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Narratives of Resistance and Transformation in the Selected Novels of Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur

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Abstract

Resistance in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur rarely looks like slogan-shouting on the street; more often it looks like a young woman saying "no" to an arranged marriage, or walking out of a house with a suitcase, or quietly refusing to perform the script that everybody else assumes is her fate, and yet these small acts, layered across their novels, amount to a sustained rewriting of the Indian female subject in late-20th and early-21st-century literature. Mukherjee's protagonists—from Dimple in Wife through Jasmine/Jyoti/Jane to Tara in Desirable Daughters and the call-centre girls of Miss New India—enact non-linear, often messy transformations whose central feminist theme is resistance to the patriarchal structures that confine women to predefined roles and fix their identities in place. Kapur's women—Virmati in Difficult Daughters, Nisha in Home, Nina in The Immigrant, Astha in A Married Woman—resist in more domestically embedded ways, asserting voice and agency against family, marriage, and community norms, their journeys caught between conformity and defiance, and they often discover that partial empowerment is accompanied by new forms of solitude and psychic cost. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial criticism, this article traces how both authors construct narratives of resistance and transformation: it looks at the evolution of female subjectivity under pressures of migration, modernity and nationalism; it examines forms of resistance ranging from emotional withdrawal and clandestine love to adultery, abortion, madness and even symbolic violence; and it maps how these resistances reconfigure but do not simply abolish patriarchal and cultural structures. Two comparative tables summarise patterns of resistance and trajectories of transformation in selected novels such as Jasmine, Wife, Desirable Daughters, Difficult Daughters, Home and The Immigrant, and the tone throughout intentionally slides between the formal and the slightly conversational, with long, abrupt sentences and lightly imperfect grammar, to echo the turbulent, unfinished processes these narratives describe.[1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9][10][11][12][13]

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee; Manju Kapur; resistance; transformation; feminism; patriarchy; diaspora; Difficult Daughters; Jasmine; Desirable Daughters; Home; The Immigrant

Framing resistance and transformation

Both Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur are repeatedly read through feminist lenses, but not the neat poster-slogan kind of feminism; critics emphasise that their protagonists' resistance is complicated, incremental, internally conflicted and often non-heroic, which is precisely why it feels believable and politically significant. One recent article on Mukherjee's novels argues that "one central feminist theme…is the resistance to patriarchal structures that confine women to predefined roles," and that women's transformations are non-linear, interrupted, yet inherently political acts of defiance against forces that seek to impose fixed notions of who they should be. Similarly, a study of Difficult Daughters, A Married Woman and The Immigrant stresses that Kapur's protagonists "assert their voices and resist subjugation, whether through overt acts of defiance or subtle acts of rebellion," even though their resistance is "fraught with limitations."[2][4][5][7][8][10]

In both bodies of work, transformation is not depicted as a clean before-and-after event; it's a process, often painful, where women renegotiate identity, dignity and agency across different contexts—village and metropolis, homeland and diaspora, parental home and conjugal home, nationalist movement and post-liberalised capitalism. Mukherjee's characters sometimes transform into "violent, avenging mythical figures," as a 2025 essay on reimagining the Female Gothic in Wife and Jasmine notes, using abortion, adultery, madness, mariticide and even patricide as symbolic ruptures with both colonial and patriarchal narratives. Kapur's women less often pick up literal weapons, but they do sabotage the scripts handed to them: Virmati chooses education and a taboo relationship, Nisha insists on economic independence, Nina walks out on an emotionless marriage in Canada, Astha in A Married Woman seeks fulfilment outside heteronormative monogamy.[3][4][5][6][7][8][10][13][1]

So, the question driving this article is: how do these two authors build narrative arcs in which female resistance leads to transformation, and what is the cost of that transformation in terms of belonging, mental health, social legitimacy, and new forms of vulnerability? The answer, as you might expect, is not simple or tidy, and that's actually the point.

Bharati Mukherjee: resisting scripts, inhabiting multiple selves

Feminist resistance in the diasporic frame

Mukherjee's fiction is deeply entangled with diaspora, migration and cultural hybridity; multiple critics underline how she connects feminist struggle with the dislocations of immigration and the search for acceptance in alien lands. One paper on "Feminism in the Indian context in Bharati Mukherjee's fiction" notes that her work "delves into themes of empowerment, resistance and self-exploration," especially around migration, identity crisis, cultural assimilation, and self-redefinition, showing her female protagonists negotiating family expectations and the conflict between tradition and modernity. Another study of women's transformation across her novels describes how her characters' journeys, though complicated and non-linear, "represent acts of defiance against external forces that seek to impose fixed notions of who they should be," and argues that these transformations are inherently political, challenging norms around gender and identity.[4][14][9][2]

In Jasmine, for example, Jyoti/Jasmine moves from a small Punjabi village through widowhood and illegal migration to the United States, taking on a series of new names and roles (Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, Jane) that reflect her fractured yet resilient pursuit of autonomy and dignity in the

face of trauma, displacement and gendered oppression. Her resistance is not always explicit speech; sometimes it's a refusal to die, sometimes it's the decision to leave one man and move to another space, or the choice to carry on after assault and bereavement. Her transformation is marked by a willingness to discard imposed identities—dutiful village daughter, sati-like widow—and to inhabit new scripts, even when these scripts (illegal migrant, caregiver, lover) expose her to fresh risks.[6][15]

In Desirable Daughters, Tara's resistance to the role of the "desirable daughter"—obedient, married within caste, properly motherly—is articulated through divorce, her relationship with Andy, her relocation to America, and her eventual attempt to reconcile with her family on her own terms. A critical piece on gender biases and resistance in the novel argues that Mukherjee "depicts the atrocities inflicted on 'gendered subaltern' women" through child marriage, imposed arranged marriage, and limited career prospects, and portrays marriage as "the medium of exploitation rather than a desirable heavenly bliss." Tara's refusal "to surrender to the whims of fate and the manipulation of the marital marketplace" and her decision to choose her own partner and mode of life are framed as feminist resistance, even though the novel doesn't pretend these choices are free of pain or confusion.[16][11][6]

Darker resistances: Wife and the Female Gothic

While Jasmine and Desirable Daughters offer narratives where transformation, however fractured, opens onto possibilities of self-fashioning, Wife goes into much darker territory. A 2025 article on "Reimagining the Female Gothic in Bharati Mukherjee's Wife and Jasmine" argues that Mukherjee centres female rage as a response to gendered violence, displacement, and cultural erasure, and that her protagonists' resistances—abortion, adultery, madness, mariticide, incest, patricide—are symbolic ruptures with both colonial and patriarchal narratives. These acts, though sometimes horrifying, function as extreme forms of resistance against confinement, and they transform the protagonists into "avenging mythical figures" who subvert the passivity historically assigned to gothic heroines.[3]

In this reading, Mukherjee's feminism refuses respectable, soft resistance only; it insists that women's resistance may be violent, morally ambiguous, or self-destructive, and yet still politically significant. It actively dismantles the binary of a "backward" East vs a "liberated" West, showing that patriarchal control and madness can live in both spaces and that resistance must be understood in that messy cross-cultural context.[14][3]

Non-linear transformation and the politics of becoming

Across novels, critics observe that Mukherjee portrays women's transformation as non-linear paths toward self-realisation, "complicated by cultural conflict" and marked by episodes of regression, compromise, or ambiguous choices. In The Tiger's Daughter and Wife, for instance, Dimple's and Tara's transformation arcs involve psychological breakdowns and morally fraught actions rather than straightforward empowerment. A study entitled "Female Phase in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction" notes that the "element of transformation" is central to her project, with protagonists playing different roles over time and gradually gaining a sense of agency through experiences that are sometimes traumatic.[12][2][6]

A 2025 article on "Quest for Identity and Dignity of the Women in Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine and Desirable Daughters" emphasises how Mukherjee articulates the struggles of her

female protagonists as they navigate cultural displacement and patriarchal expectations, highlighting their evolving subjectivities and attempts to assert selfhood in foreign, often alienating environments. In Jasmine, the succession of names reflects a fractured but insistent quest for autonomy; in Desirable Daughters, Tara's journey from tradition-bound Indian daughter to independent woman in America foregrounds the tension between inherited values and individual freedom.[15][6]

Taken together, these readings suggest that Mukherjee's narratives of resistance are inseparable from her narratives of transformation: resistance—whether quiet refusal, geographic mobility, or shocking acts—propels transformation, and transformation itself becomes a political challenge to rigid identities and gender roles in a globalised, postcolonial world.[9][2][4][14]

Manju Kapur: domestic rebellions and incomplete liberations

Resistant daughters, wives, and migrants

If Mukherjee's heroines often resist through mobility and identity multiplication, Manju Kapur's characters generally resist from within more grounded, recognisably Indian domestic and social spaces, even when the story later shifts abroad. A 2023 paper on "Women's Resistance Against Patriarchal Dominance in Manju Kapur's Novels" underscores that Kapur's protagonists, "such as Virmati and Nisha, are intricately crafted to reflect the complexities of female identity within patriarchal confines," balancing personal aspirations with societal expectations. The paper notes that their resistance takes multiple forms—emotional rebellion, overt acts of defiance, quiet negotiations—and that, although often constrained, these acts "significantly challenge traditional gender roles within Indian society."[5]

In Difficult Daughters, Virmati's determination to pursue higher education and her love affair with the already-married Professor Harish constitute acts of resistance against both her mother's authority and the conservative norms of her Punjabi family. A critical study describes how she "steps into the world outside her home and fights for her existence," even as the freedom struggle and changing socio-economic conditions provide external levers that push women out of their houses. However, Virmati's transformation into someone who chooses desire and education over obedience leads to new forms of imprisonment; she becomes a "prisoner" in her husband's home, and her reputation and psyche bear deep scars, showing how resistance in Kapur is brave but not uncomplicatedly victorious.[8][10][17][18]

In Home, Nisha resists her objectification within the marriage market and the expectations of being "at home to do all household work," reacting strongly to being treated as nothing more than a potential bride; she aspires to create a separate identity through business, and her firmness pushes against the boundaries of her joint family's norms. A study of Home and Difficult Daughters emphasises that Kapur's narratives reveal "the paradox of women's resistance—despite their struggles for autonomy, they remain entangled in a patriarchal order," but that resistance is nonetheless crucial in redefining gender roles.[10][13][19]

The immigrant wife becomes her own anchor

The Immigrant offers perhaps Kapur's clearest narrative of both resistance and transformation in a diasporic context. Nina, a university teacher in India who marries an NRI dentist and moves to Canada, gradually transforms "from a docile wife to a liberated woman" who eventually

denounces her emotionless marriage. A diasporic reading of the novel argues that Nina is "baptized by the pressure of postcolonial ideology" and that the tribulations she faces as a relocated immigrant— racism, isolation, joblessness, sexual humiliation—force her to change her personality. In one telling scene, after being humiliated by a landlady, Nina realises that her previous anchors—family, husband, even her professional status—no longer stabilise her, leading her to conclude that "one had to be one's own anchor."[20][13]

Here, resistance operates both externally and internally: Nina outwardly resists her husband's controlling behaviour and the silent suffering expected from her; inwardly, she resists the narrative that says a good Indian woman must tolerate an unsatisfying marriage abroad simply because she has "made her bed." Her transformation, however, is bittersweet; she gains self-respect and agency but also experiences acute loneliness and a sense of dislocation, echoing Virmati's and Nisha's partial liberations.[7][13][21][20]

Narrative of resistance as ongoing negotiation

Multiple critical works emphasise that Kapur's fiction presents women as "silent sufferers" who uphold family traditions while yearning for independence, but who increasingly "voice their dissent against traditional roles and seek autonomy," making their resistance a powerful response to patriarchal control, even if the results are incomplete. A thematic analysis of Kapur's novels highlights recurring themes of marital conflict, identity formation, gendered expectations, and the struggle for autonomy, noting that despite moments of rebellion, her protagonists "ultimately find themselves bound by cultural expectations," thus revealing the persistence of social resistance to female independence.[17][22][5][7]

Another study of women's agency in Home and Difficult Daughters points out that resistance does not always lead to total liberation but "is a crucial step toward redefining gender roles in Indian society," and that Kapur's narratives foreground resilience as well as constraint. So her narratives of resistance and transformation are more muted than Mukherjee's Gothic explosions but no less radical in their own quieter way: they capture the kind of everyday, slow-burn transformation that happens when women persistently push at the edges of what is permitted in families, marriages, and communities.[10]

Table 1 – Forms of resistance and transformation in selected novels

Author / Novel	Key forms of resistance	Trajectory of transformation	Limits / costs
Mukherjee – *Jasmine*	Leaving village, illegal migration, changing names/roles.[6][15]	From Jyoti to Jasmine/Jane; from victim to agent.[6]	Trauma, fractured identity, precarious belonging.

Mukherjee – *Desirable Daughters*	Divorce, extra-marital relationship, rejecting imposed roles.[16][11]	From "desirable" daughter to self-defining woman.[6]	Family conflict, guilt, lingering ties to tradition.
Mukherjee – *Wife*	Adultery, abortion, madness, mariticide (Female Gothic rupture).[3][12]	From passive wife to violent avenging figure.[3]	Psychological breakdown; ethically ambiguous acts.
Kapur – Difficult Daughters	Pursuit of education; love marriage with married professor.[8][17][18]	From obedient daughter to "difficult" woman.[8]	Ostracism, loneliness, emotional scars.
Kapur – Home	Economic independence; rejecting market-driven objectification.[13][19]	From marriage commodity to self-supporting woman.[13]	Still tied to caste/family; partial acceptance only.
Kapur – The Immigrant	Questioning marital duty; leaving an empty marriage.[20][13]	From docile NRI wife to self-anchored individual.[20]	Isolation, displacement, uncertain future.

Table 2 – Comparative patterns of resistance in Mukherjee and Kapur

Dimension	Bharati Mukherjee	Manju Kapur
Spatial context	Transnational, diasporic, often US/Canada.[4][6]	Mainly Indian domestic/social; some diaspora in *Immigrant*.[5][8]
Resistance mode	Dramatic: migration, name changes, transgressive acts.[2][3][12]	Incremental: education, economic agency, marital defiance.[5][10]
Transformation style	Often spectacular, identity-shifting, even gothic.[3][14]	Often slow, interior, emotionally complex.[7][10]
Relation to patriarchy	Confronted and symbolically ruptured; sometimes violently.[3][23]	Negotiated and partially undermined from within.[5][10]
Outcome	New hybrid self, but still precarious / fractured.[6]	Partial autonomy, continued entanglement with norms.[7]
Political emphasis	Postcolonial diaspora, cultural citizenship, female rage.[4][9]	Indian middle-class patriarchy, domestic politics, feminist critique.[5][17]

Conclusion

Reading Bharati Mukherjee and Manju Kapur side by side makes it pretty clear that narratives of resistance and transformation in contemporary Indian (and diasporic) women's writing are not about simple empowerment arcs where the heroine "finds herself" and everything is magically resolved, but about messy, often painful, sometimes morally uncomfortable processes through which women carve out space, however limited, against layers of patriarchal, cultural and economic constraints. Mukherjee's protagonists resist not only fathers, husbands and communities but also national and racial narratives; their transformations include crossing borders illegally, taking on new names, committing taboo acts, and reimagining themselves as hybrid citizens of mosaic societies, all while carrying trauma and fractured identities. Kapur's protagonists resist from the inside: they argue with mothers, defy arranged marriages, seek careers, fall in love "inappropriately," walk out of homes, and in doing so they gradually transform the moral geography of the middle-class Indian home, even if they cannot yet fully escape its gravitational pull.[13][2][5][6][7][8][9][3][10]

In both writers, resistance is thus necessary but not sufficient; transformation opens possibilities but doesn't abolish vulnerability. And that may be the most important lesson their narratives offer: that in a world structured by intersecting systems of power, feminist resistance is less a single dramatic act and more an ongoing, sometimes exhausting practice of refusing to be only what society says you must be, even when the price of that refusal is high.

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