

From Colonial Resistance to Diasporic Selfhood: Women's Agency and Feminist Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride*

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Paper Received on 07-03-2026, Accepted on 08-04-2026
Published on 10-04-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.01.77

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride* offers a significant feminist re-interpretation of migration, colonial history, and diasporic identity by foregrounding women's agency within the intersecting frameworks of colonialism and nationalism. This study examines how Mukherjee reconstructs female subjectivity through the parallel narratives of Tara Chatterjee, a contemporary Indian-American migrant, and her ancestor Tara Lata, whose life unfolds during British colonial rule in India. By juxtaposing modern diasporic freedom with historical forms of resistance, the novel challenges reductive notions of feminism that equate empowerment solely with migration or Western modernity. The research applies postcolonial feminist theory, diasporic identity discourse, and migration studies—particularly the Push-Pull Theory of migration—to analyze how identity is negotiated across time and space. The study argues that Tara Chatterjee's achievement of identity emerges through ethical engagement with ancestral memory rather than cultural disavowal. Mukherjee thus redefines feminist identity as a historically grounded and morally informed process, emphasizing continuity between past and present. Ultimately, *The Tree Bride* positions women not as passive subjects of history but as active agents whose

resistance, memory, and ethical consciousness shape both personal identity and national narratives.

Keywords: Feminism; Women's Agency; Colonialism; Nationalism; Diaspora; Migration; Identity; Postcolonial Literature; Push-Pull Theory; Ethical Modernity.

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent Indian-American writer known for exploring migration, cultural displacement, identity, and women's agency. Her works examine the psychological and social transformations of immigrants, especially women navigating between tradition and modernity. Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride* offers a complex feminist re-evaluation of women's agency within the intersecting frameworks of colonialism, nationalism, and diaspora. Moving beyond conventional representations of women as passive victims of history, Mukherjee foregrounds female subjectivity as an active force shaping both personal identity and national memory. The novel constructs a dialogic relationship between past and present through the intertwined narratives of Tara Chatterjee, a contemporary Indian-American migrant, and her ancestor Tara Lata, a woman whose life unfolds during British colonial rule in India. Through these parallel figures, Mukherjee demonstrates that women's agency operates differently across historical contexts yet remains central to identity formation. The novel ultimately argues that feminist selfhood in the diaspora can only be achieved through ethical engagement with colonial history and nationalist struggle rather than through cultural amnesia.

Feminism and Women's Agency in the Colonial Context

In the colonial sections of the novel, Mukherjee redefines feminism by situating women's agency within restrictive social and political conditions. Tara Lata's life is shaped by patriarchal customs such as child marriage and widowhood, institutions that traditionally silence women. However, Mukherjee resists portraying Tara Lata as merely oppressed. Instead, she reconstructs her as a figure of moral strength who transforms personal tragedy into collective service. After her husband's death on their wedding day, Tara Lata symbolically marries a tree, an act that simultaneously acknowledges tradition and subverts its intent the "marriage" to the Sundari tree is described with ritualistic gravity:

"The girl and the tree were bound together by garlands of marigolds and the chanting of mantras" (Mukherjee 142).

This symbolic marriage becomes a radical feminist gesture within the colonial framework. Rather than submitting to social erasure as a widow, Tara Lata reclaims agency by dedicating her life to education, social reform, and nationalist resistance. Mukherjee thus challenges Western feminist assumptions that liberation must always involve breaking away from tradition. Tara Lata's agency emerges not through rebellion against her cultural environment but through reinterpretation of its values. Her feminism is rooted in ethical responsibility and communal uplift, aligning with postcolonial feminist perspectives that emphasize context-specific forms of empowerment (Mohanty 39).

Nationalism and the Gendered Rewriting of History

Mukherjee's feminist intervention is particularly evident in her revision of nationalist history. Traditional nationalist narratives often foreground male revolutionaries while marginalizing women's contributions. *The Tree Bride* counters this exclusion by positioning Tara Lata as a moral center of anti-colonial resistance. Her participation in nationalist movements is not militant but symbolic and sustained. She shelters freedom fighters, promotes indigenous education, and embodies Gandhian ideals of non-violent resistance. When she eventually leads a procession against the British, Mukherjee uses powerful imagery:

"She walked with the steady pace of one who had already crossed the border between the living and the dead" (Mukherjee 172).

By privileging such forms of participation, Mukherjee expands the definition of political agency. Tara Lata's actions demonstrate that nationalism is not solely enacted through public spectacle or armed struggle but also through everyday acts of care, resilience, and ethical commitment. This portrayal aligns with feminist historiography that seeks to recover women's roles in nation-building without measuring them against masculine standards of heroism (Loomba 193). Through Tara Lata, Mukherjee asserts that women are not merely symbols of the nation but active agents shaping its moral foundation.

Diasporic Feminism and the Crisis of Modern Identity

In contrast to Tara Lata's rooted agency, Tara Chatterjee initially represents a modern, diasporic feminist identity shaped by migration. Having relocated to the United States, Tara believes she has escaped the constraints of Indian patriarchy. She embraces individualism, sexual autonomy, and professional independence, equating these freedoms with feminist liberation. However, Mukherjee gradually exposes the

limitations of this assumption. Tara's detachment from her cultural and historical roots results in emotional instability and fragmented selfhood (Mukherjee 67).

Tara's crisis reveals Mukherjee's critique of liberal feminism when divorced from historical consciousness. While Tara enjoys material and personal freedom, she lacks ethical anchorage. Her feminist identity remains incomplete because it is based on rejection rather than integration. Mukherjee thus complicates diasporic feminism by demonstrating that empowerment through migration alone does not guarantee psychological wholeness. As Stuart Hall argues, identity is not a finished product but a process shaped by memory and representation (Hall 225). Tara's inability to reconcile her past initially prevents her from achieving a coherent sense of self.

Historical Memory as a Feminist Strategy

The turning point in Tara Chatterjee's identity formation occurs through her engagement with Tara Lata's history. As Tara uncovers her ancestor's story, she begins to understand that women's agency has long existed within Indian history, albeit in forms unrecognized by dominant narratives. This realization destabilizes her earlier belief that feminism is exclusively a Western or modern construct. Mukherjee uses historical memory as a feminist strategy, enabling the protagonist to reclaim a lineage of resistance and agency.

This engagement with the past allows Tara to reposition herself within a continuum of women's struggle rather than as an isolated modern subject. The ancestral narrative functions as what Homi Bhabha terms a "third space," where new identities emerge through negotiation between tradition and modernity (Bhabha 38). By acknowledging Tara Lata's contributions, Tara Chatterjee reconstructs her own feminist identity as hybrid, ethical, and historically informed.

Identity Achievement through Ethical Feminism

Tara's ultimate achievement of identity does not involve returning permanently to India or rejecting her American life. Instead, it manifests as an ethical reconciliation between her diasporic present and her colonial past. She recognizes that freedom without responsibility is hollow and that feminist selfhood must account for historical debts. This realization marks her transformation from a self-centred migrant to a reflective diasporic subject.

"I had been living a life of easy choices, a California life of personal whims. But Tara Lata had taught me that freedom isn't the absence of ties; it's the choosing of which ties are worth dying for." (Mukherjee 168).

Mukherjee thus redefines feminist identity as an ethical stance rather than a geographical position. Tara's identity is achieved when she accepts that her autonomy

is connected to the sacrifices of women like Tara Lata. This form of feminism transcends binaries of East and West, tradition and modernity, oppression and liberation. It affirms that women's agency operates across time and space, adapting to historical conditions while retaining its transformative potential.

Conclusion

Through *The Tree Bride*, Bharati Mukherjee offers a sophisticated feminist exploration of women's agency within colonialism, nationalism, and diaspora. By juxtaposing Tara Lata's historically grounded resistance with Tara Chatterjee's modern migratory experience, Mukherjee demonstrates that identity formation is inseparable from historical consciousness. The novel challenges reductive models of feminism that equate liberation solely with modernity or migration. Instead, it proposes an ethical feminism rooted in memory, responsibility, and continuity. Tara Chatterjee achieves identity not by escaping her past but by understanding it. In reclaiming her ancestral lineage, she reconciles personal freedom with collective history, embodying a feminist selfhood that is both modern and historically aware. *The Tree Bride* thus stands as a significant contribution to feminist, postcolonial, and diasporic discourse, redefining women's agency as a dynamic force shaping both individual identity and national memory.

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RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)

www.rjoe.org.in | Oray's Publications | ISSN: 2456-2696

An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal
Impact Factor: 8.373 (SJIF) | Vol. 11, Issue 2 (April/May&June;2026)

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How to Cite this Article (MLA 9th Edition):

Ranjitham, K., and L. Mohanasundari. "From Colonial Resistance to Diasporic Selfhood: Women's Agency and Feminist Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride*." *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2026, pp. 1–5. Oray's Publications, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.01.78.