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Narrative Voice and Female Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine*

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Abstract:

This paper compares narrative voice and constrained agency in Bharati Mukherjee's The Tiger's Daughter and Jasmine. Building on established accounts of her movement from expatriate to immigrant writing, it examines how third-person irony and first-person self-interpretation represent female diasporic identity. Close readings of Tara's Vassar experience and confinement, and of Jasmine's naming, bodily trauma, and reliance on personal networks, show that both protagonists negotiate continuity and change. The third-person narrator conveys Tara's thoughts while qualifying her self-understanding; Jasmine narrates her successive roles while navigating gendered and material constraints. Drawing on Mohanty, Spivak, Hall, and Bhabha, the analysis distinguishes access to a character's thoughts and interpretations from the practical freedom to act. This comparison qualifies a simple opposition between expatriate immobility and immigrant liberation by examining how class, gender, and legal status shape the possibilities of agency.

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee, Female Identity, Postcolonial Feminism, Diaspora, Hybridity, Metamorphosis.

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1. Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee's The Tiger's Daughter and Jasmine offer contrasting narrative accounts of migration and female identity. In her 1989 interview with Ameena Meer, Mukherjee identifies herself as an American writer and distinguishes immigrant writing from expatriate writing. She recalls writing The Tiger's Daughter while she considered herself an expatriate, associating its enclosed social world with irony and affection. These statements place the comparison within her changing account of belonging. They also require care: Mukherjee describes Jasmine as expressing her emotions while denying that its events or characters are autobiographical. Her self-positioning provides context for close reading; the protagonists' agency must be assessed through their narrated circumstances.

Critics have often approached Mukherjee's protagonists through the opposition between alienation and assimilation. Nelson summarises Brinda Bose's reading of Mukherjee's heroines, including Tara, as one in which adaptation to change is possible only when the characters "unanchor themselves from their nostalgic immobility" (xii). Responses to Jasmine are more divided. Carmen Wickramagamage reads Jasmine's transformation as an "emancipatory narrative of self" (174), part of Mukherjee's vision of immigration as "a positive act" (194). Nelson describes Gurleen Grewal's essay as "a restrained critique": Grewal acknowledges the dramatic force of Jasmine's transformation but questions the novel's investment in the American Dream and its promise of self-reinvention irrespective of race, gender, or class (xvi).

Sharma's account of Mukherjee's movement from expatriate to immigrant, discussed in Nelson's collection, provides an established starting point for this comparison (3). The collection also includes Bose's comparative discussion of female identity in The Tiger's Daughter, Wife, and Jasmine (Nelson xii). Nelson also describes Parekh's reading of Jasmine as relating its narrative

structure to female-centred Indian oral storytelling (xiii–xiv). This paper builds on these readings by comparing how third-person irony and first-person self-interpretation shape the representation of constrained agency in The Tiger's Daughter and Jasmine.

The argument draws on postcolonial feminism and theories of diaspora and hybridity. In "Under Western Eyes," Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques Western feminist scholarship that homogenises women in the Third World through shared oppression (333, 335). Her attention to specific social and historical relations guides this paper's comparison of Tara's elite position and Jasmine's precarious migrant circumstances. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work on subaltern voice and the gendered body in colonial discourse provides a related framework. Stuart Hall contrasts a view of cultural identity as "one, shared culture" (223) with a second, related view in which it is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (225). He describes black Caribbean identities as framed by "two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative": one of "similarity and continuity," the other of "difference and rupture" (226). Applied here, this framework allows Tara's attachment to the past and Jasmine's repeated self-reinvention to be compared as different negotiations of continuity and change. Homi K. Bhabha's "Third Space" describes the conditions of enunciation through which cultural meanings are negotiated and reinterpreted. It challenges claims that cultures possess a fixed, original identity (54–55). Applied to these novels, the concept directs attention to how narration and acts of naming produce contested meanings of belonging. Together, these concepts show how spatial displacement alters consciousness without reducing cultural identity to either preservation or loss.

This paper argues that both novels represent female diasporic identity through tensions between inherited attachments and changing circumstances. The Tiger's Daughter gives access to Tara's thoughts while subjecting her self-understanding to third-person irony; Jasmine presents the

protagonist's own recollections and reinterpretations through first-person narration. Read together, the novels distinguish the capacity to interpret experience from the practical freedom to act. Tara's inward responses persist despite restricted action, while Jasmine's self-reinvention depends on relationships and resources that both enable and constrain her choices.

The analysis uses the 1972 Houghton Mifflin edition of The Tiger's Daughter and the 2019 thirtieth-anniversary e-book edition of Jasmine, which is cited by chapter.

2. The illusion of the homeland: spatial dislocation and the myth of return

Narrative perspective and spatial disorientation in The Tiger's Daughter

In The Tiger's Daughter, third-person narration moves between Tara's thoughts and commentary that questions her understanding of herself. This combination gives access to her estrangement without treating her perspective as the novel's only account. The opening description of Calcutta establishes the city and the Catelli-Continental through exaggeration and images of consumption:

> The Catelli-Continental Hotel on Chowringhee Avenue, Calcutta, is the navel of the universe. Gray and imposing, with many bay windows and fake turrets, the hotel occupies half a block, then spills untidily into an intersection. . . .
>
> There is, of course, no escape from Calcutta. Even an angel concedes that when pressed. Family after family moves from the provinces to its brutish center, and the center quivers a little, absorbs the bodies, digests them, and waits. (Mukherjee, The Tiger's Daughter 3–4)

The opening makes the hotel's supposed centrality ironic through the contrast between unrest and routine. "While small riots break out in the city, while buses burn and workers surround the warehouses," its fashionable visitors arrive for their "daily ritual of espresso or tea" (Mukherjee,

The Tiger's Daughter 4). The repeated "while" clauses place political upheaval alongside a social ritual that appears to continue undisturbed. The city's consuming imagery then unsettles the hotel's apparent refuge: Calcutta absorbs newcomers and offers no complete escape. This contrast establishes the precarious security of the social world to which Tara returns.

Tara seeks continuity with a remembered home, although her experiences abroad have already altered her relation to it. Read through Hall's account of identity, her dislocation emerges from the tension between that desire for continuity and changes in both herself and Calcutta (225–26). Bhabha's account of the unhomely (unheimlich) describes a related collapse of the boundary between private domestic refuge and public turmoil (13). Tara becomes alienated inside her ancestral home. The Vassar episode shows how access to Tara's thoughts coexists with ironic qualification. After reporting her claim that she began to think for herself there, the narrator immediately questions its accuracy, then acknowledges her late-night discussions of birth control (Mukherjee, The Tiger's Daughter 11). This sequence resists a simple story of liberation through Western education: changes in what Tara can discuss do not make her account of intellectual independence unquestionable. Her difficulty in belonging therefore coexists with changes in her outlook.

Continuity and forward movement in Jasmine

Jasmine uses first-person narration to present the protagonist's recollections and interpretations of her experiences. Tara's journey circles back toward a home she cannot recover; Jasmine's journey moves westward. After Sikh fundamentalists murder her husband, Prakash, in Punjab, Jyoti refuses the rural domestic confinement expected of a widow. She travels to the United States on forged documents, intending to burn Prakash's suit and immolate herself. After the assault in Florida, she burns the suitcase containing the suit and her widow's sari, then continues her journey (Mukherjee,

Jasmine, ch. 17). Later, in Manhattan, reflecting that she should have saved her wages rather than spending them, she recalls that burning as Jyoti's death: "Jyoti would have saved. But Jyoti was now a sati-goddess; she had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida. Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijh & Wife" (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 23).

Spivak's discussion of sati shows how colonial rescue narratives and defences of women's willing sacrifice can both displace the widow's own account (93). Jasmine's retrospective narration reworks this problem by describing Jyoti's death as figurative while recounting her own survival. The burning marks a change in her relation to widowhood, but the reference to "Vijh & Wife" preserves Prakash's place in her imagined future. Mukherjee's fictional first-person voice therefore makes the meaning of sacrifice available for reinterpretation; it does not by itself resolve Spivak's question about whether subaltern women can be heard.

Tara seeks reassurance through return, while Jasmine responds to displacement through further movement. Her route runs from rural Hasnapur through Florida and Flushing, then to Manhattan, Iowa, and finally toward California. Across these settings, her names and social roles change. Yet memories of Hasnapur remain active in her American life: recalling its water shortages, she describes her continuing habit of storing water in Iowa (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 2). Read through Hall, this pattern brings continuity and rupture together (226). Jasmine revises her relation to the past as she inhabits new identities.

3. Violence, bodily vulnerability, and survival

Coercion and political violence in The Tiger's Daughter

In The Tiger's Daughter, Tuntunwala's coercion and the attack near the Catelli-Continental expose different limits on Tara's security. The first disregards her refusal; the second brings political violence into her protected social world.

In Nayapur, Tara seeks relief for a headache in Tuntunwala's guest suite, where he dismisses her refusal:

> Tara gathered herself primly on the small sofa. "No thanks," she said. But Tuntunwala was accustomed only to acquiescence, to disposing of business empires and petty destinies without advice or apology. He dismissed her "No thanks" with a sympathetic nod, and began rubbing Vicks VapoRub indulgently on her forehead. . . .
>
> In another Calcutta such a scene would not have happened. Tara would not have walked into the suite of a gentleman for medicine, and a gentleman would not have dared to make such improper suggestions to her. (Mukherjee, The Tiger's Daughter 198–99)

Tara refuses Tuntunwala's advances and tries to disrupt the encounter through conversation. He overrides her refusal and invokes her reputation to discourage departure. The subsequent account of her difficulty telling her friends about his violence shows that concerns about reputation also constrain disclosure (Mukherjee, The Tiger's Daughter 198–99). Her resistance is visible, while her ability to secure protection and disclose the violence remains limited.

Outside the Catelli-Continental, Pronob leaves the car in an attempt to help Joyonto and is himself seized by the mob:

> He got only two steps away when the mob seized him. A soda bottle burst against Pronob's head. He had no time to scream. Tara had not seen so much blood on a friend before; a fat man bleeds profusely. They punched him while he was still bleeding. . . .
>
> And Tara, still locked in a car across the street from the Catelli-Continental, wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she didn't, whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely. (Mukherjee, The Tiger's Daughter 210)

The assault on Pronob brings political violence directly into Tara's protected social world. From inside the car, she witnesses the attack and wonders whether she will escape Calcutta. The ending exposes the limits of the security afforded by wealth and caste, yet continues to convey her fear and her love for David. Her restricted agency therefore coexists with the privilege that continues to shape her social position.

Class privilege and gendered constraints in The Tiger's Daughter

Mukherjee herself described the novel as an account of "my class at a certain period in Calcutta's history, about a class and a way of life that's become extinct" ("Bharati Mukherjee"). Critics have read that class focus more sceptically. Anne Brewster observes that the narrator "mourns the decline of Calcutta in the face of communist-inspired populist uprising," and Debjani Banerjee, as summarised by Nelson, finds the novel's account of the Naxalite revolt "unifocal, drawing on the hegemonic point of view" (qtd. in Nelson xv). On this reading, Tara's alienation belongs to a declining elite insulated from the struggles that surround it.

Mohanty's insistence on analysing women through specific social and historical relations helps qualify this class-based explanation (338). Applied to Tara, it directs attention to how class privilege and gendered expectations shape one another. Her family's wealth protects her from deprivation, yet the social order sustained by that wealth also regulates her conduct. The pressures of family expectations, convent schooling, and Tuntunwala's coercion qualify the autonomy her privileged upbringing appears to promise (Mukherjee, The Tiger's Daughter 11, 198).

Bodily injury and the Kali identification in Jasmine

In Jasmine, the Florida assault precedes the protagonist's killing of Half-Face and her eventual abandonment of planned self-immolation. Her account moves from thoughts of suicide to cutting her tongue and attacking him:

> I extended my tongue, and sliced it. Hot blood dripped immediately in the sink. . . .
>
> I began to shiver. The blade need not be long, only sharp, and my hand not strong, only quick. His eyes fluttered open even before I felt the metal touch his throat, and his smile and panic were nearly instantaneous. I wanted that moment when he saw me above him as he had last seen me, naked, but now with my mouth open, pouring blood, my red tongue out. I wanted him to open his mouth and start to reach, I wanted that extra hundredth of a second when the blade bit deeper than any insect, when I jumped back as he jerked forward, slapping at his neck while blood, ribbons of bright blood, rushed between his fingers. (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 17)

Jasmine later names Kali among the identities associated with the men in her life, linking that name to Half-Face (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 24). This retrospective identification connects the bloodied tongue and killing to an inherited cultural figure. It gives the violence a place in her

account of successive identities, while the surrounding account of suicide and intended immolation complicates a reading of that identification as immediate liberation.

Mohanty critiques Western feminist scholarship that represents women in the Third World as a homogeneous group defined by victimhood (336–38). Applied to Jasmine, that critique cautions against allowing the rape to exhaust the account of her subjectivity. Her killing of Half-Face and subsequent survival complicate a reading organised solely around victimisation (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 17). The scene presents agency under conditions of coercion, bodily injury, and precarious migration, leaving the costs of survival visible.

4. Agency, inherited expectations, and self-interpretation

Ancestry, composure, and displacement in The Tiger's Daughter

Family lineage and convent schooling shape Tara's responses to unfamiliar circumstances. The early account of Vassar associates her ability to remain there with inherited expectations of composure: "For Tara Vassar had been an almost unsalvageable mistake. If she had not been a Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin, the great-granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee, or perhaps if she had not been trained by the good nuns at St. Blaise's to remain composed and ladylike in all emergencies, she would have rushed home to India at the end of her first week" (Mukherjee, The Tiger's Daughter 10).

Inherited expectations help Tara remain at Vassar, while also requiring her to appear composed. Her repeated attempts to write home show how difficult it is to disclose her distress to her parents (Mukherjee, The Tiger's Daughter 10). The passage thus presents ancestry and education as resources whose demands complicate her response to displacement.

Tara's divided affiliations become visible in encounters that contest her education and marriage. Aunt Jharna treats Tara's suggestion of medical treatment as evidence of contempt for family practices, invoking her American money and foreign husband. Tara, in turn, wonders whether her estrangement began at St. Blaise's, Vassar, or Madison. Her recollection of the Belgian nuns shows how European cultural forms had already entered her elite Calcutta upbringing (Mukherjee, The Tiger's Daughter 36–37). The narration presents foreignness as a question with several possible beginnings, exposing the tensions within her inherited and acquired affiliations.

Defying the stars: Jasmine's serial metamorphoses

Jasmine begins with a direct refusal of such determinism. Under a banyan tree, a village astrologer predicts that seven-year-old Jyoti will suffer widowhood and exile. She immediately challenges him:

> Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears—his satellite dish to the stars—and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns.
>
> "No!" I shouted. "You're a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds!"
>
> "Suit yourself," the astrologer cackled. "What is to happen will happen." Then he chucked me hard on the head.
>
> I fell. My teeth cut into my tongue. A twig sticking out of the bundle of firewood I'd scavenged punched a star-shaped wound into my forehead. I lay still. The astrologer re-entered his trance. I was nothing, a speck in the solar system. Bad times were on their way. I was helpless, doomed. The star bled.
>
> "I don't believe you," I whispered. (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 1)

Jyoti's account of the forehead wound turns an injury into a dispute over meaning. Her sisters treat the scar as an obstacle to finding a husband, while she identifies it with the third eye of the sages in her mother's stories. She draws on an inherited cultural image to contest a judgment that measures her future through marriageability. The first-person account records both her initial sense of helplessness after the injury and her subsequent efforts to challenge what it means (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 1).

This refusal continues through Jasmine's successive names, which can be read through Hall as changing positions shaped by both her past and her present circumstances (225–26). As Jyoti, whose name means "Light," she is a rural Punjabi girl who insists on continuing her education and learning English. Prakash renames her Jasmine as part of their move toward urban modernity and away from village superstition: "Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities" (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 12). In Florida, Lillian Gordon calls her Jazzy and teaches her the practical codes of American life, including how to walk and dress like an American without drawing attention to herself. Taylor calls her Jase in Manhattan, where she describes growing confidence and values his acceptance of her foreignness. His help securing work at Columbia expands her opportunities. These gains coexist with her employment as the Hayeses' caregiver and the insecurity of her undocumented status (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 23). In Baden, Iowa, she becomes Jane, the domestic partner of the disabled banker Bud Ripplemeyer and the mother of his unborn child. None of these identities is final. Each belongs to a particular relation, place, and set of material pressures.

Jasmine's account of becoming Jane makes the tension between naming and self-interpretation visible. Bud supplies the name, but she distinguishes his jokes about the name from her own wish to be ordinary, describing Plain Jane as a role. Her acknowledgement that her foreignness frightens

them both suggests that the new name does not resolve their anxieties about difference. The brief qualification that she is almost Jane interrupts the apparent completion of the new identity (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 4). First-person narration lets her register the gap between the name she is given and her own sense of identity. The comparison with Tara's Vassar episode reveals two ways of qualifying a character's account of change: narratorial correction and the protagonist's own qualification.

Suhaib H. Malkawi's archetypal reading argues that male renaming does not necessarily cancel Jasmine's agency and that her earlier self persists within transformation. His account of instinctive agency includes intuitive responses alongside deliberate action (125). The present reading shares his attention to continuity while questioning his anticipation of psychological integration at the ending (157). Jasmine's departure opens a further relationship and an uncertain future; it does not establish freedom from the legal and economic constraints narrated earlier. Her first-person interpretation of change must therefore be considered alongside the conditions under which she can act.

Assimilation and constrained agency in Jasmine

Critics have also questioned the politics of the novel's celebration of mobility. Anne Brewster's critique of Mukherjee's "neo-nationalism" argues that her celebration of immigrant success reinforces dominant American national ideals while obscuring differences of class, race, and ethnicity. This criticism requires a distinction between Jasmine's capacity to act under constraint and the novel's presentation of America as a place of self-reinvention.

In "Two Ways to Belong in America" (1996), Mukherjee contrasts her commitment to American belonging and self-transformation with her sister Mira's attachment to Indian citizenship. Yet the essay also records Mira's sense of betrayal over proposals affecting legal immigrants and recalls

Mukherjee's own experience of exclusion in Canada. Its celebration of transformation therefore coexists with an account of belonging made insecure by political decisions. Read alongside Jasmine, this tension helps distinguish the protagonist's desire for a future in America from the legal recognition and material security available to her. The later essay offers a perspective on that tension rather than a definitive explanation of the novel.

The material conditions of Jasmine's survival nevertheless remain central to assessing her choices. As an undocumented migrant, Jasmine encounters limits on legal recognition, illustrated by her inability to testify for Lillian Gordon and the rejection of her anonymous letter of support (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 19). Lillian and other personal contacts nevertheless provide shelter, medical help, and routes to work (Mukherjee, Jasmine, chs. 2, 18–22). Her survival depends on this uneven combination of exclusion and assistance. Her successive roles as Jazzy, Jase, and Jane can be read as responses to changing dependencies and opportunities. Hall's term "positioning" is useful here because it treats identity as a location within changing relations of power, not as an essence that can either be preserved or betrayed (226).

Jasmine's choices remain shaped by relationships and the insecurity of her undocumented status. In Manhattan, recognising Prakash's killer prompts her decision to leave for Iowa; she rejects Taylor's suggestion of calling the police, citing her undocumented status and vulnerability to attack (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 23). Her later departure from Iowa is a separate decision: while pregnant with Bud's child, she leaves with Taylor and Duff toward California: "I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness. . . . I am out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 26).

The final sentence places emphasis on movement: Jasmine is “scrambling ahead,” “greedy with wants,” and “reckless from hope.” She does not simply follow Taylor. She moves ahead of him and denies that her choice can be reduced to a choice between men. Jasmine’s exchange with Karin turns her departure into a dispute over meaning: she redescribes leaving Bud as movement toward a future (Mukherjee, Jasmine, ch. 26). Bhabha’s account of the Third Space directs attention to this attempt to redefine duty and self-reinvention through language (55). Her appeal to the “promise of America” nevertheless retains the national opposition criticised by Brewster, while her departure remains bound to another relationship.

5. Conclusion

The Tiger’s Daughter and Jasmine represent female diasporic identity through different forms of narrative access. Third-person irony conveys Tara’s thoughts while qualifying her understanding of displacement; Jasmine’s first-person account presents her interpretations of successive names and roles. Both draw on inherited memories and expectations, so their difference cannot be reduced to a movement from fixed identity to unrestricted reinvention.

These forms of representation also distinguish interpretation from practical freedom. Tara’s refusals and self-questioning coexist with elite privilege and vulnerability to coercion and political violence. Jasmine’s capacity to reinterpret her experience develops through bodily injury, uncertain legal standing, and dependence on personal networks. Her departure toward California leaves an open future, while Tara’s confinement exposes the limits of her security. The comparison therefore qualifies the established expatriate-to-immigrant account: narrative voice shapes how agency is represented, while gender, class, and migration circumstances constrain the choices each protagonist can make.

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