



## Hybridity, Mimicry, and Uncanny: Postcolonial Character in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Bride Tree*

Masoumeh Baei<sup>1</sup>, Behzad Pourgharib<sup>2,\*</sup>, and Abdolbaghi Rezaei Talarposhti<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*M.A in English Language and Literature, Golestan University, Gorgan, Iran  
Email: masoumebaee@yahoo.com*

<sup>2</sup>*Corresponding author: Assistant Professor of English Literature, Department of  
English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
Golestan University, Gorgan, Iran, ORCID: 0000-0002-6162-7312  
Email: b.pourgharib@gu.ac.ir; pourgharib\_lit@yahoo.com*

<sup>3</sup>*Assistant Professor of English Literature, Department of English Language and  
Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Golestan University,  
Gorgan, Iran, ORCID: 0000-0002-6380-4845  
Email: a\_rezaei\_t@yahoo.com*

### Abstract

The endeavor to establish reconciliation between the opposing demands of two cultural communities lies at the heart of some literary works associated with postcolonial literature. This theme, which is also central to the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, especially *The Tree Bride*, forms the plot of the novel and serves as an axis around which the characters are developed. The present article adopts the theories of Homi. K. Bhabha to expound upon the gap that distances the oriental and the occidental cultures from one another and renders fragmented the identity of the postcolonial individual. Bhabha's notions of the uncanny and the hybrid identity are two central concepts that can serve as keys to explaining the postcolonial encounter. They can significantly contribute to the discussion of the novel as they can prepare the ground for the investigation of how anti-colonial resistance becomes possible through the third space that is created through hybridity and the uncanny. In *The Tree Bride*, the protagonist finds herself between two cultures that attempt to draw her into their own orbits. The protagonist's mimicry of the target culture is an ironic one, since it consists of acceptance and rejection at the same time. In other words, while Tara Chatterjee mimics the norms and criteria of the target culture toward which she strives, she is influenced by her ancestral culture. The paper argues that such uncanny condition can be detrimental to the individual and plunge her into a deep identity crisis.

*Keywords:* Bharati Mukherjee, *The Tree Bride*, mimicry, hybridity, uncanny

### ARTICLE INFO

Research Article

Received: Monday, April, 26, 2021

Accepted: Friday, April 15, 2022

Published: Sunday, May 1, 2022

Available Online: Friday, April 15, 2022

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22049/jalda.2022.27229.1305>

Online ISSN: 2821-0204; Print ISSN: 2820-8986



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## **Introduction**

Bharati Mukherjee is a leading novelist who is associated with what is called the Asian-American immigrant novel. Kain (1993) argues that “the dominant theme for which Mukherjee has become known is the coexisting pain and exhilaration involved in the ‘refashioning of the self’ central to the experience of Asian characters (women, ordinarily) who have emigrated to North America” (p. 151). Drake slams the idea that Mukherjee sought to promote American multi-culture, arguing instead that the Indian-American writer “fabulizes America, Hinduizes assimilation, and represents the real pleasures and violence’s of cultural exchange” (1999, p. 61). In this regard, Mukherjee opines that one of the essential elements in her fiction is its transnational aspect:

I think the most important compelling force in my fiction has been being transnational: the experience of having started out incredibly solidly rooted in a traditional culture, then having found myself deracinated from that culture, and gradually becoming re-rooted in an alien. (Interview with Lavigilante, 2014, p. 179)

The very emphasis on transnationalism reminds one of the questions of hybridity and the function it has in resistance to colonialism.

Because of the dominance of transnationalism in Mukherjee’s thought and literary productions, the present paper seeks to apply Bhabha’s theory of hybridity to Mukherjee’s novel *The Tree Bride* in a bid to investigate how and to what extent the concepts of mimicry, hybridity, and uncanny play a role in the formation of the characters. As the primary focus of Bhabha’s theory is on the opportunity for resistance that hybridity and his other postcolonial notions provide, the present paper tries significantly to answer the questions what opportunities hybridity and the uncanny provide for the protagonist of Mukherjee’s novel and how the novel as a cultural product creates alternative discourses with the aim of de-centering the centrality of the colonial discourse and history.

### **Bhabha, Hybridity, and Uncanny**

“Postcolonial studies” today continues to study the formation of colonies and empires in history. As a result, racial power relations, subjectivity, identity, the role of the nation-state in determining one’s identity, cultural imperialism and resistance remain central to postcolonial studies in academia. Post-colonial theory came into being when “once colonized peoples had cause to reflect on and express the tension that ensued from ... this powerful admixture of imperial language and local experience” (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 1). Postcolonialism is a very significant and strategic branch of literary criticism and the growing number of articles and books published on this topic reflects the attention it has attracted in the previous years.

Postcolonial scholarship has been an academic tool to defy the “traditional model of empire where Europe represented the centre and the colony, the margins” (Nayar, 2015, p. 28). Like most approaches in the realm of literary criticism, postcolonialism encompasses divergent concepts and theories for analyzing the encounter, or sometimes the conflict, between the colonizer and the colonized as the

representatives of two cultural communities. The present article takes as its theoretical framework some of the major ideas developed by Homi Bhabha.

One of the most widely used and most conflicting terms in postcolonial theory is hybridity. The term “commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization” (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 8). Not only is the term challenging by itself, it also challenged many of the assumptions which offer a pure and authentic nature for postcolonial concepts. As Bhabha argues, hybridity displays “necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination” (1995, p. 31). In postcolonial studies, hybridity refers to the mixing of races and cultures so that new forms of culture are produced. Back in the 19th century, hybridity was a condition that scared the Europeans. The colonials therefore advertised against miscegenation – an alternative name for hybridity – because they saw the conflation of races as a threat to their superior race. In other words, hybridity occurs when colonial invaders aim at dispossessing indigenous peoples and force them to take in new social patterns. These patterns usually derive from the colonizer’s cultural, social, linguistic, and discursive forces and grounds. Thus, these fields intermingle to generate what Bhabha calls the “assimilation of contraries” (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 3).

By doing so, the colonial power preserves its purity and at the same time, alienates the local people from their cultural and historical heritage. As a result, this postcolonial concept is associated with “the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects” (Bhabha, 1995, p. 34).

Homi Bhabha is credited as the critic who has elaborated on the concept of hybridity and turned it into a key part of the postcolonial studies. Innes contends that “drawing on psychoanalytical theory with particular reference to Sigmund Freud and Lacan, Bhabha has elaborated the key concepts of mimicry and hybridity” (2007, p. 12). Bhabha’s analysis of the relations between the colonizer and the colonized “stresses their interdependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivities” (2007, p. 108). The last decade of the 20th century “saw the rise in popularity of concepts of fusion, hybridity and syncretism as explanatory tools for the analysis of cultural formation” (Chrisman, 2003, p. 73). It is in this context that pays due attention to the role of colonialism in cultural formation that

the bulk of work since the late 1990s can be subsumed under the label of cultural history. The paradigm shift of the discipline as a whole thus translated, in the field of colonialism, into an interest in issues of hybridity, memory and representation. (Poddar et al., 2008, p. 239)

These concepts highlight the role of postcolonialism in and contribution to cultural elements.

Whether this mutual construction is in favor of the colonizer or the colonized is not unanimously decided. In other words, that the silent repression of the indigenous people as the result of the colonial command is the product of hybridization is open to contention. But the creation of the third space, another term

by which Bhabha is known, paves the way for the production of resisting discourses. Tariq Jazeel states that “rather than just the binaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, self and other, postcolonialism has brought into focus a myriad of interconnected spatialities and subjectivities produced through the joined-up spaces and ideologies that were empire’s stock-in-trade” (Jazeel, 2012, p. 60). However, most postcolonial scholars agree that defining hybridity as an innocuous cross-cultural exchange between cultures and societies is, in fact, the neglecting of the inequality of power relations to which it refers. Such inequality is so conspicuous in the relation between the colonizer and the colonized that it is almost impossible to regard it as common social and cultural exchange. The mere intention of the colonizer to invade a territory disturbs this balance and equality. Discarding the neutral use of hybridity, Young states that the term is deeply rooted in the racist assumptions, maintaining that it “became, particularly at the turn of the century, part of a colonialist discourse of racism” (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 110).

The other concept which forms the theoretical framework of this study is the uncanny. As theorized by the Austrian Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the uncanny deals with

the human “sense” of house and home. It is a perception of a space where the perceiver finds herself simultaneously “at home” and “not at home.” The uncanny is the name of this experience of double perception of any space which is at once familiar and strange, safe and threatening, “mine” and “not mine”. (Nayar, 2010, p. 89)

Homi Bhabha was one of the first literary critics who moved the uncanny out of the pure psycho-sexual realm. In Bhabha’s worldly definition of the term, the “sight of a particular place or event invokes uncanny dread because the perceiver hesitates to classify, define and identify the ambiguity in the place or event” (Nayar, 2010, p. 89).

### **Mukherjee and the Postcolonial Novel**

Mukherjee’s account of personal life which led to her “awareness of different cultures” (Carchidi, 1995, p. 92) is significant in our discussion of hybrid identity in her novel. Srivastava (2018) contends that in this novel Mukherjee “focuses on the global identity that the Indian woman is fast acquiring” (p. 59)<sup>1</sup>. What appears in the novel can be taken as the reflection of the novelist’s multicultural life. Mukherjee was born to an upper-class family in India but later in her life settled in the United States. It can therefore be said she, similar to her protagonists, is an individual between cultures. The fact that her family constantly used to return to India every summer indicates that upholding traditions meant a lot for the Mukherjees. And the high status she earned in the western community (as a university professor) well depicts that she was on good terms with the environment of the colonized. Such a person can be called a hybrid identity as she had access to both cultures equally and appeared as a successful member of both. She informs us that her novels “seem to grow out of a personal energy, an energy unleashed by a combination of traumatizing and inspiring experiences and histories I have lived through” (Interview with Lavigilante, 2014, p. 179). This multicultural, hybrid situation helps

the author develop an awareness of the opposing discourses and the way the rejection of the dominant, linear colonial discourse can be achieved.

For a person who kept oscillating between cultures and “faced racist attacks and discrimination” (Sharma & Gupta, 2014, p. 2)<sup>2</sup>, the process of identity formation was thwarted and, in some cases, postponed endlessly. This dualistic feeling of being lost between different homes, as we will see with respect to *The Tree Bride*, does not necessarily suggest hostility toward either of them. It can create the uncertainty for the colonial discourse and pave the way for a resisting discourse, the situation that Bhabha terms third space. The colonized subject can be received well by the cultures that surround her, as was the case with Bharati Mukherjee. Nevertheless, the plurality of the axes around which her life was defined resulted in fragmentation, a state that can help colonial negotiation appear. During an interview, Mukherjee discussed the importance of violence in the transformation of character, both in her own life and in the lives of her characters:

I can see that in my own life it's been psychic violence. In my character Jasmine's case it's been physical violence because she's from a poor farming family. Plus terrorism is a virus of the 80s, so there is the initial violence of the village, where her husband dies in a fire bombing. (Connell et al., 1990, p. 8)

Violence is a turning point in the life of a marginal figure clinging on to a culture and environment. As Mukherjee asserts, this violence does not have to be a physical one, but can be any force that has the power to make the individual see to what extent she has been pushed to the edges. “Psychic violence” is the uncanny which will be discussed in the following. The “physical violence” that serves as a trigger in Mukherjee's novels results in “unrest” in the life of the colonized individual and throws into confusion the order and peace of her life. On the one hand, there is this violence (with its manifold aspects) that renders the life of the marginalized, colonized figure insecure and disordered. On the other hand, there are numerous other experiences that constantly remind the subject of her position. Mukherjee's account of her school days is suggestive:

During the schooldays we were taught to devalue – I was going to say sneer at, but that's putting it a little too strongly – Bengali plays, Bengali literature, Bengali music, Bengali anything. And then we went home – I came from a very orthodox, very traditional family – so we had to negotiate in both languages. But, as I'm sure happens with minority children who are being channeled into fancy prep schools and all, it created complications within the Hindi community, within the Indian upper-class community of my generation. (Connell et al., 1990, p. 9)

Mukherjee's experience as a school student shows the contrast between the two communities she experienced during her life-time. She was asked to devalue her background and traditional beliefs. Such a contrast between personal values and environmental demands is precisely what marks a central conflict that Mukherjee's characters encounter. The fact that she was always forced to negotiate in two languages is another factor that contributes to this inner fragmentation. Unlike the

colonizer, the colonized *has to* interpret the world twice, each time through a new language system that suggests different sets of values. This double-ness cannot help but be resolved in favor of one part of the binary opposition sooner or later. It is often either the more powerful culture, or the more readily accessible one, that manages to exert influence and control over the individual and marginalize the other culture. As for Mukherjee, and her protagonist, the British culture is both more powerful and more easily accessible. The only reason Mukherjee decided to learn Indian culture and language was her need for a university degree.

Regarding the stylistic changes during her writing career, Mukherjee pointed to the role of her nationalities in shaping her style: “My style has changed because I am becoming more Americanized with each passing year. American fiction has a kind of energy that fiction from other cultures seems to lack right now” (Carb, 1988, p. 649). Elsewhere, however, she explicitly underlined that “as an immigrant I don’t have models here in America” (Interview with Desai & Barnstone, 1998, p. 136). The two opposing comments reveal both the advantages and disadvantages of hybridity. The novelist, however, proves to be smart enough to appropriate the hybridity in question to her own advantage.

Both generic and the stylistic transformations that appear in Mukherjee’s writing are highly influenced by her changing national affiliations. She found a more exuberant style when she identified herself with the American fiction, while the omniscient irony of her former fiction was influenced by the British literature. The trilogy that includes *Desirable Daughters*, *The Tree Bride*, and *Miss New India* – with which her writing career came to an end – is the result of a hybrid of British, American, and Indian identities Mukherjee experienced during the different phases of her career.

### **From Mimicry to Hybrid Identity**

*The Tree Bride* deals with the story of Tara Chatterjee, the Tree Bride. The five-year-old Tara is widowed and frowned upon by the society when her teenage fiancé is killed by a snake bite. As Tara is considered the reason for her fiancé’s death, she is forced by her father “to tie a knot with the tree to avoid further deliberations” (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 34). This story shares affinities with the life of the narrator who is also called Tara. The “modern rootless” (2014, p. 34) Tara Chatterjee, however, comes from a rich family. She immigrates to the United States after marrying Bishwapriya Chatterjee. Unable to adapt to the American community, she divorced her husband and travels back to India for a lost identity. The event that triggers her quest for “root-search” (Babu & Kumar, 2013, p. 41)<sup>3</sup> in the novel is an act of violence: a bombing that awakens within Tara a feeling of insecurity inside the cultural aura of the United States. This means her marginalization is not a political or social one; rather, she has to endure mental and psychic subalternity. It is this very subaltern position that leads the protagonist toward assuming a hybrid identity, the one that makes her think about the discourses that have long formed her consciousness, leading to the appearance of negotiation about colonial discourse.

*The Tree Bride* begins with a short excerpt from *Mahabharata* that is central to our understanding of the entire plot and characterization of the novel: “All kings

must see hell at least once. Hence you have for a little while been subjected to this great sorrow” (Mukherjee, 2018, p. 1). The hell which is mentioned here is a metaphor for the otherness that fragments the colonized individual. Whether she is a westernized Indian subject who has suppressed her eastern identity or vice versa, the protagonist can only have access to heaven by facing this other hellish half. The whole novel is an account of the suppressed aspects of Tara Chatterjee’s identity. She is a respected American citizen who is forced to cast another glance at her past life and at the culture from which she has departed. Therefore, she is situated between two cultures and is in a liminal situation.

The beginning of the novel is characterized by the liminal situation of giving birth:

Bish and I were standing on the back porch of my house in Upper Haight on a warm, November, California night. My daughter must have been the size of a half-corpuscle. I wouldn’t even know of her existence for another two months. (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 3)

The novel opens with birth (or the prospect of giving birth) and ends with death. Therefore, the whole novel can serve as the chronicle of life as experienced by a colonized eastern-western individual. The life of the infant during pregnancy is an in-between life. Similar to the colonized subject living in a colonizing civilization, the infant exists in a neither-nor situation. It is neither alive nor dead. The colonized subject here is also neither eastern, nor western, but occupies an in-between hybrid condition and is closely similar to the soul the wanders between worlds:

When I was a very small child back in Kolkata, my paternal great-grandmother told me a very strange, very moving story about life-before-birth. Call it the Hindu version of the stork legend. Between incarnations, she said, the individual soul wanders in a dreamless state, like a seed between plantings [...] the bodies it has previously inhabited have perished, but the soul persists. Fire cannot burn it, nor does water drown it. It dreams of its past tenancies. It remembers the terrors and triumphs of its many lives on earth and links them together with the logic of dreams. (Connell et al., 1990, p. 4)

If we take the soul to be a metaphor of the hybrid, colonial subject, “the bodies” that were formerly occupied by it are equal to the historical, social, and cultural background from which it has been detached. The soul “wanders” rather than settles in a specific, fixed spot. This indicates the confused, lost situation of the subaltern living in a western world. The past to this in-between creature is neither all terror nor a complete triumph. That is precisely why it can never completely break with the past and assume a completely new form. Similarly, Tara, who is forced by the violence of the explosion to reconsider her past, cannot completely dispense with it and move on.

Tara is a westernized Indian from a traditional family who is tempted by the lure of the western civilization. Tara’s description of her husband, Bish, certifies to this claim:

When we were married, Bish stood six feet tall and walked with a manly stiffness my sisters called Calcutta cowboy and I called Clint Eastwood. An imaginary saddle creaked whenever he walked. Now I stand behind him and look down on his thinning hair, at the gray roots he can't dye out. (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 14)

Bish's tallness makes him look particularly western, similar to a "cowboy ... Clint Eastwood," which can be synonymous with the whole western civilization. His posture reminds Tara of western cowboys whose images were promoted through Hollywood movies. Therefore, he resembles one of the most prominent emblems of western civilization.

Bish has been able to mimic the image of the perfect western man (a cowboy) so well that "an imaginary saddle" creaks whenever he walks. He had been able to fashion a hybrid identity for himself before the bombing incident deprived him of his mimicking power. At this point, this superficial appearance is pitted against Bish's situation and "thinning hair" which cannot be dyed. This second image of Bish gives him a specifically eastern, Indian appearance that makes him undesirable to Tara, who goes on to remember other things about her husband:

He had been a good off-spin bowler on his college cricket team and he played – used to play, that is – killer tennis with anyone who'd learned his game on private courts in tropical clubs. When America started looking for unthreatening, non-European success stories, there was always the "Atherton Communications Guru," "the Swami of Stanford," Bish Chatterjee. (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 15)

Bish's mimicry was so precise that he could serve as an example of the "European success" story or the American dream whenever the story was needed. The incident of the bombing that shattered Bish's, and Tara's, hybrid identity, makes Tara realize that she has lost touch with half of her identity. She looks back on her past and sees that a whole world (which she sometimes remembers as an uncanny world) has been suppressed unconsciously so that she can mimic her new environment more readily:

I felt for the first time how recent my family's Calcutta identity was, just two generations, how shallow those urban roots were, not much deeper than Rabi's in California. I saw my life on a broad spectrum, with Calcutta not at the center, but just another station on the dial. (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 20)

Reflecting on her past, Tara realizes that her Indian identity is much closer to her than she might have imagined before. Having realized this, she understands the superficiality of her mimicry and her newly developed urban, hybrid identity. Tara realizes that pretending to be what she is not cannot be the solution as she can never just erase the past that has shaped her. When her physician reminds her of professor Khanna, she surprisingly exclaims "how stupid of me, it sometimes seems so long ago" (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 22). She claims that her forgetfulness is due to stupidity, but this is not the case. She has unconsciously suppressed anything related to her Indian heritage in her mind in a bid to better fashion a new identity.



Elsewhere in the novel, Tara stresses that Calcutta is not “the center” but one “station” (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 28) that must be visited. She does not see her past in Indian culture as a destination to which she must return; rather, she views it as one among many points in time and space that have worked hand in hand to turn her into what she is. As Bish says, and as Tara begins to discover for herself, “nothing in the universe is ever lost” (2004, p. 36).

When Tara begins to realize the significance of her background in India and the centrality of Indian history and culture to her present situation, she begins to see to what extent she has changed. She admits that she knowingly adopted western ways of life in order to mimic western individuals, fashion a hybrid identity, and distance herself more and more from her past:

I come from a highly religious, orthodox Hindu Brahmin family, but to know me in California, you'd never guess. My sisters and I received a typical upper-middle-class Calcutta convent-school English-language education, but we were not of that cultural persuasion. We left school and returned to a world of tales, prayers, and a shadow universe of myth and legend. Our family, whatever its outward signs of Westernization (and they were plentiful), had never joined forces with the truly Westernized, progressive traditions of nineteenth-century Bengal [...] our family, beginning with Jai Krishna Gangooly, father of the tree bride, became anti-secular, and the traditions of piety remain. (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 43)

In the above paragraph, the narrator wavers between eastern tradition and western progress several times. The very fact that she reconsiders the past and present, leads to a space in which the character can objectively consider and discuss the discourses that have long created her personality. First of all, she acknowledges that she comes from a traditional and religious family. Then, she asserts that she has changed and adapted herself to a western lifestyle so much that one cannot recognize her from other Americans. Then, she changes her stance and states that she and her sisters received an English education. However, they did not like it and escaped to the world of Indian tradition that brimmed with tales and legends of the lore. Her family has numerous signs of Westernization that turn it into a progressive, westernized community. Yet, it has never been so westernized as to completely dispense with its pious Indian traditions. Tara concludes by distinguishing between “the truly Westernized,” and her own “anti-secular” family. One can see that Tara’s existence only occurs through in-between spaces and moments, not within extremes.

As Tara delves deeper and deeper into her past, she begins to realize that the epistemic violence inflicted upon her has prevented her from both having a voice (speaking as a subaltern) and knowing the truth. Therefore, she leans more and more toward her Indian heritage. In a part of the narrative when she revises the history of her original country and recapitulates the stories they were told, Tara asserts that the British and not Muslims were responsible for their relocation. The protagonist, then, argues that “it is easy for an English-educated, middle-class Indian (or Pakistani or Bangladeshi) to fall in line with colonial prejudice” (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 44). Formerly, she was the product of slavish imitation of the colonizers. But now she

begins to mimic them more and more and to fashion a more hybrid identity that transcends the lies and fabrications of “colonial prejudice”. Although her western upbringing has taught her to be inclined toward the future, she chooses, from this point on, to focus her attention on the past: “When Victorians dreamed, they dreamed of the future. I dream of the past” (2004, p. 51).

Mukherjee’s protagonist, then, offers a series of nostalgic, dreamy, romanticized image of India in the past. Her intention, however, is not to fall into the trap of nostalgic mourning and self-indulgence. She aims to show the reader how the British saw India in those days. Her hybrid identity prevents her from eulogizing the land that has limiting traditions:

I was a nineteen-year-old girl from a good Calcutta family, which meant I’d never been on intimate terms with any hidden part of my body. One day a virgin who’d never even looked in the mirror, three months later, vomiting twenty times a day. (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 155)

The prudish tendencies of the traditional culture of “a good Calcutta family” (as Tara ironically tells the audience) prevents her from knowing her very own body. To read a little more between the lines, the bounds and limitations of the tradition deprive her of any self-knowledge and keep her ignorant. Her ignorance is only shattered later through some sort of violence that tears her away from traditional illusions and shows her the reality about life and womanhood.

Having thus highlighted the positive aspects of the progressive, western culture that offers her self-knowledge, she turns to the process of mimicry adopted by most colonized subjects in an attempt to become English. She stresses the fact that mere imitation falls short of bestowing upon the individual an air of genuine Englishness.

English-speaking peoples: There’s a jab there. Welsh and Irish and Australians and Americans are all fundamentally English. *There a huge difference between speaking it and actually being it.* Jamaicans, Trinidadians, and the bloody Bengalis mimic a decent English, even Chinese out of Singapore and Hong Kong can do a fair job of copying a standard accent, if only to use our language against us, like bloody Naseer Ahmed of the Honours List. There were quite a number of things he might have done differently, had he occupied Churchill’s position, but the faults, like the differences between them, were small and of little consequence. (Mukherjee, 2004, pp. 199-200; italics added)

The long list of different nationalities who strive to become more and more English can do their best. But no matter how hard they try, they cannot turn into full-on English subjects, because “there is a huge difference between speaking it and actually being it.” The best that such an individual can do is to fashion a hybrid identity that has traces of both the native culture and the target culture and does not attempt to control or tame any of them. The hybrid identity is not the result of siding with either of the two extremes blindly. Rather, it is the product of accepting the double-ness and the fragmentation of one’s identity. The hybrid identity collects the

positive aspects of both cultures and turns into a combination of the two minus their shortcomings. The narrator seems to have arrived at the same solution when, at the end of the novel, she offers us the perfect hybrid character through Rabi.

At the end of the novel, we get a hint of the peaceful coexistence of tradition and the modern way of living through reading about how Rabi takes part in a tradition about which he might know very little. When the priest asks “who will touch flaming torch to skill?” Rabi knows that he is the only one that is allowed by tradition to do the rite. Therefore, “Rabi hands me his video-cam. It is his duty as the only living male blood relative present, the tree bride being a mother’s side connection” (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 292). By participating in the traditional rite, he has acknowledged, silently, that both the western culture in which he is brought up, and the Indian culture that serves as his original background, are equally valid and worthy of taking notice.

### **The Uncanny Condition**

As mentioned earlier, in Home Bhabha’s version of the uncanny, a particular place or event may evoke fear in the perceiver, because they are not able to identify or categorize the vagueness in that location or incident. It can thus be another situation that paves the way for reconsideration of and resistance to the linearity and hegemony of colonial discourse. The uncanny is most fittingly shown at the beginning of the novel through the big explosion that disrupts the peace and stasis: “And that’s all I remember, until I found myself in the backyard under a shower of glowing splinters and balls of flaming tar that had been my home. My hair was singed off, my face and arms pitted by embers” (Mukherjee, 2004, pp. 3-4). The scene illustrates the uncanny as it is “the coming together of strangeness and intimacy, the disturbing overlaps between terror and comfort” (Johnson, 2010, p. 215).

This chaotic condition represents all that Tara has sought to suppress through years. As Mukherjee said above, psychic as well as physical violence has the capability to disrupt the façade that divides cultures and creates boundaries. The veil of forgetfulness that covers the past is shattered through this explosion. Further on into the novel, we encounter a Tara who is beginning to realize how much she has suppressed and left behind. Answering the physician who asks her whether she believes in destiny or not she thinks to herself “who doesn’t in my family? Some cultural habits never die” (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 11). The word “die” here, is highly significant. It shows some sort of expectation for the death of cultural habits, or even willing attempts at killing it. Tara remembers, perhaps a little guiltily, that some of her cultural habits have not yet perished despite her attempts at killing them.

This awakening is not limited to Tara. Bish, too, is awakened by the violent bombing incident and is made aware of the past that he had attempted to render invisible. He sees the series of disastrous events as signs that intend to open his eyes to the illusory nature of the world. To be more precise, the physical and actual violence of the bombing has removed the epistemic violence that made Tara, Bish and several other colonized minds to the truth behind their colonization:

For Bish, the divorce, the bombing, the handicap, had all been signs. We come from a long line of amateur yogis and sadhus. He who had walked with statesmen, movie stars, and corporate gods, and soared above the world, now shuffled along its surface, pushed by his wife. Instant communication, possessions, wealth, were Maya, he said, illusions. (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 18)

The uncanny is that which has been suppressed, but has managed to resurface and work its way through to Bish's consciousness. It is only through this violent incident that the mind can be directed toward the past.

The uncanny is not limited merely to the personal experiences of Bish and Tara. Tara casts a critical glance upon the colonizing British and castigates them for the crimes they committed in India by reconsidering and re-interpreting past history. The narrator's highly ironic tone is of note here: "Then came the time when a serious-minded bureaucrat said, 'All right, enough with the silks and spices – where do you keep the gold?'" (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 48). The trade, represented through "silks and spices" is only a pretext for the bureaucrat to have access to gold and financial gain. And his pretentious interest in native traditions (gods you worship) is replaced by better gods of the capitalist: money and profit. All the pages of history are reduced, through this revisionary attitude, to the struggles of the western man to make more profits. Thus, the novel does present an uncanny condition where "the signs and norms of the colonizer's culture arrive belatedly and repeat at a spatiotemporal remove" (Gopal, 2015, p. 198).

The western man, too, cannot escape the critical eye of the hybrid subject that has been re-opened through violence:

I can imagine the sort of men they were, outcasts of the British Isles. Second and third sons cut off from inheritance. Cornish seafarers, Manxmen, Scotch, Welsh and Irish, theirs were the names on charge sheets; the escapees from debtors' prison, the common criminals and mutineers. Others had absconded from contracts of indentured or other binding agreements. (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 55)

The gentlemen that rode horses in Hellenic landscapes have turned, here, to escapes, debtors, prisoners, criminals and mutineers who communicate with other Europeans through eastern men as proxies out of the fear that they might be caught and deported back to their own countries. The pages of history abound with chaotic incidents that have been curtailed, refashioned, and embroidered to appear like comprehensible, linear accounts of the battle between the good and the bad. Tara's re-reading of history, however, shows that this simplistic outlook upon history cannot be trusted.

### **Conclusion**

The investigation of the hybrid and uncanny identity in the characterization of Tara Chatterjee in the present paper reveals that there are remarkable affinities between Mukherjee's personal experiences as an Indian-American person and Tara's story. Tara's hybrid identity hinders her sense of belonging to both her Indian and American cultural communities. In other words, this results in some sort of double

banishment, being in a place and being out of a place simultaneously. The hybrid situation in which the protagonist is involved paves the way for colonial negotiation. It creates a third space which enables the character to decide on her position in the conflicting discourses, embracing one while resisting the other. Along the way, the protagonist assumes a judging stance, revisiting the past and the present with the consideration of what the British colonial discourse has done to the native values. The hybridity that happens in *The Tree Bride* is thus an opportunity for reconsideration, estrangement, resistance, and change, the very objective and mission that Bhabha assumes for the notion.

An investigation of the novel in terms of the uncanny with a focus on the way confusion causes the state of being at home and out of home at the same time reveals that Mukherjee's novel does depict and seek to find a remedy for such bewilderment in the life of the protagonist who has lost her sense of belonging to a particular location as her homeland. Like hybridity, the uncanny serves as a strategy to create a third space in which resistance to and rejection of the ruling colonial discourse take place. Through this third space, the certainty assigned to the colonial history is shattered and thus incredulity towards the past, the one that has long been taken for granted results. The incredulity and resistance in question pave the way for the appearance of negotiation and reconsideration of the forgotten history, namely the one belonging to the colonized culture.

It is noteworthy that Mukherjee's attempt to illustrate "the potential synthesis of Indian and American culture in the context of globalization" (Gamal, 2013, p. 4) is not limited to *The Tree Bride*. In *Jasmine* (1989), she "mangers--in a tale filled with tough raw experience--a smooth synthesis of Hindu religious imagery and concepts and American frontier mythology" (Kain, 1993, p. 157). The results of this research as well other studies conducted on Mukherjee's other novels reveal that the Indian-American novelist was concerned with the concept of hybrid identity throughout her career. What is conspicuous about her version of hybridity is that Mukherjee rarely takes side – or is able to take side – with either of the cultural communities her female protagonists come to encounter.

## Notes

1. Srivastava concludes that all Bharati Mukherjee's heroines go through a transformation in their personality; they are not what we know them to be at the beginning of the novel, we are simply amazed what they have turned themselves into when the novel ends. People can internally transform at only when they are not quite satisfied with their identity, in some corner of their heart they yearn for change. This dissatisfaction leads to a quest for identity in ambitions and curiously adventurous people for their actual self and eventually, to an affirmation of their newly found identity.

2. Sharma & Gupta maintain Mukherjee's diasporic concerns of an immigrant are portrayed in her novels - *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of The World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004), *Miss New India* (2011). She also has to

her credit two collections of short stories - *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), for which she won National Book Circle Critics Award.

3. Babu & Kumar state that like her contemporary feminist writers she upholds the cause of women, but she differs from them because her basic concern is to delineate the problems of cross cultural conflicts faced by Indian women immigrants.

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## Author's Biography

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**Masoume Bae** has received her B.A. in English Literature from Gonbad University and was graduated in M.A. from Golestan University in February 2019. She has a keen interest in exploring Postcolonial works of literature. Her thesis applies the Postcolonial theorist Bha-bha's notions of hybridity, uncanny, and mimicry to two novels by Indian-American author, Mukherjee. She mainly tends to depict the aftermath of Colonization and the side-effects it has left on societies, people's personalities, and their insights into life, so as to raise a public awareness of these issues. Currently, she works as an English instructor in language institutes and high school.



**Dr Behzad Pourgharib** (Corresponding Author) is an Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature at Golestan University in Iran. He has published various articles in national and international journals. He has also presented papers at many national and international conferences and written a book entitled *Virginia Woolf and Consciousness*. His research interests include 20th century English and American Literature, Literary Theory, and Criticism and English Fiction.



**Abdolbaghy Rezaei Talarposhty** is an Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature at Golestan University, Iran. He has published various articles in national and international journals. His research interests include 20th century English and American Literature, Literary Theory and Criticism, and Cultural Studies.

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