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Tradition, Modernity, and Cultural Negotiation in Selected Novels of Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur

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Abstract

Tradition and modernity don't sit quietly in the corners of Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur's fiction; they collide, flirt, bargain, and sometimes straight-up brawl, and out of that messy contact zone their heroines carve precarious, improvised lives. Mukherjee's diasporic protagonists— Jasmine, Tara, Virmati's "twin" in Desirable Daughters, the new-India call-centre girl in Miss New India—move through spaces of "unhousement" and "rehousement," negotiating between inherited Indian norms and the seductive, often brutal promises of Western modernity, recasting diaspora not as pure loss but as a site of hybrid gains. Kapur's women, by contrast, mostly start inside Indian social milieus—Lahore and Amritsar in Difficult Daughters, joint-family Delhi in Home, small- town to Canadian dislocation in The Immigrant—and work their way outward or sideways, contesting patriarchy, marriage, sexuality and middle-class respectability from within the "domestic" sphere. This article explores how both writers stage tradition/modernity not as a simple binary but as a field of cultural negotiation, where gender, class, nation, and diaspora intersect, and where every choice—love marriage, divorce, immigration, education, career, sexual autonomy— comes at the cost of new forms of alienation. Drawing on critical work on diaspora, hybridity and multiculturalism in Mukherjee and feminist readings of Kapur, the discussion tracks key narrative strategies (shifting names and identities, intergenerational conflict, transnational mobility, and domestic rebellion) that dramatise this ongoing negotiation. Two comparative tables map major thematic and formal convergences and divergences between selected novels such as Jasmine, Desirable Daughters, Miss New India, Difficult Daughters, Home, and The Immigrant. The tone keeps drifting between formal and slightly conversational, with long sentences and minor rough edges, to echo the way these novels themselves refuse neat closures or tidy binaries.[1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9][10][11][12][13][14][15]

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee; Manju Kapur; tradition; modernity; cultural negotiation; diaspora; feminism; identity crisis; Desirable Daughters; Difficult Daughters; Jasmine; The Immigrant

Tradition and Modernity as a Research Problem

Both Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur write from within and against Indian traditions, but the narrative coordinates they choose are quite different: Mukherjee foregrounds the experience of immigration, citizenship, and multiculturalism in North America, while Kapur sticks much closer to the subcontinent (with occasional forays abroad) and to the textures of Indian middle-class, mostly

Hindu, domestic life. Yet critics have repeatedly noticed that the core tension they explore is similar: women trying to negotiate the weight of tradition—family, caste/class expectations, arranged marriage, sacrificial daughterhood—with the attractions and anxieties of modernity— education, romantic love, autonomy, global mobility, feminist selfhood.[2][5][6][9][10][11][15][1]

In Mukherjee, tradition vs modernity often appears as a cross-cultural clash that is also an internal psychic split: her heroines carry "traditional Indian values" inside them even as they step into Western feminist cultures and labour markets, producing a kind of double consciousness and, very often, an identity crisis that cannot be fully resolved. A study of Jasmine explicitly describes the novel as charting "the negotiation of one's identity" via an amalgam of strange immigrant experiences, where the protagonist moves through different names and roles (Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, Jane) trying to reconcile "world of origin" and "world of adoption." Desirable Daughters similarly stages Tara and her sisters between their Bengali Brahmin upbringing and the "fresh air of American feminist culture peeping into traditional Indian customs," with Tara torn between her arranged-marriage husband Bish and her Californian lover Andy.[3][16][10][11][14][17]

In Kapur, tradition vs modernity plays out more visibly inside India's own social milieu—Partition-era Punjab, post-Independence Delhi, late-20th-century diasporic shifts—where questions of marriage, motherhood, sexuality and education become the main battlegrounds. Difficult Daughters depicts Virmati's love affair and eventual marriage to the already-married Professor Harish in the 1940s, scandalising her conservative family and marking her as a "difficult daughter" who dares to pursue education and desire against maternal and societal expectations. The Immigrant follows Nina's arranged marriage to Ananda and subsequent immigration to Canada, where she grapples with loneliness, infertility, sexual dissatisfaction, and the disorientation of her new status as a "lonely bride without any family or friends in an unfamiliar setup," crying "I miss home—I miss a job—I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow."[7][10][18][15]

So the central research problem—or if we want to say it more casually, the big question—is how these two authors narratively choreograph this back-and-forth between tradition and modernity: do they frame tradition as pure oppression and modernity as salvation, or do they instead depict both as ambivalent terrains where power, desire, loss, and reinvention constantly shift? And how do their women, especially, negotiate these landscapes in ways that are gendered, classed, and shaped by location (India vs diaspora)?

Bharati Mukherjee: Diaspora, Hybridity, and the Breaking of "Single Identity"

From "unhousement" to "rehousement"

Critical discussions of Mukherjee often start with her own essays and interviews, where she uses striking metaphors for diaspora: "unhousement" and "rehousement." In a well-known piece on multiculturalism and cultural citizenship, Mukherjee is described as redefining diaspora as a process of gain, not simply terminal loss, and her trajectory involves breaking away from the culture into which one was born and "re-rooting oneself in a new culture." Scholars invoke this when reading novels like Desirable Daughters, Jasmine, and Miss New India as trans-cultural narratives that challenge fixed identities and mono-centric definitions of the nation.[4][8][13][2][3]

A thematic analysis of Desirable Daughters underlines how the novel "vividly explores the trials and tribulations faced by immigrants" and the ways characters "struggle with cultural adaptation" through multiple cultural landscapes, negotiating belonging, historical legacies, and autonomy amid the collision of diverse cultural influences. Tara's conflict between her arranged marriage to Bish, her

divorce, her life in America with Andy, and her eventual reconnection with family and tradition exemplifies the text's insistence that tradition and modernity are not simply antagonists but constantly reconfigured.[16][19][11]

Similarly, a paper on Jasmine reads the protagonist's journey as a continuous negotiation of identity and cultural conflict. She moves from a village in Punjab to the US, through marriage, widowhood, illegal migration, sexual assault, and multiple relationships, each stage marked by a new name and identity. Here, traditional gender roles and familial obligations collide with modern individualism and American feminist discourses, but the outcome is not a clean switch; Jasmine/Jane never fully abandons her Indian sensibilities even as she appropriates Western opportunities.[14][3]

Tradition vs modernity in Desirable Daughters and Miss New India

In Desirable Daughters, the three sisters—Tara, Padma, and Parvati—embody different negotiations of tradition and modernity. Padma's adherence to tradition and Parvati's rebellious spirit create a dichotomy that complements and clashes with Tara's more wavering perspective; their parents' expectations and the generational gap produce a series of conflicts and misunderstandings that lay bare the difficulty of reconciling divergent worldviews inside an Indian diaspora family. Scholars show how Mukherjee uses this triad to depict female empowerment and the evolution of women's agency within Indian culture and the diaspora, but also to show how deeply traditional values remain embedded, for instance in Tara's continued need to see Bish, her ex-husband, as a "sheltering tree."[19][16]

Miss New India turns the lens back to India, charting the life of Anjali "Angie" Bose, who moves from provincial small-town Bihar to the call centres and urban landscapes of Bangalore. Critics read it as a parable of changing Indian identity, linking globalization and economic liberalization with new possibilities and anxieties for young women. Tradition appears in parental pressure for marriage, caste/class constraints, and the moral surveillance of a small-town milieu, while modernity is encoded in English fluency, consumer culture, and the cosmopolitan, precarious labour of the call centre. Mukherjee's protagonist navigates between these, neither fully rejecting her origins nor safely embraced by the "new India," and this precariousness is the point: tradition and modernity are both sources of violence and empowerment, depending on who holds power in each.[13][2]

Manju Kapur: Domestic Spaces, Feminism, and the Slow Rewriting of Tradition

Difficult daughters, difficult homes

Manju Kapur is widely recognised as a feminist writer, even if she doesn't always label herself that way, because her novels consistently foreground women's struggles, desires, and attempts at empowerment within Indian society. A recent overview of feminist themes in Kapur's work notes that her protagonists navigate "traditional and modern Indian society," confronting patriarchal norms, negotiating familial expectations, and seeking autonomy in spaces usually dismissed as merely domestic.[5][9][12][15]

Difficult Daughters is emblematic: set against the backdrop of Partition and nationalist politics, it tells the story of Virmati, who pursues education and an illicit relationship with Professor Harish, ultimately marrying him as his second wife and being ostracised by her family. The novel's "social milieu" has been analysed comparatively with Mukherjee's Desirable Daughters, showing how both texts depict women "not as enslaved people but as victims of society, male crimes, and cultural struggles," caught between being idealised as goddesses or sacrificial icons and being treated as fallible, desiring humans.

Tradition in Difficult Daughters is tied to family honour, arranged marriage, parental authority, and gendered sacrifice, while modernity enters through education, political activism, and romantic choice; the tragedy is that neither space offers Virmati a stable sense of self, leaving her alienated, isolated, and haunted by her choices.[6][10][15][7]

In Home, Kapur turns to a Delhi joint family, exploring the life of Nisha and other women in a business household where the rules of caste, gender, and respectability are inscribed in everyday routines. Feminist readings highlight how Kapur presents "the changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards self-assured, assertive, and self-reliant individuals," but always in friction with conservative expectations. Topics like dowry, infertility, sexual abuse, and female sexuality—which Kapur handles with notable frankness—are embedded in this domestic sphere, showing how tradition polices women's bodies, while modernity opens some discursive space (e.g., a woman wanting to work, earn, choose her partner) but doesn't magically dismantle patriarchal structures.[9][12][7]

Immigration and isolation in The Immigrant

The Immigrant offers a bridge to Mukherjee's diasporic landscapes: Nina, a lecturer in Delhi, marries Ananda, a dentist settled in Canada, through an arranged marriage, and moves to Halifax. A detailed thematic reading notes how Nina's "desire for a life outside" faces difficulties reconciling family devotion and middle-class expectations; the novel portrays her search for identity amid gendered spaces and power hierarchies, progressing to a stage where liberation and autonomy are gained at the cost of isolation and alienation.[18][7]

The narrative touches bigger themes like dowry, religion, immigration, and superstition, but its core remains deeply intimate: Nina's homesickness, her unfulfilled desire for a child, her husband's sexual dysfunction and reluctance to seek help, and her sense of becoming "a shadow" in a foreign land. Here, tradition travels with her—she still feels like a "good Indian wife" who must adjust— but modernity also arrives in the form of new relationships, literature, jobs, and the possibility of extra-marital intimacy. Kapur doesn't romanticise either; the immigrant space is as capable of producing loneliness and sexism as the Indian one, and Nina's negotiation is as much internal (what kind of woman she wants to be) as external.[7]

Where Mukherjee's immigrant protagonists often embrace assimilation as a form of positive "rehousement," even if it's uneasy, Kapur's Nina remains more ambivalent, more torn, and perhaps less willing to declare the new world an unequivocal gain.[10][18]

Table 1 – Key thematic concerns in selected novels

Author / Novel	Central setting & frame	Tradition (selected elements)	Modernity (selected elements)	Mode of cultural negotiation

Bharati Mukherjee – *Jasmine*	Punjab village → US cities (Iowa, etc.)	Village honour, arranged marriage, widowhood, expectations of self-effacing woman.[3][14]	Migration, illegal entry, multiple relationships, American feminism.[3][14]	Identity through multiple names; assimilation as survival + reinvention.
Bharati Mukherjee – *Desirable Daughters*	Kolkata elite → US diaspora	Brahmin lineage, arranged marriage, family reputation, "sheltering tree" husband.[16][19]	Divorce, cohabitation with lover, Silicon Valley modernity.[16][14]	Sisters embody different stances; protagonist oscillates, seeks balance.
Bharati Mukherjee – *Miss New India*	Small-town Bihar → Bangalore	Parental pressure for marriage, class boundaries, "good girl" norms.[2][13]	Call-centre work, English, consumerism,	Reinvention in "new India," but with precarity
			global capitalism.[2]	and gendered vulnerabilities.
Manju Kapur– Difficult Daughters	Lahore/Amritsar, pre-Partition	Family honour, arranged marriage, motherhood, maternal authority.[7][10][15]	Education, love marriage, nationalist politics, individual desire.[15]	Protagonist gains education and love but remains alienated and judged.
Manju Kapur– Home	Delhi joint family	Joint family, caste rules, dowry, domesticity, business caste traditions.[12]	Women's employment, consumer choices, silent sexual autonomy.[12]	Incremental acts of resistance inside traditional structures.

Manju Kapur – The Immigrant	Delhi → Halifax, Canada	Arranged marriage, wifely duty, modesty, family honour.[7][18]	Migration, academic career, sexual experimentation, self-realisation.[7]	Gains autonomy but suffers loneliness, cultural and marital dislocation.

Cultural Negotiation and Identity: Convergences and Divergences

A number of comparative studies bring Mukherjee and Kapur into the same frame, especially around the portrayal of women as "victims of society, male crimes, and cultural struggles," but not as passive slaves. Both writers depict the myth of the single, stable identity being broken apart by migration, education, romantic love or sexual agency, and their heroines' trajectories can often be read as them trying to balance "world of origin" and "world of adoption" (or tradition and modernity) through processes of assimilation, compromise, and resistance.[17][6][10]

One critic remarks that Mukherjee's protagonists "break the myth of single identity and try to balance the 'world of origin' and the 'world of adoption' through the process of assimilation," seeing diaspora as a site that destabilises fixed identities and national narratives. Another emphasises that Mukherjee's work—in both her theoretical reflections and fiction—is committed to hybridity, to challenging monocultural stability by showing how immigrant experiences produce new, trans- cultural forms that unsettle metropolitan centres.[8][11][4][10][13]

Kapur's characters, for their part, are often described as "new women" who move away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing wives toward more complex figures who desire independence, education, and sexual fulfilment, though this movement is fraught and never fully endorsed by the narrative as cost-free. In Difficult Daughters, Virmati's choice of a married lover, her education, and her eventual marriage to Harish mark her as transgressive, but also leave her in limbo: her family disowns her, her husband's house never fully accepts her, and she ends up more "difficult" than triumphant. In Home, Nisha's economic and emotional agency within and beyond the joint family has to negotiate with caste and marriage constraints; in The Immigrant, Nina's individual growth is accompanied by emotional fragmentation and alienation.[12][15][5][9][10][18][7]

So in both authors, "cultural negotiation" is not a neat Homi Bhabha buzzword, it's lived as conflict, compromise, loss, and partial gains. Tradition is neither demonised nor idealised; modernity is neither pure freedom nor pure corruption. What differs is emphasis: Mukherjee foregrounds the political dimensions of citizenship, multiculturalism, and diaspora, while Kapur refuses to treat the domestic as "small," showing how the home is a microcosm of the nation and its struggles over gender, class, and modernity.[2][4][5][9][10]

Table 2 – Comparative axes: Mukherjee vs Kapur

Axis	Bharati Mukherjee	Manju Kapur
Primary spatial focus	Transnational (India–Canada–US; globalised India).[2][4][13]	Primarily India, with selective diaspora (*The Immigrant*).[5][7]
Central thematic frame	Diaspora, immigration, citizenship, multiculturalism, hybridity.[4][8][13]	Domesticity, marriage, family, feminist selfhood, social milieu.[5][9][15]

Tradition vs modernity	Framed as clash of Indian values vs Western feminist / capitalist modernity.[11][14]	Framed within Indian modernisation, Partition, post-liberalisation.[7][10][12]
Protagonist trajectory	Multiple names/identities, active assimilation, bold risk-taking.[3][16][13]	Gradual consciousness-raising, ambivalent resistance, often isolation.[7][12][18]
Narrative tone	Energetic, plot-driven, sometimes didactic, embracing "melting pot."[4][13]	Quietly subversive, detailed, often melancholic, interior.[5][9][15]
Political articulation	Explicit commentary on diaspora gain/loss, cultural citizenship.[4][17]	Feminist critique of patriarchy, gendered spaces, social change.[5][12][15]

Conclusion

Both Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur refuse to let "tradition" and "modernity" sit as lazy binaries. They write women who carry tradition inside their bodies and memories even when they board planes, step into call centres, or walk into university lecture rooms; they write women who adopt modern postures—educated, independent, sexually aware—but still feel the gravitational pull of parents, husbands, caste, and the old narratives that defined what a "good" daughter or wife should be. In Mukherjee, this negotiation happens in border zones, airports, immigration lines, suburban American homes, and cosmopolitan Indian cities; in Kapur, it happens in crowded kitchens, bedrooms, family courts, classrooms, and the lonelier corners of immigrant flats.[15][16][19][12][7]

If one wanted a crude formula you could say: Mukherjee dramatises leaving and Kapur dramatises staying (even when her characters leave, they psychologically argue with "home"), but both are ultimately interested in that same question: how do women make selves at the intersection of cultural inheritances and modern pressures, and what do they lose in the process? Neither writer offers tidy answers; their heroines often end in states of productive incompleteness—Jasmine poised for yet another transformation, Tara struggling with her hybrid attachments, Angie not quite "Miss New India" yet, Virmati a difficult mother as well as daughter, Nina a woman who has learned to name her loneliness but not fully resolve it.[3][16][18][2][7]

So, tradition and modernity in these novels aren't static blocks, they're moving targets, and cultural negotiation is, frankly, exhausting and ongoing, but also where all the interesting narrative energy comes from.

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