactions with others reflect this inner conflict, as she tries to balance her individual identity with the cultural expectations surrounding her.

Similarly, in *Jasmine*, the protagonist's journey across different geographical and cultural landscapes is marked by a series of transformations in her gender expression. Jasmine's ability to adapt her appearance and behavior to fit into various roles—ranging from a traditional Indian woman to an independent American—illustrates the fluidity of gender expression and its dependence on cultural context. Her changing appearance, from the sari-clad widow in India to the modern, Westernized woman in the United States, symbolizes her evolving identity and her resistance to being confined by any singular gender role.

Mukherjee's portrayal of gender expression in these novels challenges the binary and rigid understanding of gender roles. By depicting characters who navigate and sometimes subvert societal expectations, she emphasizes the performative nature of gender expression, illustrating how it can be a powerful tool for negotiating identity in different cultural settings. Through these narratives, Mukherjee critiques the constraints imposed by traditional gender norms and highlights the potential for individuals to redefine and express their gender in ways that align with their personal experiences and evolving identities.

Cultural Displacement

Cultural displacement refers to the experience of being removed or separated from one's native cultural environment, often resulting in a sense of dislocation and identity crisis. This phenomenon can occur due to migration, exile, colonization, or other forms of cultural transition, where individuals find themselves navigating the complexities of a new cultural

context while grappling with the remnants of their original identity. The feeling of being caught between two or more cultures often leads to a reevaluation of self, identity, and belonging.

In Bharati Mukherjee's novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine*, cultural displacement is a central theme that deeply influences the lives and identities of the protagonists. Mukherjee uses the experiences of Tara and Jasmine to explore how cultural displacement impacts their sense of self, particularly in relation to gender identity and expression.

In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara's return to India after several years in America epitomizes the experience of cultural displacement. Having lived in the West, Tara has adopted new ways of thinking and expressing herself, which conflict with the traditional values and expectations of her Indian upbringing. Her sense of displacement is exacerbated by the realization that she no longer fully belongs to either culture—her Indian roots feel distant, yet she is not entirely at home in the Western world either. This cultural dislocation causes Tara to struggle with her identity, particularly with how she expresses herself as a woman within these differing cultural frameworks.

Jasmine presents a more dramatic exploration of cultural displacement through the protagonist's journey from rural India to the United States. Jasmine's migration is marked by a series of transformations, each symbolizing her adaptation to new cultural environments. As she moves through different phases of her life, Jasmine adopts new identities and gender expressions that reflect her changing circumstances. Her cultural displacement forces her to continually renegotiate her identity, leading her to question and redefine what it means to belong to any particular culture or gender role.

Mukherjee's portrayal of cultural displacement in these novels underscores the profound impact that migration and cross-cultural encounters can have on an individual's sense of self. The protagonists' experiences highlight the fluidity of identity in the face of cultural transition, illustrating how displacement can lead to both disorientation and growth. Through Tara and Jasmine's stories, Mukherjee explores the psychological and emotional challenges of cultural displacement, while also celebrating the resilience and adaptability of individuals who navigate these complex cultural terrains. The novels ultimately suggest that identity is not fixed but is continually reshaped by the cultural contexts in which one finds oneself, particularly in a globalized world where cultural boundaries are increasingly blurred.

Cross-Cultural Encounters

Cross-cultural encounters involve interactions between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds, leading to exchanges of ideas, values, and practices. These encounters can be enriching, offering opportunities for growth and understanding, but they can also be fraught with misunderstandings, conflicts, and identity crises. In literature, cross-cultural encounters are often depicted as pivotal moments that challenge characters to reassess their beliefs, identities, and place in the world.

In Bharati Mukherjee's novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine*, cross-cultural encounters play a crucial role in shaping the protagonists' identities and their understanding of gender and self. Mukherjee uses these encounters to explore the complexities of living between cultures, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges that arise when different cultural worlds collide.

In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara's return to India after living in America is marked by a series of cross-cultural encounters that reveal the deep contrasts between her Westernized outlook and the traditional Indian society she left behind. These encounters force Tara to confront the changes in her own identity and the way she perceives her gender roles. Her interactions with family, friends, and strangers in India underscore the cultural gap between her past and present selves, and the difficulty of reconciling these disparate parts of her identity. Through these encounters, Mukherjee illustrates how cross-cultural experiences can lead to a sense of alienation but also to a deeper understanding of oneself and the complexities of cultural identity.

In *Jasmine*, the protagonist's journey from rural India to the United States is a powerful narrative of cross-cultural encounters. Jasmine's life is shaped by her interactions with people from vastly different cultural backgrounds, each of which forces her to adapt and transform. Her experiences range from the traditional and patriarchal structures of Indian society to the more individualistic and fluid cultural environment of America. Each encounter challenges Jasmine to reconsider her identity, leading her to adopt new roles and gender expressions that reflect her evolving sense of self. Mukherjee portrays these cross-cultural encounters as catalysts for Jasmine's continual reinvention, highlighting the transformative power of cultural exchange.

Mukherjee's depiction of cross-cultural encounters in these novels underscores the idea that identity is not static but is constantly reshaped by interactions with others from different cultural backgrounds. These encounters reveal the tensions and possibilities inherent in living between cultures, where the negotiation of identity becomes an ongoing process. Through Tara and Jasmine's experiences, Mukherjee explores how cross-cultural encounters can disrupt traditional gender norms and open up new ways of thinking about identity and self-expression. The novels suggest that while cross-cultural encounters can be challenging, they also offer opportunities for personal growth, self-discovery, and the creation of more complex and nuanced identities in a globalized world.

Gender Roles

Gender roles refer to the socially and culturally constructed expectations and behaviors associated with being male or female in a given society. These roles dictate how individuals should act, dress, and engage in various aspects of life based on their perceived gender, often reinforcing traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Gender roles are deeply embedded in cultural norms and can be restrictive, limiting individuals' potential by prescribing rigid behaviors and responsibilities.

In Bharati Mukherjee's novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine*, the exploration of gender roles is central to the protagonists' journeys, as they grapple with the expectations imposed upon them by their cultures and their desires to assert their own identities. Mukherjee uses her characters to challenge traditional gender roles, highlighting the tension between societal expectations and personal agency.

In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara's struggle with gender roles is evident as she navigates her return to India after living in the United States. Raised in a traditional Indian family, Tara is expected to conform to specific gender norms that dictate her behavior, appearance, and life choices. However, her time in America exposes her to different ways of thinking and living, leading her

to question these prescribed roles. Tara's journey reflects the conflict between adhering to the expectations of her Indian heritage and embracing the autonomy she experienced in the West. Mukherjee portrays this internal struggle as Tara attempts to reconcile her past with her evolving sense of self, challenging the rigidity of traditional gender roles.

In *Jasmine*, the protagonist's journey is marked by her resistance to the gender roles imposed on her by both her Indian heritage and her new life in America. Jasmine's story is one of transformation and reinvention, as she moves through different phases of her life, each time adopting new identities and roles that defy the traditional expectations of womanhood. From a rural Indian girl to an independent, modern woman in the United States, Jasmine's evolution is a testament to her refusal to be confined by any single gender role. Mukherjee uses Jasmine's multiple identities to challenge the notion that gender roles are fixed, illustrating instead how they can be fluid and adaptable depending on context and circumstance.

Mukherjee's portrayal of gender roles in these novels underscores the restrictive nature of traditional expectations, while also highlighting the potential for individuals to resist and redefine these roles. By depicting characters who challenge and transcend traditional gender norms, Mukherjee critiques the societal structures that enforce these roles and advocates for a more fluid understanding of gender. The novels suggest that gender roles are not inherent or natural but are constructed by society, and therefore, can be deconstructed and reshaped by individuals seeking to live authentic and self-determined lives.

Through Tara and Jasmine's experiences, Mukherjee explores the impact of cultural displacement and cross-cultural encounters on gender roles, demonstrating how migration and exposure to different cultural values can disrupt and ultimately liberate individuals from the constraints of traditional gender expectations. The narratives offer a nuanced examination of how gender roles are negotiated in a globalized world, where cultural boundaries are increasingly blurred, and individual agency plays a crucial role in the formation of identity.

The Tiger's Daughter

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) is a poignant exploration of cultural identity, displacement, and the tension between tradition and modernity through the lens of its protagonist, Tara Banerjee Cartwright. The novel, Mukherjee's debut, reflects the complex emotional landscape of a woman caught between two worlds—her native India and the Western society where she has spent a significant portion of her life.

Tara, born into an aristocratic Bengali family, was sent to the United States for her education, where she spends seven years before returning to India. Her return to Calcutta forms the central narrative of the novel, as she confronts the changes that have occurred both in herself and in her homeland during her absence. The once-familiar surroundings now feel alien to her, and she struggles with a profound sense of dislocation, unable to reconcile her memories of India with the harsh realities she now faces.

Cultural displacement is a dominant theme in *The Tiger's Daughter*. Tara's experience of living in the United States has exposed her to a different set of cultural norms, particularly regarding gender roles and individual freedom. This exposure complicates her return to a society where traditional expectations are still deeply entrenched. Her internal conflict is mirrored by the political and social turmoil in India, which has grown increasingly chaotic and unpredictable

in her absence. The India she remembers—romanticized in her mind—is starkly different from the one she encounters, filled with political unrest and societal change.

Tara's struggle with gender roles is another critical aspect of the novel. Raised with the expectations of a traditional Indian woman, she finds herself questioning these roles after her time in the West. In America, she experienced a degree of personal freedom that is difficult to maintain upon her return to India, where she is once again expected to conform to the traditional roles of wife and daughter. The pressure to adhere to these roles causes Tara significant distress, as she grapples with her own desires and the expectations placed upon her by her family and society.

The novel also delves into the theme of cross-cultural encounters, as Tara's Westernized perspectives clash with the traditional values of her Indian family and society. Her marriage to an American, David Cartwright, further complicates her sense of belonging, as it symbolizes her split identity—part Indian, part Western. This cultural hybridity is both a source of strength and conflict for Tara, as she navigates the complexities of her identity in a rapidly changing world.

The Tiger's Daughter is a rich exploration of the immigrant experience, identity crisis, and the painful process of reconciling one's past with the present. Mukherjee's portrayal of Tara's journey highlights the emotional and psychological toll of cultural displacement and the struggle to find a place in a world that feels increasingly fragmented. Through Tara's experiences, Mukherjee raises important questions about the nature of identity, the impact of cultural displacement on gender roles, and the challenges of maintaining one's cultural heritage in the face of global change.

Jasmine

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) is a powerful narrative of transformation, identity, and resilience, exploring the journey of a young Indian woman as she navigates multiple cultures and identities. The novel traces the protagonist's evolution from Jyoti, a village girl in Punjab, to Jasmine, a determined woman who reinvents herself multiple times as she migrates to the United States. Through Jasmine's story, Mukherjee delves into themes of cultural displacement, gender roles, and the fluidity of identity, presenting a vivid portrayal of the immigrant experience.

The novel begins in rural India, where Jyoti's life is shaped by traditional gender roles and cultural expectations. As a young girl, she faces the prospect of a life constrained by these norms, but her strong-willed nature drives her to resist them. Her marriage to Prakash, a progressive man who renames her Jasmine, marks the first of many transformations. Prakash encourages her to adopt a more modern, independent outlook, and the couple plans to move to America to pursue a better life. However, Prakash's murder by a terrorist group cut short their dreams, propelling Jasmine on a perilous journey to the United States alone.

Once in America, Jasmine's journey is marked by a series of profound transformations, each reflecting her adaptation to new environments and the challenges she faces. As she moves from one place to another—from the Indian community in New York to rural Iowa—she sheds her previous identities and adopts new ones, each time reshaping her sense of self. This fluidity in Jasmine's identity is emblematic of Mukherjee's broader exploration of the immigrant experience, where survival often requires adaptability and the ability to navigate multiple cultural contexts.

Cultural displacement is a central theme in *Jasmine*, as the protagonist struggles to reconcile her Indian heritage with the demands and opportunities of her new life in America. Jasmine's journey is a continuous negotiation between the past and the present, as she tries to make sense of her identity in a foreign land. Her multiple reinventions—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane—symbolize her efforts to integrate into different cultural settings while maintaining some connection to her roots. This constant reinvention also highlights the challenges of cultural displacement, where the loss of one's original identity can be both liberating and disorienting. Gender roles play a significant role in Jasmine's story, as she defies the traditional expectations placed on her as an Indian woman. From her early resistance to a life dictated by patriarchal norms in India to her eventual embrace of a more autonomous identity in America, Jasmine's journey is one of empowerment and self-discovery. However, her path is not without challenges; she encounters situations where traditional gender roles are imposed upon her, whether through violence, exploitation, or societal expectations. Despite these challenges, Jasmine continually asserts her agency, redefining herself in ways that challenge and transcend conventional gender roles.

Mukherjee's portrayal of Jasmine as a resilient, adaptable, and complex character underscores the fluidity of identity, particularly in the context of migration and cultural displacement. Jasmine's ability to navigate different cultural landscapes and adopt new identities reflects Mukherjee's broader commentary on the immigrant experience, where survival often depends on the willingness to change and the courage to forge a new path.

Jasmine is a compelling exploration of identity, cultural displacement, and the immigrant experience, offering a nuanced portrayal of a woman who refuses to be confined by the limitations of her past. Through Jasmine's story, Mukherjee challenges traditional notions of gender and identity, presenting a character who embodies the complexities and possibilities of living between cultures in a globalized world. The novel ultimately suggests that identity is not fixed but is continually reshaped by the forces of migration, cultural encounters, and personal choice.

Conclusion

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine* offer profound insights into the complexities of gender identity, expression, and cultural displacement through their nuanced portrayals of female protagonists navigating between traditional and modern worlds. Both novels delve deeply into how cultural and geographical transitions impact identity, revealing the fluid and multifaceted nature of gender roles and self-conception in a globalized context. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara's return to India underscores the challenges of reconciling a Western-influenced sense of self with the traditional expectations of her homeland. Her journey highlights the tensions between personal freedom and cultural constraints, illustrating how cross-cultural experiences can disrupt and reshape one's identity. The novel explores how gender roles, deeply ingrained in cultural norms, can both confine and challenge individuals, ultimately pushing them toward a redefined sense of self.

Jasmine presents a more dynamic narrative of transformation, as Jasmine's multiple identities reflect her adaptability and resilience in the face of cultural displacement. Her evolution from Jyoti to Jasmine and beyond embodies the continual negotiation of identity required to survive and thrive in new cultural settings. The novel illustrates how migration and cross-cultural encounters force individuals to rethink and often reinvent their gender roles, demonstrating the fluidity and adaptability of identity.

Mukherjee's exploration of gender roles in both novels critiques the rigidity of traditional norms while celebrating the potential for personal growth and self-definition. By depicting characters who challenge and transcend conventional gender expectations, Mukherjee highlights the performative and evolving nature of gender, influenced by cultural and societal contexts.

Ultimately, Mukherjee's works suggest that identity is not a static attribute but a dynamic construct shaped by cultural experiences, personal choices, and global interactions. Through Tara and Jasmine's stories, Mukherjee offers a compelling commentary on the complexities of living between cultures and the transformative power of cross-cultural encounters. Her novels underscore the importance of understanding identity as a fluid and multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by the interplay of tradition, modernity, and personal agency.

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