

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)



<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2026.v8n1.33>

## Folklore as Narrative Strategy: Tradition, Identity, and Resistance in Bharati Mukherjee's *Darkness*

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### Abstract:

*Darkness*, by Bharati Mukherjee has 12 short stories. The compilation, which was published in 1985, is one of the most important works on Indian diasporic literature that provide intimate relationships to displacement, memory, and cultural identity, addresses the experiences of immigrants, especially South Asians in finding their new homes in North America. The purpose of the paper is to critically evaluate how Mukherjee uses folklore as a narrative technique to maneuver through the conflict areas between tradition and modernity, home and exile, and submission and resistance. Mukherjee recreates the disjointed diasporic self through her mythic allusions, folk motifs and cultural symbols to recover indigenous identity in the globalized world. The paper explores *Darkness* in the context of postcolonial and folklorist theories and states that Mukherjee turns folklore into an instrument of resistance against cultural erasure as well as western hegemony.

**Keywords:** Bharati Mukherjee, Folklore, Narrative Strategy, Diaspora, Resistance, Identity, Postcoloniality

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## Introduction

Folklore the living storehouse of oral story, proverbs, song, ritual and even popular belief, has been a primary source of Indian imaginative writing. The restrained shape and the focused narrative energy of the short story lend themselves especially to the repetition of the folklore material; an individual tale, a proverb, a rite can be re-told in a short story and it will expose social contradictions, moral dilemmas, and identity transformations. This proposal examines how Indian-short story writers borrow and reconfigure the folklore and what reconfigurations tell us about modernity, nationalism, caste, gender and cultural continuity.

The presentation addresses the *Darkness* by Bharati Mukherjee that mirror the issues of cultural identity, racism, and adjustment to a new life, folk beliefs that form community - based traditions. This paper will note the mobilization of folklore by the novelist. The Indian literature has never fallen short of folklore as a source of inspiration. Ethos of Indian communities can be traced in folk narratives, which are songs, myths, legends, and proverbs. They pass moral teachings, social values, and group memories to the next generations. A short story, being a modern genre of literature, tends to alter these old traditions to new realities. Mulraj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mahasweta Devi are all authors who have successfully incorporated folklore into their work to produce a realistic depiction of Indian worldview. The paper concentrates on the main issues of the role that the folklore plays in the short stories not only as a tradition of ornament, but as a tool of cultural continuity, resistance and creation of identity. In this paper, the close reading of *Darkness* explores the dynamic relationship between oral tradition and literary modernity.

The works of the fictionist Bharati Mukherjee dwells on the emotional and cultural issues of migration and exile. Her figures are often torn between the still attraction of Indian culture and the demands of western modernity. In *Darkness*, Mukherjee short stories follow the path of immigrants who bargain their compromise identities in the foreign environments. It is in these stories that folklore, myths, legends, proverbs and cultural rituals, turn into a narrative tool, which trains the characters to their roots, as well as offers a means of self-realization. This paper examines the role in which Mukherjee uses folklore not only as a nostalgic memory of the cultural history of India, but also as an aesthetic and ideological tool to express diasporic consciousness, and resistance.

A collection of short stories (*Darkness*) is an exemplification of folklore as folklore uses darkness as one of the most complicated narrative techniques, and as the conflict of continuation of Indian identity and integration into Western culture. Mukherjee employs mythological and supernatural facts to discuss the themes of displacement, psychological impact of immigration and the painful way of self-reinvention. Instead of offering comfort. These folkloric references are, however, quite frequently subverted to signify the spiritual and cultural displacement of the

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protagonist, *Darkness* uses the given elements of Indian folklore, myth and oral tradition that ensures that the characters are rooted in the inherited memory regardless of negotiating the contemporary reality. Mukherjee says in an interview with Francisco Collado Rodrigues:

I grew up in a culture where women didn't see men as the enemy, not necessarily. However, women had to find alternate ways of dominating, of controlling, of clearing the obstacles so, in a sense, my female characters are also part of a debate with doctrinaire American feminists who did a lot of talking, especially in the mid-1970s, who were excellent at discourses but who got very little done compared to the Third World feminist. (Interview Rodriguez 303).

Mukherjee's women, chiefly Indians in *Darkness* do not accept their fate without fighting; rather silently admitting defeat, they actively try to take control of their lives.

## Folklore and the Diasporic Imagination

Folklore as a store of memory, collectivity, contains the utterance of the tradition and values of a community. Within the context of diasporas, folklore frequently serves as a cultural anchor - a means to facilitate continuity even in situations of dislocation by immigrants. Folklore in the case of Mukherjee is an imaginary idiom round which the displaced person reinvents identity. *Darkness* by Mukherjee heavily relies on oral storytelling methods, non-linear plots, episodic narration and embedded tales. These formal decisions reflect the meter of Indian folk narrative and religiously oriented *Katha*. Bharati Mukherjee uses Indian folklore, mythology and cultural archetypes in her diasporic fiction to depict the psychological change in the immigrant women. Through whitening and reinterpretation of traditional figures and narrative in new cultural setups her characters act within a complicated process of relocation as they lose previous identities and create new ones.

Folklore is used to help characters of Mukherjee come out of the status of existence; in the land of their birth and to the life of the immigrants where they are able to create a new identity. One of the fundamental illustrations of this change lies in the name *Jasmine* in which the main characters change her name several times. As Jyoti, she becomes Jasmine, Jase and Jane. All the names mark a stage in her acculturation and a new identity and show a shifting identity, not fixed one. It is permanent because of the interplay of folkloric symbolism and Mukherjee states that the fate of her characters can be recreated, rather than it is determined by the birth. As it was in *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee plays with the concept of cultural hybridity: the character of the new born such as Tara can be defined as a mixture of Indian tradition and American modernity. This cross breeding brings about a new identity. In contrast to most other diasporic writers who dwell on the cultural loss and hurt of being exiled, Mukherjee defends a melting pot idea in which the immigrants are undergoing radical, usually painful, and ecstatic, mental change. The old, tradition and folklore is that which has to be negotiated and translated or even left behind in order

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to assimilate effectively and create a new and hybrid self. Simply put, Mukherjee reveals the diasporic imagination as neither the location of mourned nostalgia of a lost past, but as an active transformative place whose traditional folklore is a primary constituent, but whose terms are bargainable in the active formulation of a new, self-created identity.

## **Folklore as a Bridge Between Tradition and Modernity:**

In the fiction, Mukherjee is working in the conflict between tradition and modernity. She uses folkloric nature in stories such as *A Father* and *The World According to Hsu* to explain how migrants bring their indigenous views of the world to foreign settings. Such bits of folk wisdom, stories, beliefs, or rituals act as cultural bed-posts to those characters who have been uprooted out of their native lands. As an example, in *A Father*, the patriarchal folklore and pure Hindu ritual of the protagonist clashes with the secularized world of immigrants. The clash of folklore identity of India and rationalism of the modern era of West high-tech world is the symbol of contraposition. Folklore is therefore a place of negotiations - a point of cultural memory and adaptation. In this regard, folklore do not just appear as cultural decoration, but also as a dynamic story machine that connects tradition and modernity. Traditions and cultural practices reappear in times of crisis in the stories such as the *Lady from Lucknow*. These aspects of folklore rituals, customs and mythic allusions attach the sense of self to the characters, despite their struggle to face the unknown moral geographies of USA. However, it is not a nostalgic depiction by Mukherjee but a symbolic and psychological set up that allows the diasporic state of existence to come to terms with the contradictions. Mukherjee through her writings provides folklore a living bridge - between tradition and modernity, homeland and diaspora, and memory and reinvention.

## **Folklore as a Reflection of Characters' Inner Turmoil:**

Folklore as a literary technique brings here both as a culture connector and a conversion technique. It also gives, Mukherjee, the ability of having the characters identify with their ancestral consciousness and adjust to a changing and sometimes alien environment. In this respect, the construction of folklore in *Darkness* is not fixed one, but it also changes along with the immigrant psyche, and is a way to rebuild fragmented identities. Throughout *Darkness*, immigrant characters hold on to the traditional beliefs and folklore as part of continuing and keeping to touch with their past, however, this habit is often contradictory with their new existence. Mr. Bhowmick of the story *A Father* is an orthodox Bengali man in Detroit who believes in ancient, Hindu, superstitions, and worships a goddess named *Kali*. These beliefs are physical that is, manifested as the belief in the invisible presence: gods and snakes and it acts as some constant reminder of his provenance and his failure to fit in. His traditional values are greatly broken when his Americanized daughter comes to announce that she is pregnant through artificial insemination. The next outburst of violence is caused by the fact that he failed to make peace between his contemporary reality and his folkloric belief system and, as a result, his family failed.

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*Nostalgia* is a story of an Indian psychiatrist named Dr. Manny Patel who is a psychiatrist in queens New York who believes that he has made it in the American dream. Nevertheless, in the story of a sales-woman he regards as a goddess, a purging nostalgia of his cultural origin breaks out. Such a folklore is demolishing broken as he gathers she is a prostitute and the ensuing shakedown humiliates him to such a level that he ultimately regresses back to a primal state and therefore defecates in the sink in the bathroom as he would have done in India. This action reveals how he is still psychologically attached to his past and how weak his assimilated identity is.

## **Folklore as a Cultural and Psychological Collision:**

The supernatural and traditional tales they carry along with them to the West are, in most instances, violently clashing with their new locations Mukherjee exhibits a ceaseless internal struggle of an ancient and most intuitive Indian world against contemporary pragmatism and practical thinking of the West. The faith in fate and universal forces that Mr. Bhowmick has in *A Father* is insignificant compared to the startling truth of his daughter making a conscious and rational decision to bear a child without getting married. His folklore fails to give him a reference point with which to interpret and recognize this new state and he thus breaks down emotionally. Ratna Clayton, an Indian lady residing in Canada, regards cultural conflicts and prejudice in *The World According to Hsu* as a collision between continents, which is found in a geological article. The threat of violence and racism, combined with the scientific metaphor, through which the story is told, demonstrates that immigrants view their lives in multiple ways, one that is based on more than one culture. Her conventional Indian ethics and morals conflict with the roughness of Canadian multiculturalism and she is unable to consider herself a Canadian or an Indian. The employment of folklore by Mukherjee is often a depiction of the Indian past-ritual, myths and oral traditions as transplanted into unfamiliar geographies. In *A Wife Story*, and *Visitors* folklores serve as cultural anchors that help the main characters to maintain the memory of their roots. As an example, Panna recalls Indian social traditions and mythology of marriage in *A Wife Story* that is carried into her in America lives to define her moral principles and identity. However, it is the burden of memories to her when she comes to experience these Western ideas of freedom and individuality. In this meaning, folklore turns into a two-sided memory keeping the identity intact but hindering adaptability. The psyche of the immigrant in *Darkness* is usually torn between internalized folklore and foreign cultural existence. The characters in the novel by Mukherjee are disturbed by the voices-ghosts of the past that are ancestral and reveal during instances of alienation. The Indian origins of the main character, in *Visitors*, are laden by the Indian traditional myths of the family and the Indian superstitiousness that collides with his American Americanized life. This tension is expressed through their psychological disorientation i.e. it is feeling haunted by the tales not fitting the new reality. This type of collision reflects what Jung termed in *Archetypes and Analytical Psychology*, the so-called “return of the repressed archetype” (76): the

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mythic consciousness invading the rational identity. Folklore, consequently, develops as a psychological reverberation of cultural displacement, the major indication of the diasporic self-fashioned by conflicting cultural codes.

In the *Isolated Incidents*, e.g., the Indian notion of fate and *Karma*, which is based on folklore, is contrasted with the American notion of self-determination. This leads to cultural dissonance: characters are ambivalent in submitting and resisting, to fate and decision.

### **Folklore as a Tool of Resistance and Self-Assertion:**

The folklore employed by Mukherjee does not rely on culture-remembrance. It turns into a resistance strategy - to the colonial heritage, as well as the pressure of assimilation. Attempting to insert folk archetypes in to the contemporary contexts, she disrupts the Western literary realism and claims Native narrative. Her women characters more so, reform, patriarchal myths into empowerment, tales. Indian women, who are the protagonists in most of the works of Mukherjee, but were displaced through the migration process, use folklore to reinforce their continuity with their homeland yet redefine themselves in a new environment. In *Darkness*, folklore is both a survival strategy and a declaration of resistance in itself an assertion that individual and community identity may exist at the same time even when displaced. This was the case of *The Tenant* where the inner conflict of the main protagonist is an expression of the conflict between the modern Western identity she enacts on the one hand, and the folk consciousness of the past that she cannot forget. Her disjointed identity is a call of modernity and the memory - a leading theme of postcolonial identity discourse. In *Darkness*, Mukherjee makes folklore an exertion of resistance and assertion of self. It has the power to give voice to displacement and recover the suppressed past and provides a cultural language to survive outside the homeland. Her characters negotiate alienation, resist assimilation, and make hybrid selves through the use of folk memory. The art of Mukherjee is based on the ability to redefine the folk consciousness into a postcolonial and feminist idiom in which storytelling, mythology, and memory can never be erased or oppressed. *Darkness* brings into the light of the world of folklore as a bright halo of self-definition during displacement a weapon of cultural sustenance and an assertion of identity.

### **Folkloric Motifs and Cultural Memory in *Darkness*:**

The narrative style of Mukherjee utilizes the folklore tropes and mythological elements, which add realism to the story. Panna, as the protagonist in *A Wife Story* faces her cultural conditioning as an Indian wife in the American present-day context. Her struggle is reminiscent of the folk memory of Sita who is both able to withstand and to fight back. In Mukherjee, this archetype is very thinly veiled, but it makes folklore turn into a psychological metaphor of diasporic transformation - as traditional female virtue becomes invested in self-assertion. The *Isolated Incidents* story can be seen as an example of evidence to the preservation of caste and gender levels in the Indian society by folklore. Mukherjee returns to folk beliefs and superstitions

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in order to satirize their repressive possibilities. She contrasts these patterns with the modern consciousness of the immigrant thus making folklore a critical commentary and not nostalgia. Mukherjee does not just limit herself to Indian folklore to play with a multicultural ethos - Indian, Chinese, Western - mythical sensibility in *The World According to Hsu*. This intertextual mixing shows the global - citizen hybrid identity. Mukherjee is involved in a feminist folk rewriting akin to Mahasweta Devi rewriting mythical women. In *Darkness* Mukherjee depicts the struggle of the Indian immigrants in North America to overcome the issue of cultural alienation. The folklore is presented in the form of pieces; rituals, idioms, and legends that help them feel like the part of the family. These stories of the grandmother, the references involved to deities, and mythical metaphors are the forms of mnemonic that are unable to update the modern subjects to the ancient knowledge: characters of Mukherjee in their process of integrating into the Western environment are haunted by old myths that affect their moral and emotional environment. In such a way, folklore serves as a living conduit, kind of a reminder, that tradition is not dead but that it is never incessantly being reborn in the memory and into the telling of the tales. Folklore, myths, customs, oral narratives, cultural symbols, plays a role in *Darkness* as a connective tissue in passing ancestral memory to the present experience. As an example, in such stories as *The Lady from Lucknow* and *A Father*, the traditional beliefs and cultural practices re-emerge when one faces a crisis. These verses of the folklore ritual, customs, and allusions to myths also ground the self of the characters despite being faced with the new moral terrains of America.

## **Folklore as a Feminist Strategy:**

Mukherjee regularly reforms folklore using feminist vision. She reads classic folktale images of the dutiful wife or virtuous woman in such stories as *The Lady from Lucknow* and *Isolated Incidents*. Rather, she introduces women who go against patriarchal norms in a transnational detailing. This character repeats the rebellious women of Indian folklore - such characters as Draupadi or Sita revisited to the contemporary diasporic context. With these rearticulations, Mukherjee employs folklore as a story of empowerment - changing mythic submissiveness into contemporary assertion. Her heroines, similar to the heroines in oral legends, portray change and endurance, the hermits between myths of the past and the present struggle. In some of the tales, Mukherjee fights the folklore to use the role of women in the traditions of the patriarchy. This tension is reflected in her heroines who are always placed between the Indian moral universe and Western liberalism. In the *A Wife Story*, as an example, the changes of the protagonist in New York are equivalent to mythical voyages of women in Indian folktales that goes away to home to find either spiritual or personal freedom. The process of decolonization with the old past is contrary, a confirmation of the folklore of self-renewal. In *The World According to Hsu*, Mukherjee combines the myths of the East with the myths and actuality of the West, showing that the folkloric mind is not to be antagonistic to modernity, but on the contrary, it may enrich it

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by its spiritual and symbolic richness. To Mukherjee characters folklore is the space of female self-definition that reclaims voices oppressed by both the colonial and patriarchal feminist discourse. The transformation made by Panna in New York in *A Wife Story* is a sign of self-affirmation which recalls the mythic adventures of folk heroines who break the rules to find their inner strength. Through postcolonial prism, folklore usage by Mukherjee is cultural decolonization - recovery of narrative space by indigenous knowledge. It is anti-Eurocentric in its approach to storytelling by giving preference to circularity, collective memory, and mythic consciousness. In a feminist approach, folklore is an area of subversion whereby women derail their classic myths to express freedom agency.

## **Folklore, Language, and Narrative Form:**

The narrative approach of Mukherjee reflects the rhythm of the storytelling technique of the oral language - repetitions, proverbs, and cultural idioms. Stylistic acculturation of the oral tradition enables her to combine the speech structures of the folk culture with the moderately English prose, and the Indian English aesthetic is formed. Even the process of storytelling as the key element of folklore is re-created in the *Darkness* as the means of survival and self-expression. Using oral echoes, Mukherjee allocates her main character as the heirs of the voices of their ancestors, even when they are in exile. The narration patterns used in *Darkness* tend to resemble oral narrative modes - cyclic, repetitive, degressive and parasite storytelling. Such stylistic decision appeals to the folk narration rhythm and provokes the challenge to the conditions of Western narratives. Indicatively, presented in *A Wife Story*, use of jointed memories and introspective monologues, more of an oral memory as opposed to a sequential story. Mukherjee also reappropriates the subaltern voice through this orality. Story telling does not only become a ritual of survival but also a statement of identity. The broken and rhythmic narrative voice indicates the way in which diasporic people build meaning by constructing fragments of folklore, myth and memory. The style of narration adopted by Mukherjee tends to mimic the patterns of traditional storytelling by word, repetition, circular narrative, embedded narratives, and symbolic imagery to bring back the sound of folk narration. With such a fusion of styles, *Darkness* is produced as a text in which the oral and the written, the traditional and the modern converge with one another. The tales are not a simple connotation of folklore but its structure, rhythm and spirit. She incorporates folklore into the framework of the contemporary diasporic narratives in order to show that the ancient and the contemporary may be in a dynamic, dialogic relationship. It makes it language that displacement makes sense and continuity, a mediating cord, connecting fragmented identities to the totality of cultural memory.

## **Conclusion:**

Folklore in Bharati Mukherjee's *Darkness* insists on its multifunctional narrative tactic - the reclamation of cultural memory, a method of negotiating identity, and a method of reasserting

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colonial knowledge produced. Using mythic consciousness and oral rhythm in her fiction, Mukherjee represents the diasporic narrative as a place of transition and not loss. It maintains a sense of identity in exile and at the same time reveals the discontinuities therein. Mukherjee puts the emphasis on the sense of belonging and alienation between the mythical and the modern, the mythic and contemporary folklore through her subtle depiction of the immigrant. This two-fold role echoes a greater conception of Mukherjee's broader vision of diaspora: not as mere displacement, but process of restructuring the psychological and cultural battleground. Through the perspectives of folklore, the paper shows how Mukherjee uses her characters to make peace with their compounded identities, how folklore, in itself, can be seen as adopting a new form, between being rooted and being in flux.

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