**Introduction**

This doctoral thesis captures the cross-cultural fictions of dislocated women and the possible condition of belonging simultaneously—psychologically and experientially—in the maze of cultural plurality. But what makes this dissertation unique is its analysis through Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of ‘dialogism’. By utilizing Bakhtin’s key concepts—dialogism, heteroglossia, polyphony and carnivalesque—the present research project aims to study women’s intercultural positionality in the immediate and current scenario of modern as well as postmodern situations in the selected works of Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri; and provides an overview of the changing cultural norms and altering controversies of women’s identity.

A common strand that runs through the lives of all the authors and the theorist undertaken in this study is the multicultural experience, though it shows considerable variations in each case. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin experienced a heterogeneous mix of cultures right from his childhood. His governess was a German woman, and the cities where he spent his adolescent years were enriched centres of cultural and linguistic mix. He also lived through wars, exiles and revolutions. Therefore, he experienced multiculturalism within his own land of origin. The impact that this
cultural merger produces on an individual can be related to Bakhtin’s notion of ‘metamorphosis’ in *The Dialogic Imagination:*

> Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual’s life in its more important moments of crisis: for showing how an individual becomes other than what he was. We are offered various sharply differing images of one and the same individual, images that are united in him as various epochs and stages in the course of his life. There is no evolution in the strict sense of the word; what we get, rather is crisis and rebirth. (115)

The ‘metamorphosis’ occurs due to the multicultural and multilingual situation around an individual. Such situation, engulfing Bakhtin, influenced him to write about dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia and other concepts that refer to “multiple voices” or “many languagedness”.

Anita Desai is a diasporic writer who experienced a mixed cultural upbringing. Her father D. N. Mazumdar, a Bengali, and mother Toni Nime, a German, provided a multicultural atmosphere at home. Her initial experience of surviving in twin cultures, altered into a cross-cultural encounter with her migration to England and then to the United States. She now divides her time equally between India, England and America, and successfully manages to unite the fragments of her memories and express them comprehensively
through the experiences of culturally uprooted characters of her works. The following statement of Avtar Brah relates appropriately in context to Desai’s depiction of differently constructed identities in varied cross-cultural scenarios:

When we speak of the constitution of individual into subject through multiple fields of signification we are invoking *inscription* and *ascription* as simultaneous processes whereby the subject *acquires* meaning in socio-economic and cultural relations at the same moment as she ascribes meaning by making sense of these relations in everyday life. In other words, how a person perceives or conceives an event would vary according to how “she” is culturally constructed. . . . (117)

The later works of Desai viz.–*Bye-Bye Blackbird, Games at Twilight* (a collection of short stories), *Baumgartner’s Bombay, Journey to Ithaca, Diamond Dust* (a collection of short stories), *Fasting, Feasting* and *The Zigzag Way*—discussed in this study, deal with the theme of intercultural interaction and the resulting synthesis between two cultures. Through the experiences of displaced women in these works, Desai delineates the extent to which the cross-cultural boundary is impervious or vulnerable to the alien influence; and how the perception of one cultural identity varies from the ‘other’.

Bharati Mukherjee, born in a Bengali Brahmin family of Calcutta, confronted alien culture early in her life due to her family’s
three years stay in London when she was around nine years of age. After doing post-graduation in English from India, she went to the United States to join the Creative Writing Programme. Subsequently she obtained a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Iowa, where she met Clark Blaise (the Canadian novelist, Professor and Journalist) and married him. Therefore, her cross-cultural experience is in complete contrast to Anita Desai, because unlike Desai she has a mixed marriage and a ‘unicultural’ parentage. After her fourteen years stay in Canada, Mukherjee migrated to America. Her migratory experiences in these two nations fall under the categories of ‘expatriation’ and ‘immigration’ respectively. Mukherjee confesses in one of her interviews:

I have been murdered and reborn at least three times, the very correct young woman I was trained to be, and was very happy being, is very different from the politicized, shrill, civil rights activist I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States. (Connel, Grearson, and Grimes 18)

Mukherjee’s creative corpus, including The Tiger’s Daughter, Wife, Jasmine, The Holder of the World, Darkness (a collection of short stories), Middleman and Other Stories, and Desirable Daughters, discussed in the present study from a cross-cultural perspective also depicts the assimilatory or multicultural traits of her diasporic female protagonists.
Jhumpa Lahiri, born to Bengali parents in London, brought up in the United States, married Alberto Vourvolias Bush, an American, and is now based in Brooklyn. Her continental drift through England and the United States is similar to that of Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee. But what segregates her diasporic experience from theirs is that she is a second-generation immigrant whose dilemma has been analysed by Jaiwanti Dimri as follows:

Expatriate experience is problematic for the second generation immigrants of the third world for specific reasons. Born and brought up on foreign soil expatriation for this neo-class immigrants hangs in the background as an imaginary reality. Free from the stigma of nostalgia and the popular symptoms of angst, loneliness, existential rootlessness or homelessness, their predicament is in many ways, worse than that of their predecessors. Despite their assimilation and acculturation they cannot escape from being victimized and ostracized. (28)

As a writer, belonging to this ‘neo-class of immigrants’, Lahiri has reached a new paradigm of bicultural experiences. Hence, her perception of cross-cultural experiences shows drastic shifts in her focus and concern regarding transnational identities and their cultural acclimatization. The entire oeuvre of Lahiri including—Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of bengal, boston and beyond, The Namesake and Unaccustomed Earth (a collection of short stories)—is
critically analysed in this thesis to study the issues of bicultural ambivalence faced by both the first as well as the second generation immigrants.

The experiences of these three diasporic women writers are clearly depicted through the words of Gloria Anzaldúa:

    We are . . . the people that don’t belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely in our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions . . . . Not all of us have the same oppressions, but we empathize and identify with each other’s oppressions. We do not have the same ideology, nor do we derive similar solutions. Some of us are leftists, some of us practitioners of magic. Some of us are both. But these different affinities are not opposed to each other. In El Mundo Zurdo I with my own affinities and my people with theirs can live together and transform the planet. (Moraga and Anzaldúa)

This epigraph by Anzaldúa projects the lived experiences of multicultural women writers and the theme of women’s marginalisation in their cross-cultural fictions. Similarly, the diasporic and feminist stances depicted by these three women writers in their works, exemplify their own multicultural experiences. Through these works, they emphasize strategies of survival and co-existence in a multicultural environment.
The issues of identity and cultural clashes have already been explored vastly. Therefore, the present approach extends the scope of the debate on identity to encompass the larger dimension of dialogue between cultures. Bakhtin’s idea of dialogism, which resists any categorisation, has been used in the present project with reference to cultural encounter. Issues regarding cultural encounter and identity formation form a part of diaspora literature and postcolonial studies. Hence, the present study approaches these issues from the perspective of diaspora and postcolonial theory. The seminal works of cultural theorists like Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Homi K. Bhabha, Edward W. Said and others provide specific cultural strategies that act as excellent source material for studying the intercultural experiences of diasporic subjects.

Since the issue of cultural encounter is to be analysed specifically from the perspective of women’s identity, the approach to this issue via feminist literary theory is but natural. In the field of feminist studies there are endless numbers of writers who have explored this issue. The prominent among these are Simone De Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter, Virginia Woolf and Betty Friedan. Some of the feminist theorists like Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Patricia Waugh deal with the postmodernist and poststructuralist thought. Hence, their works act as appropriate sources to unveil the cross-cultural focus of postmodernist or poststructuralist feminism. Globalisation, leading to
a new social and cultural pattern, has largely influenced every new work that is being produced by the diasporic writers. Thus, the approach to the issues of culture, identity formation, difference and assimilation automatically implicates postmodernist approach as well. This thesis intends to foreground this newness of women’s identity caught in the dichotomies of acculturation and dissociation.

The central argument set out in Chapter 1 titled “Existence as Dialogue: Bakhtinian Dialogics and Cultural Encounter” is pursued throughout the thesis. The first chapter intends to stretch Bakhtin’s concept of “dialogism” and interpret it as a dialogical encounter between different cultures. The purpose of this chapter is to acquaint the reader with key concepts of Bakhtin, such as–dialogism, heteroglossia, polyphony and carnivalesque–and to specify the implications of these notions in the cross-cultural scenario. The later chapters, following this line of thought, illuminate various other cross-cultural consequences.

The main focus in this chapter is on Anita Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca* and *The Zigzag Way*, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. The attempted application of Bakhtinian concepts in these works, exemplifies the extent and accuracy to which these concepts can be utilized in all other selected diasporic fictions of the writers undertaken in this study. These works foreground the conflicting and
collaborative dialogues that further culminate into multiculturalism and assimilation.

Three of the diasporic women authors analysed in this thesis belong to a Bengali background and all of them have experienced a cultural drift over three nations–Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri over India, England and America, and Bharati Mukherjee over India, Canada and America. In Chapter 2 titled “Multiculturalism and Assimilation: Representing the Tale of Women’s Diasporic Identity”, a survey is made of the identity issues of these three cross-cultural authors and the displaced women characters in their works. Through Bakhtinian dialogics, postmodern feminism and cultural theory, emphasis is laid on the impact of cultural displacement on women leading to their dual marginalisation–one culture based and the other gender based. This dual marginalisation further specifies their multicultural and assimilatory traits.

In each chapter, a specific theme has been picked up and the concerned works of the three authors are related to that theme. Since this chapter mainly deals with the theme of dual marginalisation of displaced women, and the contradictory roles of an immigrant and expatriate, the main focus in this chapter is on Anita Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca*, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Darkness* and *Desirable Daughters*, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*.

The immigrants create a “third space” in the multicultural scenario “where cultural tributaries meet . . . where the creolization,
assimilation and syncretism are negotiated” (Bromley 20). In this ‘third space’, the immigrants carve a niche for themselves, and do not allow nostalgia, fragmentation, cultural conflicts and identity crisis to impinge upon their new identity.

According to Susheila Natsa, “In the iconographies of nationalism, images of (women) have conventionally invited symbols suggestive of primal origins–birth, hearth, home, roots, the umbilical cord of being . . .” (Ray 129). Since women are looked upon as preserves and propagators of culture and the term woman is used as a metonym for nation, they continue to nurture and celebrate their ex-status and carry the cultural baggage of homeland to the land of adoption. Such expatriates cannot step out of the nostalgic moorings and act as beacons of ethnicity for their future generations.

Chapter 3 titled “Spectres of Absence: Problematics of Nostalgia” is a detailed study of such expatriate women who are haunted by the spectres of absence. Their constant efforts at assimilation are nullified as the ghosts of the past creep in and trigger their yearning for the lost home. This chapter analyses the expatriate experiences of displaced women under three broad categories–alienation, ghettoisation, claustrophobic and schizophrenic tendencies.

Lotte in Anita Desai’s Baumgartner’s Bombay, Maya Sanyal in “The Tenant” and Blanquita in “Fighting for the Rebound” (stories in Bharati Mukherjee’s collection The Middleman and Other Stories), and Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake are some of the alienated
subjects discussed in this chapter whose ethnic identity haunts them perpetually. The second classification of ghettoisation helps the expatriates to detect the ‘self’ in a sense of community. They form a ghetto with other displaced subjects who belong to a similar race, class, religion and origin. Pat in “Scholar and Gypsy” (a story in Anita Desai’s *Games at Twilight and Other Stories*), Padma in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Desirable Daughters* and Mrs. Sen in “Mrs. Sen” (from Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of bengal, boston, and beyond*) are the various characters scrutinised under the class of ghetto dwellers. The last condition of claustrophobic and schizophrenic tendencies of expatriates leads to varied impacts on their identities. The trauma of memory has such a deep bearing on their psyche that it leads to the irrecoverable fragmentation of the ‘self’. The various migrants, discussed in this chapter, befitting this category are: Sophie in Anita Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca*, Dimple Dasgupta in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*, Boori Ma in “A Real Durwan” and Shobha in “A Temporary Matter” (stories in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of bengal, boston, and beyond*).

Salman Rushdie observes:

To migrate is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul, but the migrant is not simply transformed by his act, he also transforms the new world. Migrants might well become mutants, but it is out of such hybridization that newness can emerge. (qtd. in Mund 113)
This ‘newness’ is defined in Chapter 4 titled “Association leading to Dissociation: The Impact of Diaspora on the Host Society” where cultural collision induces a complex position for both the displaced as well as the host subjects. The ‘association’ of the host subjects with the diasporic subjects, ironically, ends up in displacing not only the diasporic but also the host subjects. Based on their attitudes, the ‘dissociated’ hosts are further classified into the categories of ‘receptive’ or ‘refuting’ i.e. accepting or rejecting. This classification represents the immigrant and expatriate distinction in the diasporic subjects.

The recognition of this ironic displacement of the hosts becomes apparent in Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird, Fasting, Feasting* and *Diamond Dust*, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine, Holder of the World, Middleman and Other Stories* and *Darkness*, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of bengal, boston and beyond, The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. These works unleash the fact that two cultures in confrontation affect each other resulting in the hybridization of host as well as migrant identities.

Chapter 5 titled “Globalisation and the Mutations in Women’s Diasporic Identity” contains an assessment of the impact of globalisation on diasporic consciousness. What emerges out of this evaluation is that globalisation has made border crossing more accessible and recurrent. Hence, the whole concept of diasporic sensibility is evolving in a new and different way. Instead of the
nostalgic clinging of an expatriate, a new immigrant approach is emanating, that makes the diasporic experience more affirmative. Globalisation compresses the world, making it effortless for the migrants to locate their new global existence. The dialogue between the local and the global leads to the seepage of cultures and values across boundaries and what ultimately emerges out of it is a ‘globalised identity’ quite similar to an ‘immigrant’, willingly getting accustomed to the temporal, spatial, cultural and linguistic parameters of the ‘other’. These migrants are those identities that are somewhere in-between and are aptly termed by Stuart Hall as the “new ethnicities”. They represent the possibilities of new affiliations in a ‘globalised world’. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa, they are similar to the “the new mestiza” who undergoes a process of “synchresis”, and who “has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something new” (Anzaldúa 79). This chapter highlights the impact of globalisation on immigrant patterns by targeting the gradual transition of expatriates into immigrants through Anita Desai’s *The Zigzag Way*, Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Tiger’s Daughter*, “Scholar and Gypsy” (a story in her collection *Games at Twilight and Other Stories*), and Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Hell-Heaven” (a story in the collection *Unaccustomed Earth*).
Another conflicting influence of globalisation discussed in this chapter is that global compression spreads an awareness of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ relationship. Hence the second and third generation immigrants feel their identity being ripped apart by the contemporary and ethnic pulls. But this realisation also dawns upon them that co-existence with the ‘other’ is the most suitable and productive path to a progressive and thriving future. Therefore, they reject their past in order to blend, to merge and to assimilate with the present. Bharati Mukherjee’s “A Father” (story in the collection Darkness), “Orbiting” (in The Middleman and Other Stories), and Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Interpreter of Maladies”, “When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine”, “The Blessed House” (in her collection Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of bengal, boston and beyond), The Namesake, “Hell-Heaven”, “Only Goodness” and “Once in a Lifetime” (stories in her collection Unaccustomed Earth) are the creations discussed in this chapter that record the experiences of second and third generation immigrants–their conflict with ethnicity and reconciliation with the coeval society.

This dissertation reveals the different aspects of diasporic experiences and how these experiences further diverge into preservation and appropriation under the sway of globalisation which is a challenge to cultures, to marginalised communities and their identities.

The recognition that identity is not merely constructed, but depends upon some other, opens up the theoretical
space for marginal or oppressed groups to challenge and re-negotiate the identities that have been forced upon them in the process of domination. (Edgar and Sedgwick 184)

The concluding chapter reveals the main thrust of the present study that globalisation has contradictory influences on the migrants—preservative for the expatriates and appropriative for the immigrants (both the first and the second generation). But today’s global cultural space witnesses the existence and sustenance of plural identities because preservation of cultures and identities in their undiluted state becomes impossible under the influence of globalisation.

Chapter 2, 3, 4 and 5 discuss the contrary pulls on the individuals caught between conflicting cultures and their dilemma of choice between preserving one’s identity and appropriating changes for survival. But the relevant assessment that emerges out of this analysis is that the ‘globalised world’ invites a willing surrender as globalisation empowers us to consolidate our future by forging new alliances. In the postmodern scenario,

Globalization has given rise to new icons of culture. . . . if we take a stock of what people wear, what they eat, what music they hear, what book they read, what film they watch, and what dreams they dream then we will be able to identify a global pattern. This pattern depends on what is best in universal culture. But what is offered by the
market, the recipient, has no option to make free choice, rather he is inundated by the products of market both being culture and commodity, and also culture as commodity and commodity as culture. (Haque)

This indicates that the global changes taking place in culture raise issues of identity which first change to hybrid and then to ‘globalised identities’.
Works Cited


