



ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00
IJRE 2024; 6(2): 425-430
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 22-10-2024
Accepted: 23-11-2024

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International Journal of Research in English

The world is divided between those who stay and those who leave": A portrayal of the woman warriors in the selected texts of Bharati Mukherjee

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i2f.261>

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's novels, *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, and *Desirable Daughters*, intricately explore the dichotomy of "those who stay and those who leave," a recurring theme in the lives of her female protagonists. These novels portray women who, despite being bound by traditional expectations, emerge as warriors in their own right, negotiating their identities in a world fraught with displacement and cultural conflicts. Mukherjee's characters are emblematic of the immigrant experience, where the act of leaving—physically or metaphorically—becomes a catalyst for self-discovery and empowerment.

In *Jasmine*, the titular character embarks on a journey from rural India to the United States, transforming from an innocent village girl into a resilient survivor. Her multiple rebirths and identities reflect the struggles and triumphs of an immigrant woman navigating a foreign land. Similarly, *The Tiger's Daughter* centres around Tara, who returns to India after years of living in America only to find herself estranged from her homeland. Tara's internal conflict between staying and leaving underscores the complexities of cultural assimilation and the quest for belonging. *Desirable Daughters* further expands on these themes through the lives of three sisters, each representing different facets of the immigrant experience. Padma, Parvati, and Tara confront issues of tradition, modernity, and identity as they navigate their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers in a rapidly changing world. Their stories illustrate the varying degrees of resistance and adaptation that immigrant women must undergo.

Through these texts, Mukherjee crafts a powerful narrative about the resilience of women who, whether staying rooted in tradition or venturing into the unknown, become warriors in their pursuit of autonomy and identity. These protagonists challenge and redefine the boundaries of their worlds, embodying the complex interplay between cultural heritage and personal freedom.

Keywords: Autonomy, identity, self-discovery, empowerment, resilience, cultural assimilation, immigrant experience

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee's life and literary journey epitomize the theme "The world is divided between those who stay and those who leave." Over the years, she has held various academic positions, ultimately finding her long-term home in 1989 at the University of California-Berkeley. Mukherjee's personal experiences, marked by displacement and adaptation, reflect the complexities of the immigrant experience. Born in colonial India, she later became a post-colonial exile in Canada, finally embracing a new identity as an immigrant and citizen in the United States. Her years in Canada were among the most challenging of her life, marked by discrimination and alienation as part of the 'visible minority.' She often spoke of the doubt and prejudice she faced due to her skin colour, describing Canada as a place that was claustrophobic, narrow-minded, and resistant to cultural assimilation. In many interviews, Mukherjee highlighted the hostility she encountered in Canada, a country she felt was unfriendly to immigrants and opposed to embracing their diverse identities. This sense of exclusion eventually led Mukherjee and her family to leave Canada for the United States in 1980, where she was welcomed as a permanent resident. In the U.S., she and her husband began teaching at the University of Iowa and lectured at various universities across the continent. This move marked a significant shift in Mukherjee's life, as she transitioned from a place of rejection to one of acceptance, a journey reflected in the lives of the women warriors in her works.

Through her writing, Mukherjee channels these experiences, crafting narratives that explore the tension between staying in a hostile environment and leaving in search of a place where one can truly belong. These distinct phases of her life mirror the struggles and transformations of the women warriors in her selected texts, who navigate the challenges of staying or leaving in a divided world. Mukherjee's work seeks to create a 'new immigrant literature,' fusing her diverse experiences to explore the nuanced identities of women who must constantly redefine themselves in foreign lands.

Literature review

Bharati Mukherjee is often discussed within the framework of diaspora literature, where scholars have highlighted her focus on the challenges and transformations faced by immigrants, particularly women. In texts such as *Jasmine* and *The Tiger's Daughter*, Mukherjee delves into the lives of women who navigate the complexities of leaving their homeland and adapting to a new cultural landscape. These protagonists, often referred to as 'woman warriors,' embody the struggles of those who leave their familiar surroundings and confront the realities of life in a foreign land. Critics like have noted how Mukherjee's characters undergo significant identity shifts, often breaking away from traditional roles and embracing new, often hybrid, identities in their adopted countries.

Mukherjee's works frequently explore the binary opposition between staying and leaving, a theme central to the lives of her protagonists. The decision to stay in a restrictive, often hostile environment or to leave in search of freedom and self-fulfillment is a recurring motif in her narratives. Scholars have analyzed this theme in the context of post-colonialism and feminist theory, noting how Mukherjee's women characters challenge patriarchal and colonial structures by choosing to leave and forge new paths. For instance, in *The Middleman and Other Stories*, the stories of immigrant women highlight the psychological and emotional toll of migration, yet also celebrate the resilience and strength of those who choose to leave. According to Mukherjee's portrayal of these women underscores the notion that leaving is not just a physical act but a metaphorical one, representing the breaking of societal chains and the pursuit of autonomy.

Mukherjee's critique of cultural assimilation, particularly in her reflections on Canada, is a critical aspect of her literary oeuvre. Scholars such have explored how Mukherjee's experiences in Canada—marked by discrimination and cultural alienation—influence her depiction of immigrant women in her fiction. These women, often caught between the desire to assimilate and the need to retain their cultural identity, navigate a precarious existence. In her works, Mukherjee frequently portrays Canada as a space of exclusion, where immigrants are expected to conform to rigid cultural norms, in contrast to the more inclusive American context where her characters find a sense of belonging. This dichotomy is evident in the choices her women characters make, often opting to leave environments where cultural assimilation is synonymous with erasure of identity.

Bharati Mukherjee's contribution to what she calls 'new immigrant literature' is a significant aspect of her literary legacy. This body of work, which includes narratives centered on the experiences of immigrant women,

challenges the traditional tropes of victimhood often associated with immigrant literature. Instead, Mukherjee presents her protagonists as 'woman warriors'—strong, adaptive, and resourceful individuals who actively shape their destinies in foreign lands. Scholars like Sheila J have praised Mukherjee for her ability to capture the nuanced experiences of these women, highlighting their agency in the face of adversity. This literature underscores the duality of the immigrant experience—the simultaneous struggle and celebration of forging a new identity in a new world.

The intersection of feminism and post-colonialism in Mukherjee's work is another area of scholarly interest. Her portrayal of immigrant women is often seen as a critique of both patriarchal structures and the colonial legacy. Mukherjee's characters, especially in novels like *Wife and Desirable Daughters*, resist the traditional expectations imposed on them by both their native and adopted cultures. Critics have noted how Mukherjee's writing offers a feminist reimagining of the immigrant narrative, where the act of leaving becomes an assertion of selfhood and resistance against oppression. Mukherjee's work challenges the notion of the passive immigrant woman, instead offering a portrayal of women who are active agents in their own liberation.

Methodology

This research paper employs a qualitative approach to analyze the portrayal of "woman warriors" in selected texts of Bharati Mukherjee. The methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Mukherjee constructs her female protagonists as agents of change, resistance, and identity formation in the context of migration and displacement. This research involves the careful selection of Mukherjee's texts that best exemplify the theme of staying versus leaving. The primary texts selected for analysis include: *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, and *Desirable Daughters*. These works are chosen because they prominently feature female protagonists who grapple with the challenges of migration, cultural assimilation, and identity formation.

The core of the methodology is a close reading and literary analysis of the selected texts. This involves a detailed examination of the narratives, character development, themes, and symbols related to the concepts of staying and leaving. The analysis is guided by the following research questions: How does Bharati Mukherjee depict the decision to stay or leave as a pivotal moment in the lives of her female protagonists? In what ways do the "woman warriors" in Mukherjee's texts challenge or conform to traditional gender roles within the context of migration? How does the theme of staying versus leaving contribute to the identity formation of the protagonists in Mukherjee's work? The analysis will focus on characterization, themes and motifs and narrative structure.

In addition to literary analysis, this research incorporates contextual analysis to situate Mukherjee's work within broader socio-cultural and historical frameworks. This involves applying post-colonial theory to understand how Mukherjee's texts address the legacy of colonialism and its impact on identity, migration, and cultural assimilation, utilizes feminist theory to explore how Mukherjee's portrayal of "woman warriors" challenges traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures and draws on diaspora studies to analyze how Mukherjee's texts reflect the

experiences of displacement, belonging, and identity negotiation among immigrant women.

To complement the textual analysis, this research will review interviews with Bharati Mukherjee and critical essays about her work. Mukherjee's own reflections on her life experiences, particularly her time in Canada and the United States, will provide valuable insights into her portrayal of immigrant women.

Discussion and findings

In Bharati Mukherjee's debut novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, the protagonist Tara Banerjee returns to India after spending seven years in America. The story draws heavily from Mukherjee's own experiences and those of her sisters who had also gone to study in America. Upon arriving at the Bombay airport, Tara feels uneasy around her relatives. Her Bombay family struggles to accept her because she is unaccompanied by her husband, David. According to traditional Indian customs, a woman is expected to be led and protected by a man. In many parts of India, it is still uncommon for a woman to travel, live, or move alone. Indian tradition also dictates that marriages should occur within the same caste, and those who marry outside of their caste are often viewed as outcasts or sinners. However, Tara defies these conventions by marrying a foreign man who is Jewish, completely disregarding her caste and religious background. Mukherjee subtly critiques the conservative attitudes of Indians who, despite their obsession with foreign goods and fashion, still resist the idea of marrying foreigners. Tara feels alienated even in the presence of her mother, leading to inner turmoil. Ultimately, this sense of alienation drives her to return to the United States. Thus, the theme of alienation is central to Tara's experience in Mukherjee's first novel.

In Bharati Mukherjee's first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, the protagonist, Tara Banerjee Cartwright, mirrors Mukherjee's own background as an upper-class Bengali Brahmin from Calcutta. The novel opens in 1879, depicting the opulent wedding of Hari Lal Banerjee's daughters. Hari Lal, Tara's great-grandfather, is a landowner in Pachapara, and the scene captures the grandeur and deep-rooted stability of the Banerjee family. However, Mukherjee subtly foreshadows the turbulent future that lies ahead, noting that even a wise man like Hari Lal could not have foreseen the upheavals awaiting India, including partition, social unrest, and the rise of labour movements.

The novel underscores postcolonial themes from the outset. Tara, who is pursuing a master's degree in America, much like Mukherjee herself, reflects on her initial experiences abroad. Despite her upbringing as a Bengali Brahmin, the great-granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee, and the disciplined education she received from the nuns at St. Blaise's, she nearly succumbed to homesickness during her first week in America. By the end of her first year, as her classmates prepared to return home for the summer, Tara suffered a nervous breakdown characterized by fainting spells, headaches, and nightmares. Her letters home to her mother, filled with complaints of homesickness, prompted prayers to Kali for Tara's well-being, highlighting the severe impact of cultural dislocation on her. Mukherjee intricately weaves together broader political issues of colonialism with Tara's personal feelings of ambivalence toward emigration and her diasporic experience. The Banerjee family's fortunes, once secure, have been shattered by history, a

reality that is reflected in the personal struggles of Tara, one of its descendants. Even after marrying and living in America, Tara feels out of place and deeply homesick. She clings to her Indian identity by engaging in small, symbolic acts, such as ironing and hanging her silk scarves to give her apartment a more "Indian" feel. She also cooks curries so intensely spiced that her husband, David, protests. These actions represent her attempt to resist complete assimilation and to maintain a connection with her native culture.

Communication with David about her background and life in Calcutta proves difficult for Tara. He asks naive questions about Indian culture, and while she places great value on family—a core aspect of Indian life—David perceives her reliance on family as excessive. Both her husband's inability to understand her and the broader American culture contribute to her sense of alienation. For Tara, Madison Square is unbearable, and she sees her husband as a foreigner, underscoring her disconnection from both her new life and her past. Critics like Feroza Jussawalla have observed that South Asian immigrants in the United States often struggle more than other groups to balance belonging to the majority culture while maintaining their identities. Their reception is mixed, largely because of their reluctance or inability to fully integrate. Tara feels pressured to assimilate completely, faced with the choice of either rejecting her past or never fully becoming American.

After seven years in America, Tara returns to Calcutta with high hopes of closing the gap of cultural alienation she has experienced. However, she is shocked by the reality she encounters. The India she returns to is marked by poverty and decay, far from the idealized vision she had held. The sight of "shrivelled women," "a colony of beggars," and "walls patterned with rust and mould" leaves her disillusioned. In her letters to David, Tara avoids articulating her feelings of alienation, knowing that to do so would be to acknowledge her sense of dispossession. David, on the other hand, expects Tara to speak out against the injustices she witnesses, such as unemployment, hunger, and bribery. But Tara, feeling helpless, believes that fighting for justice is futile and that it is better to remain passive and endure whatever comes.

Tara's experience reveals that she is now too American to feel at home in India, even though she is also too Indian to fully belong in America. The narrative of Hari Lal at the beginning of the novel foreshadows Tara's eventual realization that she has become estranged from both cultures. Her dream of India, shaped by memories and stories, is shattered by the harsh realities of postcolonial India, a country grappling with the legacies of British rule, partition, and independence. Mukherjee also touches on the broader process of decolonization, which involves not only the rejection of colonial rule but also the abandonment of colonial ideologies and ways of thinking. This struggle is reflected in Tara's attempts to resist full assimilation into American culture while simultaneously longing for the Bengal of her great-grandfather. Similarly, other characters in the novel, such as Dev and Adit, engage in a self-aware parody of "Englishness" and "Indianness," highlighting the complexities of postcolonial identity.

Tara's return to Calcutta intensifies her sense of cultural alienation. Her interactions with family and friends remind her of how much she has changed. She realizes that she has forgotten much of the language she once used with her friends in Indian-English, and she finds herself uncertain in

performing religious rituals with her mother. This forgetting is not just a loss of vocabulary or religious practice; it represents a deeper, more profound loss—a "little death," as Tara describes it. Leaving India, whether intentionally or not, has led to a gradual forgetting of the customs and traditions that once anchored her identity. This act of forgetting is not just an individual experience; it is collective, influenced by social and historical forces. Maurice Halbwachs' concept of "collective memory" shows how groups rely on one another to remember and preserve shared experiences. In a postcolonial context, memory becomes a battleground against the erasure of the past, as noted by Michael Rothberg, who argues that memory is crucial in resisting empire, which often seeks to erase histories it deems irrelevant or dangerous. Tara's act of remembering her grandfather, despite her husband's opposition to her cultural practices, can be seen as a gendered form of cultural reclamation.

However, Tara's forgetting of her language, religion, and customs can be seen as a betrayal of the group, explaining the hostility she encounters from her former friends. The dilemma in the novel revolves around the characters' need to choose where they truly belong. As Roger Kennedy suggests, the idea of home transcends physical structures and resides in the soul. Yet for Tara, her long-anticipated return to her "original home" in India forces her to confront the reality that her beliefs and preconceptions are no longer valid. Immigrants in the diaspora, like Tara, often find themselves living in an "interstitial space" between the country they left and the country where they now reside. This "grey area" becomes their "home," existing between two cultures, two ways of life, and two sets of values.

Bharati Mukherjee's third novel, *Jasmine*, is a powerful narrative of adaptation rather than defeat. It centers on Jyoti, a young girl from rural Punjab, whose life undergoes profound transformations. Her journey begins when she marries Prakash, an energetic and ambitious man. When Prakash plans to move to America, Jyoti, now renamed Jasmine, expresses her deep commitment to him by declaring, "I'll go with you, and if you leave me, I'll jump into a well." This statement reflects the traditional expectation that a wife should follow her husband's path. Enthusiastically adopting Prakash's ambitions as her own, Jasmine eagerly anticipates their new life in America, a land she views as full of opportunities. However, this dream is abruptly shattered when Prakash is murdered on the eve of his departure. Despite this tragedy, Jasmine resolves to fulfill Prakash's mission, planning to travel to America and perform "Sati," a ritual act symbolizing a widow's ultimate devotion. Once in America, Jasmine undergoes a series of transformations, adapting to her new environment with remarkable resilience. She learns to "walk and talk" like an American, seizing every opportunity to assimilate. Jasmine's evolution continues as she adopts the name "Jase," symbolizing her new identity in a foreign land. Her journey is marked by acts of empowerment, including avenging Prakash's death by killing Sukhwinder, the man responsible for his murder. After this, she moves to Iowa, where she assumes yet another identity, "Jane." Through these various personas—Jasmine, Jase, and Jane—she embodies a power comparable to the Hindu goddess Shakti, who symbolizes strength and the ability to destroy evil.

Jasmine's story is one of breaking free from the constraints of caste, gender, and familial expectations. She learns to live

for herself, not merely for her husband or children, and emerges as a survivor, a fighter, and a master of adaptation. Confronted with unfavorable circumstances, she overcomes them and builds a new life in an alien country, redefining her identity along the way.

The novel *Jasmine* can be interpreted as a feminist work, as it showcases the protagonist's ability to balance modernity with tradition—a key aspect of feminism. Throughout the novel, Jasmine undergoes numerous transformations, each marked by a change in her name and identity. She begins as Jyoti, a village girl from Hasnapur, and after marrying Prakash, she becomes Jasmine. As an undocumented immigrant in America, she takes on the name Jase, later transforming into Jane, a Manhattan nanny, and eventually becoming Jane, a woman living in Iowa. The recurring letter "J" in her various names serves as a symbol of continuity, transformation, and feminism throughout the novel. Elizabeth Bronfen aptly notes that this "J" signifies a dialectic of progressive identity formation, where new identities emerge, overwrite existing ones, and yet do not entirely erase them. Jasmine's evolving identity reflects her conscious and resilient self-reinvention, marked by hybridity. Unlike traditional women who passively accept their fate, Jasmine challenges and reshapes her destiny. She views the scar on her forehead not as a blemish but as her "third eye," a symbol of insight and wisdom that guides her as she explores new worlds.

Bharati Mukherjee's heroines, including Jasmine, are portrayed as distinct, hopeful individuals who set their own rules. Mukherjee emphasizes that women are no longer meek, content with whatever life offers them. Instead, they are fighters, determined to achieve what they deserve. Jasmine, from her childhood, is different. She refuses to be bound by ancient beliefs and carves out her own path, overcoming every obstacle with determination. In an interview with *Bomb* magazine, Mukherjee describes characters like Jasmine as people who are breaking free from traditional worlds where their fates are predetermined by the stars. Jasmine, however, asserts her agency by declaring, "I'm going to reposition the stars," embodying the spirit of a new kind of woman who refuses to accept a predestined fate.

Desirable Daughters, Bharati Mukherjee's sixth novel, published in 2002, delves into the intricate lives of three sisters who navigate the intersections of tradition and modernity. The story portrays Tara, Parvati, and Padma, women from a distinguished Bengali Brahmin lineage, as they grapple with the expectations of their heritage while forging their own paths in a rapidly changing world. These sisters, the great-granddaughters of Jai Krishna Gangooli and the daughters of Motilal Bhattacharjee, embody both traditional values and contemporary aspirations. They represent the concept of "desirable daughters," women who would make any parent proud due to their ability to balance respect for their roots with their personal ambitions. The novel explores themes of generational values, the impact of American culture on these values, and the immigrant experience as the sisters negotiate their identities between their homeland and their adopted country. The narrative, told from the perspective of Tara, the youngest sister, takes readers on a journey through the complexities of identity and cultural adaptation. Tara, Parvati, and Padma, named after aspects of the Hindu goddess Shakti, symbolize strength and resilience. As the novel states, "Just as our

mother hoped in naming us after goddesses, we have survived, even prospered." Their lives reflect a blend of tradition and modernity, each sister navigating her own unique path.

Parvati, who married an Indian man she met in college in Boston, embodies a blend of traditional values and personal choice. She later settles in the affluent neighborhoods of Bombay, where she lives a life of comfort with servants at her disposal. Padma, the eldest, embraces a life of luxury in Bombay after marrying a man of her choosing, demonstrating how traditional roots can coexist with modern desires. Tara, however, finds herself more adrift. She appreciates her conventional upbringing but also takes pride in her ability to move forward in life, showcasing the adaptability of immigrants and their capacity to redefine themselves.

Mukherjee uses the relationships among the sisters to explore deeper themes of modernity versus tradition and the dynamics of female bonding. The sisters' interactions reveal how stories within a family are claimed, denied, and passed on, highlighting the complexity of identity even within a seemingly homogeneous sibling group. Through Tara, Parvati, and Padma, Mukherjee examines how different roles emerge within the family and the broader implications of these roles within the context of their cultural heritage. Tara, the middle sister, often communicates with her parents and sisters, yet their conversations avoid stirring up past conflicts or unresolved issues. Despite the family's outward appearance of success and normalcy, the arrival of a young man at Tara's home claiming to be Padma's son forces Tara to confront long-buried family secrets. The novel explores how these secrets and the sisters' different responses to them shape their identities and relationships.

Parvati's marriage to her Indian husband, whom she met in Boston, was initially a cause for concern within the family, reflecting the tension between tradition and personal choice. Padma, on the other hand, has distanced herself from her family, living in New York and keeping much of her life a mystery. This distance highlights the different paths the sisters have taken and the varying degrees of self-empowerment they experience. As Tara grapples with the revelations brought about by the young man's appearance, she begins to question her existence and the values she has held. Her journey to uncover the truth about her family leads her to reexamine her past in an effort to find authenticity in her present life. This exploration of identity, both personal and cultural, is central to the novel's narrative.

In *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee presents a nuanced portrayal of women who are simultaneously rooted in their cultural heritage and determined to carve out their own identities. The novel's exploration of the immigrant experience, the clash between modernity and tradition, and the complexities of family relationships offers a rich and insightful look at the challenges and triumphs of navigating life between two worlds. Bharathi Mukherjee's latest novel *Desirable Daughters* is a tale of immigrants and the attitude of three sisters and their ways of dealing with situations. 'Desirable Daughters' as the title suggests, is one kind of daughter, which parents would be proud of and for whom every parent would crave.

Conclusion

In Bharati Mukherjee's novels, the construction of female identity is a complex process shaped by a multitude of

factors, including language, mythology, history, psychology, gender, and race. This identity is intricately tied to the subject's self-perception and the unconscious inheritance of cultural and social positioning. The notion of a "third space," a concept that reflects these intricate layers, is central to understanding the cultural dynamics in Mukherjee's work. This space is not merely a backdrop; it actively shapes historical narratives and determines the nature of relationships formed within the intersections of power, especially in the diasporic context where exclusion and inclusion merge in global ethnic landscapes.

The experience of dislocation and cultural displacement is central to Mukherjee's portrayal of diasporic life. Individuals transplanted into new environments often face a fragmentation of identity, as they navigate the cultural and psychological splits that arise from living between two worlds. Homi Bhabha's idea of a "double bind" in culture, where there is a disjunction between the artifice of cultural constructs and the agency of discourse, aptly describes this condition. Bhabha suggests that to remain true to oneself, one must also embrace a certain degree of untruth, existing slightly out of sync with the generalizable norms of cultural identity.

Mukherjee's narratives are deeply influenced by Western paradigms of thought, yet they also challenge these paradigms by emphasizing differences and fluid identities. She often explores the tensions between being labeled as an outsider and resisting the dominant Western discourse. This emphasis on contrariness and difference is not merely oppositional but arises from the social context in which individuals must navigate new locations that contrast with established racial and cultural stereotypes. The cultural space Mukherjee creates is marked by dislocations and tensions, where identity is reconfigured into an ambivalent form, reflecting both the original cultural roots and the new realities of life in an alien environment. Mukherjee's sensibility towards the cross-cultural crises of globalization is evident in her exploration of the psychological and cultural slippages experienced by immigrants. Her characters often grapple with the clash between traditional Indian values and the allure of Western lifestyles, a tension born out of both professional necessity and a desire for the freedoms offered by American society. Mukherjee's fiction delves into the complexities of what it means to call a place "home" in a diasporic context, where the concept of home is either disintegrating or being radically redefined.

Mukherjee's personal experiences as both an expatriate and an immigrant inform her literary exploration of these themes. Her work is imbued with the emotional turmoil of individuals caught between their Indian heritage and their new lives in the West. Indian traditions, values, rituals, and the grace of human relationships—both social and religious—are recurring motifs in her writing, reflecting the profound impact these elements had on her creative sensibility. Through her fiction, Mukherjee offers a nuanced examination of the complexities of identity formation in a globalized world, particularly for those who find themselves navigating the challenging terrain of cultural and psychological displacement.

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