

Bharati Mukherjee's Trilogy: An Exploration of Identity, Culture, and Transformation

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's trilogy, consisting of *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004), and *Miss New India* (2011), delves into themes of identity, cultural conflict, and transformation. This paper explores the narratives and characters within these novels, examining how Mukherjee addresses the complexities of Indian and Indian-American experiences. Through a close reading of the texts, this study highlights Mukherjee's portrayal of the diaspora, the intersections of tradition and modernity, and the personal journeys of her protagonists.

Keywords: Identity, Culture, Tradition, Immigration, Transformation, Empowerment, Modernity

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee, a renowned Indian-American author, has significantly contributed to contemporary literature through her exploration of the immigrant experience and identity. Her trilogy, comprising *Desirable Daughters*, *The Tree Bride*, and *Miss New India*, presents a nuanced portrayal of Indian women navigating the complexities of tradition and modernity. This paper aims to analyse the thematic and narrative elements of the trilogy, focusing on Mukherjee's depiction of cultural conflict, identity formation, and personal transformation.

DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS (2002)

Desirable Daughters is the first novel in Bharati Mukherjee's trilogy, published in 2002. The story revolves around Tara Chatterjee, an Indian woman who navigates her identity and life between the traditional values of her Indian heritage and the modern lifestyle she adopts in America.

Plot Overview

The narrative follows the story of Tara Chatterjee, the protagonist, who lives in San Francisco after her divorce from Bish Chatterjee, a successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur. Tara is originally from a traditional Bengali family in Calcutta, India, where she was raised alongside her two sisters, Padma and Parvati. The novel begins with Tara reflecting on her current life as a single mother to her teenage son, Rabi.

Tara's modern, independent life in America stands in stark contrast to her upbringing in a conservative,

upper-middle-class Bengali family. She struggles with her sense of identity, torn between her Indian roots and her American present.

The tranquillity of Tara's life is disrupted when she receives a visit from a mysterious young man named Chris Dey, who claims to be the illegitimate son of her eldest sister, Padma. Chris presents letters and photographs that suggest a connection to Tara's family, but his story is filled with inconsistencies and raises suspicions.

As Tara delves into Chris's claims, she is drawn back to her past and the tightly-knit community in Calcutta. She contacts her family to investigate Chris's background, which leads to a series of revelations about her own family history.

Through flashbacks and reflections, Tara explores the history of her family and the societal expectations placed on them. She recalls the arranged marriages, strict adherence to cultural norms, and the silent endurance of hardships by the women in her family.

Tara's investigation uncovers secrets that challenge her understanding of her family's past. She learns about the sacrifices and struggles of her ancestors, particularly the women who navigated a patriarchal society.

As Tara pieces together the truth about Chris and her family's history, she begins to reconcile her own identity. She realizes that understanding her roots is essential to forging her own path. This journey of self-discovery helps Tara come to terms with her bicultural existence and the complexities of her identity.

The novel concludes with Tara gaining a deeper appreciation of her heritage and the resilience of the women in her family. She decides to embrace both her Indian and American identities, finding strength in the fusion of her past and present.

The novel contrasts Tara's modern life with her traditional upbringing in Calcutta, exploring her struggle to reconcile these two worlds. Tara's journey of self-discovery is triggered by the arrival of a mysterious stranger claiming to be related to her.

Themes and Analysis

Identity and Self-Discovery

Tara's character embodies the quest for identity, torn between her Indian heritage and her American lifestyle. Mukherjee uses Tara's internal conflict to explore broader themes of diasporic identity and the challenges of cultural assimilation.

Tradition vs. Modernity

The novel juxtaposes the traditional values of Tara's family with the modern, individualistic ethos of her life in America. Mukherjee critiques the rigid structures of traditional Indian society while also highlighting the alienation and fragmentation experienced in the diaspora.

THE TREE BRIDE (2004)

The Tree Bride is the second novel in Bharati Mukherjee's trilogy, published in 2004. The novel continues the story of Tara Chatterjee from *Desirable Daughters*, intertwining her contemporary life with the historical narrative of her great-great-aunt, Tara Lata, known as the Tree Bride. The story explores themes of heritage, identity, and the impact of colonialism.

Plot Overview

The novel begins with Tara Chatterjee recovering from the traumatic event of her house in San Francisco

being firebombed. While dealing with the aftermath, Tara reflects on her divorce and her son Rabi's recent departure for college. Seeking solace and understanding, Tara delves into her family's history, particularly the life of her namesake and great-great-aunt, Tara Lata.

Through research and family stories, Tara uncovers the remarkable life of Tara Lata, who lived in British India. Tara Lata, a young Bengali girl, was married to a tree after her groom died of snakebite on the day of their wedding. This act, intended to save her from widowhood and social ostracism, marked the beginning of her life as the Tree Bride.

Tara Lata becomes a symbol of resistance and resilience. Despite being bound to a tree, she defies societal norms and becomes an influential figure in her village. Her story is one of quiet rebellion against the oppressive structures of colonial rule and traditional patriarchy.

As Tara Chatterjee delves deeper into Tara Lata's life, she draws parallels between her ancestor's struggles and her own. Both women face challenges imposed by societal expectations and navigate the complexities of their identities. Tara Lata's strength and determination inspire Tara Chatterjee to confront her own fears and uncertainties.

Tara's investigation into her family history leads her to uncover hidden connections between her ancestors and key historical events in India. She learns about the impact of British colonialism on her family and their role in the independence movement. This exploration broadens Tara's understanding of her heritage and the sacrifices made by her ancestors.

The novel culminates in Tara Chatterjee's personal transformation. Embracing the legacy of the Tree Bride, she gains a deeper appreciation of her cultural roots and the resilience of the women in her family. Tara decides to honor her ancestor's memory by reconnecting with her heritage and taking an active role in preserving her family's history.

The narrative intertwines Tara's contemporary life with the history of her ancestor, exploring themes of resistance, legacy, and the impact of colonialism.

Themes and Analysis

Historical Legacy and Resistance

Through the story of Tara Lata, Mukherjee examines the role of women in resistance against colonial oppression. The novel celebrates the resilience of Indian women and their contributions to the fight for independence.

Connection to Ancestry

Tara's investigation into her ancestor's life serves as a metaphor for her search for identity. Mukherjee emphasizes the importance of understanding one's roots to navigate the complexities of modern identity.

MISS NEW INDIA (2011)

Miss New India is the third novel in Bharati Mukherjee's trilogy, published in 2011. The story centres on Anjali Bose, a young woman from a small town in Bihar who moves to Bangalore in pursuit of a better life. The novel explores themes of modernization, globalization, and the aspirations of the new generation in contemporary India.

Plot Overview

Anjali Bose, also known as Angie, is a spirited young woman living in the conservative town of Gauripur, Bihar. The daughter of a railway clerk, Anjali dreams of escaping her small-town life and its

limitations. Encouraged by her English teacher, Peter Champion, who sees potential in her, Anjali aspires to a modern, independent life in the city.

A marriage proposal from a wealthy but unappealing suitor prompts Anjali to reassess her life. Realizing she does not want to be confined by traditional expectations, she decides to move to Bangalore, a city known for its opportunities and modern lifestyle. Anjali leaves her family and fiancé behind, determined to forge her own path.

In Bangalore, Anjali is exposed to the fast-paced, dynamic environment of a globalizing India. She initially struggles to find her footing but quickly adapts to the city's culture. Anjali secures a job at a call center, where she meets a diverse group of young professionals who, like her, are striving for success and independence.

As Anjali navigates her new life, she faces numerous challenges, including financial instability, workplace politics, and the complexities of urban life. Despite these obstacles, she remains resilient and resourceful. Anjali's interactions with her colleagues and new friends open her eyes to different perspectives and lifestyles.

Through her experiences in Bangalore, Anjali undergoes significant personal growth. She learns to assert herself, make independent decisions, and embrace her ambitions. Anjali's journey reflects the broader transformation of Indian society, where traditional values and modern aspirations often collide.

The novel concludes with Anjali finding a balance between her roots and her newfound identity. She becomes more confident and self-assured, embodying the spirit of "Miss New India"—a symbol of the new generation of Indian women who are breaking free from traditional constraints and shaping their own destinies.

The novel explores her experiences in the rapidly globalizing and modernizing landscape of urban India.

Themes and Analysis

Modernization and Globalization

Anjali's story reflects the broader societal changes in India, with Mukherjee highlighting the opportunities and challenges brought by globalization. The novel portrays the dynamism of contemporary Indian cities and the new aspirations of Indian youth.

Empowerment and Transformation

Anjali's journey is one of empowerment and transformation. Mukherjee presents her protagonist's struggle for independence and self-realization against the backdrop of societal expectations and cultural constraints.

Conclusion

Bharati Mukherjee's trilogy provides a rich and complex exploration of identity, culture, and transformation. Through the experiences of her protagonists, Mukherjee addresses the challenges of navigating multiple cultural worlds and the personal journeys of self-discovery. Her work offers valuable insights into the diasporic experience and the evolving landscape of contemporary India.

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