CHAPTER-1
Existence as Dialogue: Bakhtinian Dialogics
and Cultural Encounter

My research foregrounds the cross-cultural experiences of female characters in the works of three diasporic Indian women writers—Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri. But what differentiates this dissertation from others is its treatment through the “dialogic” principle of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin. It is an attempt at stretching Bakhtin’s concept of “dialogism”, to understand it in a larger sense, to mean the dialogical encounter between different cultures, and how this encounter leads to the problematics of women’s diasporic identity. ‘Diaspora’ and ‘dialogics’ are co-related in this thesis to appropriate Bakhtin’s key concepts so as to recuperate and interpret them in the cultural context.

The son of a bank manager, Bakhtin was born on 16 Nov. 1895 in Orel, South of Moscow. His governess being a German, Bakhtin experienced a multicultural environment at home; and from an early age he was bilingual in German and Russian. Due to his father’s frequent job transfers, Bakhtin spent his gymnasium years in Vilnius and Odessa, two Russian cities with a heterogeneous mix of cultures and languages. Though the official language of Vilnius is Russian, but the majority of population speaks Lithuanian or Polish. Being the intellectual centre of the East European Jewry, Vilnius is known as the ‘Jerusalem of the North’, therefore, Yiddish and Hebrew are also
commonly spoken in Vilnius. Odessa, on the other hand, is a busy port on the Black Sea, and therefore a mingled hub of several different cultures each with its own language. Bakhtin’s initial confrontation with multiple cultures and languages within and around his home, paved the platform for Bakhtin’s interpretation of dialogue as an interaction “between mind and world” (Holquist 4). The multicultural and multilingual situations around Bakhtin, influenced him to write about dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia and other such concepts that refer to multiple voices or many languagedness.

Throughout his life from 1895 to 1975, Bakhtin managed to live through wars, revolutions and exiles, and ended up paying extreme attention to the question of time and space and the relation between the two. According to Michael Holquist, “Given such massive displacements, it is less surprising that for almost sixty of those years he never ceased to think about the mysteries of locating a self” (12). The concepts of dialogism, time, space and self which are crucial to Bakhtinian thought can also be seen as running parallel on the string of diasporic experiences. This chapter is an attempt at intertwining these two parallels into a whole and exploring the ‘dialogics’ of cultural encounter.

The Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, is considered “the most important Soviet thinker in the human sciences and the greatest theoretician of literature in the twentieth century” (Todorov ix).
His writings originated in Russia in the 1920’s, but it is only during the 1980s that his works became popular in the West due to the translations of Michael Holquist, Caryl Emerson, Katerina Clark, Hélène Iswolsky, V. W. McGee, Albert J. Wehrle, L. Matejka, I. R. Titunik and others. Certain critical works by Tzvetan Todorov, Lynne Pearce, Pam Morris, Simon Dentith, Sue Vice, David Lodge and Robert Stam on Bakhtin and his oeuvre help us to estimate the extent to which “the soul and legacy of Bakhtin” (Stam 15) still survives. These works also help us to seize upon the relevance and endurance of Bakhtin’s key concepts—dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia and carnival—in the contemporary literature. Bakhtin’s work today, is influential in the linguistic, political, social, cultural, philosophical and many other disciplines.

All Bakhtin’s writings are animated and controlled by the principle of dialogue. Bakhtin has himself written in his essay “Towards a Methodology for Human Sciences” that, “The contents of dialogue are without limits” (170). No comprehensive term can encompass Bakhtin’s important contributions to several different areas of thought. It is evident from what Bakhtin writes:

> Our analysis must be called philosophical mainly because of what it is not a linguistic, philological, literary or any other particular kind of analysis. . . . On the other hand, a positive feature of our study is this: [it moves] in spheres that are liminal, i.e., on the borders of all the
aforementioned disciplines, at their junctures and points of interaction. (qtd. in Holquist 14)

Keeping this statement in mind, I have utilized Bakhtin’s concept of ‘dialogism’ “as one means of challenging the oppositional presumptions of border, division, exclusionary thought and absolute difference” (Bromley 2). This thesis focuses on the “addressivity” and “speaking across” of the culturally displaced female subjects.

The dialogic concept of Bakhtin is evident in the various literary creations undertaken in this research. Through these fictional works an attempt has been made to interpret Bakhtin’s notion of multiple voices in the novel (heteroglossia), and relate it to many centres and many peripheries (multiple border discourse) in the diasporic arena. By incorporating Bakhtin’s principle in the lived experiences of the displaced women in these works; their journey through multiple national and cultural borders is viewed as a many voiced narrative because of the simultaneous presence of two or more languages interacting within a composite cultural system. According to Bakhtin, many-voiced characteristic of the novel implies the “never finalized interactivity” of dialogism. Similarly, border crossing leads to the negotiation between multiple voices (the displaced voice and the dominant voice of the adopted culture) resulting in the constant adaptation and re-adaptation of the diasporic identity.

A displaced subject can be compared to a “grotesque body”, which in Bakhtinian terms is “a body in the act of becoming. It is
never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created and builds and creates another body. Moreover the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world . . .” (Rabelais and his World 317). The existence of such metamorphic identities is portrayed in this thesis as a dialogic event, which is the result of “addressivity” and “speaking across”. While justifying ‘existence as an event’, Holquist writes:

Sharing existence as an event means among other things that we are–we cannot choose not to be–in dialogue, not only with other human beings, but also with the natural and cultural configurations we lump together as ‘the world’. The world addresses us and we are alive and human to the degree that we can respond to addressivity.

(30)

This addressivity leads the fluid identities to develop a relation of ‘simultaneity’ with the ‘other’; and ‘simultaneity’, as defined in dialogism, is not a relation of identity or equality. The displaced ‘self’, according to Bakhtin, is in the state of being “unfinished” or “unfinalizable”. “The self, for him [Bakhtin], is an act of grace, the gift of the other.” It is in “a process of perpetual negotiation with other selves . . .” (Kershner 21). Hence, the cross cultural scenario brings about a transition in the ‘unfinished’ state of the displaced ‘self’; and this transition further culminates into hybridization, multiculturalism or assimilation.
This thesis is an attempt at interpreting Bakhtin’s key concepts—polyphony, dialogism, heteroglossia and the carnivalesque—in the cross-cultural context, and foregrounding the applicability of these terms in the works of the three diasporic women writers undertaken in this research.

Polyphony, literally meaning ‘many voices’ has its origin in Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984), where he draws the distinction between monologic and dialogic tendencies in literature as well as culture. Bakhtin believes that a novel is polyphonic as it consists of multiple, independent voices of the characters and an authorial voice that constructs the hero [character] not out of words foreign to the hero, not out of neutral definitions; he constructs not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament, in fact he constructs no objectified image of the hero at all, but rather the hero’s *discourse* about himself and his world.

(*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 53)

These novels not only represent the authorial voice presenting the relation and dialogues between characters, but also the individual voices of the narrator and characters as well. The polyphonic novels also interpret the responses from the readers and all discourse in such novels is a further interpretation of the world around the author, narrator, characters and readers, where all of them are in a dialogic relation with one another. Similarly, all the works of Desai, Mukherjee
and Lahiri undertaken in this dissertation are polyphonic in character as they represent a cross-cultural world which is literally dialogic. As the authorial, narrators’ and the characters’ voices in these fictions hold their own discursive positions, they all justify the dialogic criteria of ‘multiple voices’ arising out of multi-cultural situations. “For the author,” in these works, “the hero is not ‘he’ and not ‘I’ but a fully valid ‘thou’ that is, another and autonomous ‘I’ (‘thou-art’)” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 63), representing all the diasporic individuals in general, who experience indeterminacy and ‘unfinalizability’.

According to Bakhtin, “author participates in a novel *with almost no direct language of his own*. The language of the novel is a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 47). Therefore, these diasporic women writers not only articulate their positions, but they also seek to represent as well as fictionalize their tensions and cross-cultural experiences through their own prototypical characters in their works. Though their works commonly reflect the complexities of cultural assimilation, yet the identity crisis may individually differ for the authors, their characters as well as the receptors (readers). So, throughout the novel, the author is in a dialogic relation with the characters; and the culturally displaced characters in the novel are in a constant dialogue with the dominant host; and the novel collectively represents a world where two cultures are in a dialogic relation with each other. Hence, the diasporic works of these three immigrant
women writers are polyphonic in nature as they “present a world in which no individual discourse can stand objectively above any other discourse; all discourses are interpretations of the world, responses to and calls to other discourses” (Allen 23).

Dialogism, in terms of Bakhtin, is a constitutive element of all language and can be associated with the cross-cultural situations in everyday life. Bakhtinian ‘dialogism’ is a matter of ‘dialogue’ and ‘difference’ because ‘difference’ is the most important condition that makes dialogue possible. In literary terms, dialogue can not only be discovered between characters, or between character and narrator, but also within a single character’s speech because:

The speaker is not the biblical Adam, dealing only with virgin and still unnamed objects, giving them names for the first time. . . . In reality . . . any utterance, in addition to its own theme, always responds (in the broad sense of the word), in one form or another to others’ utterances and precede it. The speaker is not Adam, and therefore the subject of his speech itself inevitably becomes the arena where his opinions meet those of his partners (in a conversation or dispute about some everyday event) or other viewpoints, world views, trends, theories and so forth (in the sphere of cultural communication). World views, trends, viewpoints, and opinions always have verbal expression. All this is others’ speech (in personal or
impersonal form), and cannot but be reflected in the utterance. The utterance is addressed not only to its object, but also to others’ speech about it. (“The Problem of Speech Genres” 93-94)

Similarly, a culturally displaced subject not only enters into a dialogic relation with the ‘other’ (the host subject) but also with the new and alien viewpoints, traditions, opinions and culture that collectively reflect the others’ utterance. Therefore, dialogism cannot be limited to language or literary texts, but it is applicable to all those fields that deal with “the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addressee and addressee” (Bakhtin and Volosinov 86).

Another Bakhtinian concept of “heteroglossia” meaning ‘many voices’ or ‘a mixture of tongues’ originates from the Greek word *hetero* meaning ‘other’ and *glot* meaning ‘tongue’ or ‘voice’. Therefore, “heteroglossia”, as defined by Bakhtin, is language’s ability to contain many voices, one’s own and other voices. Bakhtin states that:

At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglott from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These ‘languages’ of heteroglossia
intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new
typifying ‘languages’. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 291)

Similarly, when employed in the cultural context, heteroglossia, is interpreted as many voices originating due to the confrontation of multiple cultures in the diasporic arena. The voices of displaced and host subjects in a cross-cultural scenario act as an on-going struggle between the centrifugal and centripetal forces that result in the hybridization of identities.

Originating in Bakhtin’s books *Rabelais and his World* (1984) and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984) is the concept of “carnival”, or “the carnivalesque” that implies reversal of social hierarchies. In the introduction of his book *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin writes:

> The suspension of hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident in official feasts . . . it was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary all were considered equal during carnival. . . .

> This temporary suspension, both real and ideal, of hierarchical rank, created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. (Bakhtin 10)
Thus, carnival opposes all forms of authority and celebrates the ‘joyful relativity’ of order. It is the concept of carnival that assists in relating feminism with diasporic cultural studies.

The diasporic women are caught between opposing cultures as well as patriarchies leading to the confusion of identities. They are considered responsible for the preservation and propagation of religious and cultural traditions in the alien land. As a result, the expatriate women try to oppose all forms of social hierarchies and authorities in the adopted land. Some other immigrant women try to evade this responsibility in order to assimilate completely with the adopted culture and society. In that case, they revolt against and try to repress the traditional patriarchal authority. Hence, in both the cases, carnival acts as a centrifugal force that helps the women to struggle against the centripetal force in order to overturn the dominant order of society or subvert the authority. Hence the concept of ‘carnival’ is most explicitly visible in this thesis when the culture based and gender based marginalization of women is discussed in the works of these novelists that focus on the cultural adjustment of the immigrant women—as individuals as well as ethnic representatives of religious and cultural traditions.

In her essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” Showalter writes: “Women’s writing is a ‘double-voiced discourse’ that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritage of both the muted and the dominant” (263). Hence, when viewed from the feminist
aspect, it can be justified that the works of the three diasporic women writers discussed in this thesis employ Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, of heteroglossia, of double-voiced discourse and of the dialogic, as their works expose the ‘otherness’ of women’s writing within the patriarchal culture and society; and display the dialogic nature of those displaced women’s identity who, as Dale M. Bauer suggests in her *Feminist Dialogics: A Theory of Failed Community* (1988), are alienated by society and find themselves in the position of the carnivalesque ‘Fool’. For such ‘othered’ and repressed characters, “Stupidity [a form of resistance] forces the unspoken repressions into women vulnerable to interpretation, contradiction and dialogue” (Bauer 11).

These diasporic writers capture the double nature of the marginalized, ‘othered’ female subjects in their works, who are both socially ‘other’ and also the protagonists of their own search for identity. Hence their utterances are double voiced as they result from a clash between the dominant and repressed discourses. Thus, dialogism in this research refers to a clash between discourses that not only foreground the social division but also surface the divided space of identity formation within a culturally displaced individual. This condition of being in discourse is termed by Homi K. Bhabha as “hybridity” which according to him is “a difference ‘within’, a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” (13).
Similarly, the diasporic women writers and their culturally displaced female characters exist as split subjects whose utterances are ‘double-voiced’—their own and yet displaying the presence of an ‘otherness’.

Anita Desai’s multicultural feminist writings include Journey to Ithaca and The Zigzag Way which emphasize the pluralist co-existence of identities and multiple voices that arise out of the cross-cultural web. These narratives also highlight the carnivalesque features that give courage to the female protagonists to transgress cultural and patriarchal norms in different ways. The search for identity and the process of suppression and transgression refer to the dialogic and carnivalesque principle of Bakhtin. These writings are “open-ended” in the Bakhtinian sense as they acquire new meaning by entering into dialogue with various feminist and cross-cultural concepts. Moreover, the cross-cultural characters of these narratives are also fluid identities that continue to evolve by indulging in a dialogic relation with the ‘other’.

Mother (alias Laila) in Journey to Ithaca and Doña Vera in The Zigzag Way are the characters who portray simultaneous existence of varied cultures and co-existence or merger of varied identities. They exist on “a site, indisputably, of conflict and violence but also one of contest, exchange, negotiation, hybridization, and change” (Berman 221). The various narratives in these works assume a ‘living’ dialogical
quality in Bakhtinian terms, and transform the novel into a dialogue about gender and culture.

In Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca*, Laila (later known as Mother), the daughter of Alma and Hameed, starts her diasporic journey as a spiritual quest. Spending her childhood in Alexandria (Egypt), she is educated in Paris and Venice and finally comes to India for her spiritual emancipation. Laila is rebellious from the very beginning as she wants to give up “all orthodox religions” (*JI* 199), and cannot conform to the traditional code of Muslim religious and social conventions. She craves for self-identity. Her yearning for freedom is perceptible in her address to the fellow students at the Al Azhar University where she states that its “better to go to prison than live as slaves” (*JI* 172). Laila wants to break out of the orthodox social norms and the ethnic role designated to women. Laila exemplifies that, “A selfhood denied, controlled, rendered inexpressive over centuries can erupt, eventually, disruptive in its demands” (Kanitkar 197). This rebellious and disruptive attitude indicates Bakhtinian notion of carnival that embodies a “licensed misrule” set to oppose all forms of authority. According to Bakhtin, in “carnival misalliance”, there is no regard of hierarchies, structure and order. It is a celebration–just as in the case of Laila—who celebrates her freedom irrespective of any social, religious, cultural or patriarchal limitations.

Laila’s stay at Paris is also replete with her rebellious attitude. In the house on rue des Bernardins, all the rooms were curtained
against the streets and the lights. But Laila, a spirit of light herself, revolts against the shady gloom and repeatedly removes the curtains. She deliberately shatters the mechanical ‘order’ and artificial aestheticism of the Francoise household. When her Uncle Bertrand and Aunt Francoise ask her to eat meat, she refuses and confesses: “I am a vegetarian. No one will make me eat the flesh of slaughtered animals” (JI 185). And one evening at the dinner table “Laila electrified them by suddenly picking up her knife and fork and attacking the meat with such ferocity that gobs and strips of it flew around” (JI 178). Her memory of the black panther in Jardin des Plantes, that refuses to be domesticated, is symbolic of her revolt against oppression. Instead of purchasing Islamic books, she purchases the books of oriental philosophy, with titles referring to L'Orient or L'Inde—The Rig Veda, Samhita, Ratnavali, Brhadaranyake Upanishad, La Bhagvad Gita etc. When she meets Krishnaji (who appears to her an image of Lord Krishna) she even goes to the extent of joining his dance troupe ‘Krishna Leela’ in order to learn the Oriental art of dance. Laila “was drawn first in one direction, then another, whenever she saw passion taken to its extreme, whether celebratory or ascetic” (JI 167). Such attempts of Laila, in Paris, to reject Islam and Christianity, and seek freedom from stultifying institutionalism are indicative of ‘carnivalized subversion’ of authority.

For Laila, a spiritual quester, the truth lies in India and that is the place where she hopes to find her enlightenment, her Ithaca. In
Krishna Ji she finds a guide who takes her to India, where she embarks a journey to the north to Guru Prem Krishna’s ashram. Being a Muslim girl, she does not hesitate to be initiated by a Hindu saint and renamed as ‘The Mother’. This is how she overturns the patriarchal authority by becoming the first woman to head the Ashram. She continues her rejection of customs by refusing to accept any kind of formalism for the realization of ultimate truth. For her all religious practices are futile:

This is no church, my friends, this is no temple or mosque or Vihara. We have no religion. Religion? Like the black crows up in the tree caw-caw, caw, scolding, scolding!

But, do they Crow at us now? No, they are silent! We have silenced them. . . . Religion makes one ashamed, makes one guilty, makes one fearful. The Master has told you not to feel ashamed, not to be afraid. (JI 98)

Laila is “The subject [who] is constituted through practices of subjection, or, . . . through practices of liberation, of freedom . . . starting of course from a certain number of rules, styles and conventions that are found in culture” (Sawicki 288). Therefore, Laila’s idea of self-assertion is to propagate the individualistic values and defy the inherited historical traditions.

The quest motif in this novel, describes Laila’s diasporic journey from Egypt, Paris, Venice, New York and finally to India during which she undergoes identity transformations from Laila to Lila and then the
Mother. These multiple identities refer to the “dialogic exchanges that negotiated the contact zone and built a bridge across the gulf” (Nakai 91). Foucault terms such cultural contact zone a “heterotopia”, a border zone of resistance and freedom where multiple voices co-exist. Laila is in one such “heterotopia” where she is like “A person who has no sovereign internal territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* 287).

The hindrances and turbulent phases in her cross-cultural journey could not dissuade her indefatigable spirit, and she continues the process of regeneration through self-analysis and acculturation till she finally reaches India, the land where she achieves great illumination, because what she “wanted of India was the outward manifestation of what already existed inside her” (*JI* 285). She constantly indulges in the cross-cultural dialogue between the centre and periphery. This ‘addressivity’ and ‘speaking across’ forges “new alliances in consolidating an identity that is self-reflexive” (Rath 19).

In *The Zigzag Way* Desai depicts her capacious vision on culture and identity through the character of Doña Vera. She escapes from Nazi’s Austria to marry a Mexican silver baron named Don Roderigo, who brings her back from Europe after his first wife, Doña Josefina’s, death. Vera is a theatre dancer in Austria, and

  In all her European years, she had never had solitude or space. No one in Roderigo’s family or circle could know
how she had lived—the small, cramped apartment at the
top of a building of stained and peeling stucco, its
dripping walls, torn linoleum and its battered stove and
pots, smells of lavatories down the hall and cabbage
cooking in the kitchen, and the fear of losing even that.

(ZW 66)

She despises her past, and tries to reconstruct her life when “An
outsider, a foreigner [Don Roderigo], presenting an opening to a
foreign world” (ZW ) takes her to Mexico where she re-identifies
herself as Doña Vera.

Doña Vera’s expatriate living highlights the multicultural and
ethnic clashes. “When they [immigrants] uproot themselves from their
motherlands either by necessity or by choice, they absorb the culture
and history of the new land” (Vijaya Lakshmi 207). Vera is one such
immigrant who wants to negate her past and acculturate completely
with the adopted land. She does not treat the new land as an exile but
as a domain to establish her new identity. In this domain:

The self may be conceived as a multiple phenomenon of
essentially three elements (it is—at least—a triad, not a
duality): a centre, a not-centre, and the relation between
them. . . . In taking up the third item (element), the
relation that centre and not-centre bear to each other, we
will have to keep in mind one or two terms that are
crucial to Bakhtin’s undertaking. Dialogism, is a form of
architectonics, the general science of ordering parts into a whole. In other words, architectonics is the science of relations. . . . In addition, Bakhtin emphasizes that a relation is never static, but always in the process of being made or unmade. (Holquist 29)

Doña Vera recreates her new identity, through this relation of the ‘self’ with the ‘other’ which is termed by Bakhtin as a ‘dialogic event’.

Once in Mexico, Doña Vera “had quickly given up being the delightfully coquettish woman he (Don Roderigo) had brought back from Europe.” But soon she begins to voice her desire “to travel outside Mexico City and see something of this land to which he had brought her.” She begins to depict carvalesque features as she declares: “I am not one of these silly, card-playing women of your circle.” She is curious to go to “a place [Hacienda de la Soledad] that intrigued her because of its distance from everything that made up their [Don Roderigo and his family’s] lives: its very name promised a refuge” (ZW 62). Her attempt at subverting the patriarchal and cultural authority of Don Roderigo’s family becomes visible when she scandalously slips away to the Hacienda de la Soledad (the deserted house from which the silver had been extracted that made the Roderigo family wealthy) and converts it into a centre for studies on Huichol Indian culture. “Here we work to keep the culture and religion and art of the Huichol a-live that the mining industry near-ly de-stroy-ed” (ZW 56). Her contribution to the preservation and
propagation of Huichol Indian culture and gradual conversion into the ‘Queen of the Sierra’ represent the concept of carnival because in Bakhtin’s “understanding of it, carnival like the novel, is a means for displaying otherness: carnival makes familiar relations strange” (Holquist 89). Through her assertion of ‘the self’ and suppression of Don Roderigo’s family principles, Doña Vera adds strangeness to her relation with ‘the other’ (i.e. Don Roderigo’s family).

Another evidence of subversion of religious authority is Doña Vera’s rejection of Father Fray Junipero’s beliefs that Huichol Indians (referred to as paganos by Father Junipero) should not be visiting the Church and presenting their traditional ‘pagan offerings’ to Virgin Mary. Doña Vera negates these religious beliefs of Father Junipero saying, “Ah, Father, you know as well as I do that they bring these offerings to the Virgin Maria because to them she is not that, she is their own goddess To-nant-zin, and that is why they bring her the votive offerings that she prefers” (ZW 90-91). She requests the Father to let the old Gods back into their land. She displays her utter dejection against the religious authority by switching her religion from Christianity to the religion of the Huichol Indians. She declares: “They are my gods too—I accepted them when I came here and they are more powerful full than yours, you know” (ZW 90).

Thus, Doña Vera’s suppression of cultural, patriarchal and religious authority, and her attempts at reversing the social hierarchies (trying to re-establish the Pre-Columbian Mexico), are the
carnivalesque features that relate feminism with dialogism because “In the rich literature on Feminism, Bakhtin is frequently cited because dialogism, it is argued, disrupts patriarchal harmony and permits the liberation of a feminine voice” (Holquist 189). Hence the dialogic and carnival features evidently visible in the cross-cultural discourse of this novel, display the feminist traits of disrupting the patriarchal hegemony.

Both the works of Desai depict the theme of dialogics of cultural encounter that encompasses the larger dimension of the question involving the dialogue between cultures, between civilizations, between religious, political and social ideologies, and between the present and the past. These and other works of Desai discussed in this thesis foreground the conflicting and collaborative dialogues further culminating into multiculturalism or assimilation. Each cultural encounter is replete with dialogical social exchanges that emphasize that the walls between cultures are always porous. Homi Bhabha appropriately describes this cultural engagement in *The Location of Culture* (1994), saying that:

> The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural
hybridities that emerge in moments of historical
transformation. (2)

Hence, this chapter is an attempt at studying the works of Anita
Desai by understanding them in
the more complex but valuable interplay of ideas across
cultures and time as a way of making sense of the
intricate process of encounters between cultures, despite
the more obvious signs of many forms of conflicts
resulting in violent political and ideological clashes. (Rath
12)

Bharati Mukherjee’s, *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* are the
works that successfully interpret Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism,
heteroglossia, carnival etc. They draw our attention to the women
protagonists who live lives of multiple identities. During their gradual
progression from the ‘periphery’ to the ‘centre’ or from one identity to
another they enter into a dialogic relation with the ‘other’, and also
depict the ‘carnivalesque’ features of subverting the authority.

Jasmine (in *Jasmine*) and Tara Chatterjee (in *Desirable Daughters*) are
the two characters discussed in this chapter who not only undergo
changes in the process of hybridization but also highlight the
subversive and liberationist connotations of Bakhtin’s concept of
‘carnival’, or the ‘carnivalesque’. Each of these texts concentrates
upon a figure on the boundary, at the “cultural border zones [that] are
always in motion, not frozen for inspection” (Rosaldo 217).
Each narrative discussed in this chapter is about transplantation, re-rooting and a journey against the fixed notions of origin and ethnicity, against the irreducible cultural and patriarchal absolutes that cannot be completely erased or obliterated. According to Roger Bromley:

The rerooting is also a rerouting, hence the proliferation of journey metaphors throughout the texts. Above all, each narrative constructs ‘a painful process’ of arrival and departure, flight and return (mentally, if not literally), rupture and explosion, decentring and delinking, rape and disfigurement, the losing of tongues and the loosening of tongues, reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation. The transplantation is never final but always in process, the gently (and not so gently) ripping sound is continuous; and the tearing away of roots never finally completed. (21)

Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* is a narrative that concentrates on the ‘diasporic space’, which can also be identified as a ‘no-man’s land’. It is like a ‘bridge’ thrown between the ‘earlier self’, when the character (or the author) has not crossed the boundaries, and the ‘latter self’, when the protagonist has left home and has transplanted herself to a new place and environment. The word ‘bridge’ is used by Bakhtin as a metaphor for the operation of dialogism: “A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge belongs to me,
then the other depends on my addressee. A word is a territory shared by both addressee and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor” (Bakhtin and Volosinov 86). Jasmine, the protagonist of this fiction, seems to be standing on one such ‘bridge’ during her journey from Punjab to California, via Florida, New York and Iowa leading her through various transformations—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane. This re-identification, resulting from the cross-cultural exchange or the ‘dialogization’ of the First World and the Third World voices, presents the problematics of belonging.

Jyoti, an innocent girl of Village Hasanpur in Punjab, marries Prakash Vijh and commences the ceaseless journey, which begins with her transformation into Jasmine. Prakash secures admission in some American Institute of Technology. Unfortunately, on the eve of his departure, he is killed by the Khalsa Lions (rebels demanding a separate land for the Sikhs—called Khalistan). After his death, Jasmine smuggles herself into America with the strong urge of burning herself a ‘Sati’ on the campus of that very Engineering College in which Prakash has taken admission. An innocent village girl, marrying an educated city boy, then smuggling herself into America and burning herself a Sati are all carnivalesque features, where Jasmine subverts the patriarchal as well as the cultural authority. Her encounter with Half-Face, the sailor who abducted, brutalized and raped her during her passage from the Third World to the First World; and her consequent killing of him instils a new faith and courage in her—
desire to live. Samir Dayal writes: “In killing Half Face, she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life-affirming transformation” (71). The death of her husband by a bomb, her killing of the sea captain, her banker partner (Bud) becoming wheelchair bound after being shot–are symbolic of the fragmentation, violation and distortion of the patriarchal body. Hence, Bakhtinian carnival in this novel is interpreted and appropriated as a feature that reverses and suppresses the prevailing social and patriarchal hierarchies.

Jasmine’s incessant journey continues through a series of incarnations—as ‘Jazzy’ in Lillian Gordon’s house in Florida, ‘Jasmine’ again in the house of Devinder Vadhera (her husband, Prakash’s, former teacher) in New York, ‘Jase’ in Taylor and Wylie Hayes’ house in Manhattan, as ‘Jane’ in Bud’s house in Iowa, and finally as ‘Jase’ again when she decides to marry Taylor in the end of the novel and comes back to Manhattan. At one point, Jasmine says, “How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, how many more husbands?” (Jasmine 215). “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine. Taylor for Jase. Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali” (Jasmine 197). This continuous process of ‘transculturation’ that Jasmine undergoes can be viewed as an abysmal interaction with which dialogic experience is usually associated. Such similar experience is depicted by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in The Mistress of Spices (1997) where the protagonist, like
Jasmine, lives a life of multiple identities: Nayan Tara, Bhagyavati, Tilottama and Maya.

Due to the change in time/space “the subject operates as if its environment were open, unfinished” (Holquist 168). This leads to the constant alteration in the identity of the diasporic subject. The cross-cultural experience of Jasmine, in which she forgets her past in order to assimilate or hybridize herself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land, is quite palpable in her outcry: “There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams” (Jasmine 29). Jasmine, having a flexible identity, recreates the ‘self’ during the process of dislocation by repositioning herself in varied temporal/spatial, cultural/multi-cultural situations.

The memory of dead dog in the water continues to haunt Jasmine throughout the narrative:

Suddenly my fingers scraped the soft waterlogged carcass of a small dog. The body was rotten, the eyes had been eaten. The moment I touched it, the body broke in two, as though the water had been its glue. A stench leaked out of the broken body, and then both pieces quickly sank. The stench stays with me. (Jasmine 5)

This dismembered body broken by her touch predicts the danger to her own body shuttling between different identities. Adaptation is the ‘glue’ that holds her body together throughout her journey and helps
her survive in the maze of cultural plurality. The ‘stench’ that stays with her constantly reminds her that she is a figure of continuing metamorphosis with a temporary and transitional identity.

The ‘addressivity’ and ‘speaking across’ of central and peripheral cultural voices, leads to transplantation and metamorphosis of the displaced subject, which if viewed from diasporic angle is never final but always in the process of endless search for location. This condition of belonging simultaneously, mentally and experientially, to a diversity of cultures is visible in the character of Jasmine.

Tara in *Desirable Daughters* may not have undergone any alteration of names, yet we witness multiple portraiture of her persona undergoing changes in succeeding phases of hybridization—from Tara Bhattacharjee to Tara Chatterjee and then simply Tara (a single mother, living in San Francisco with her adolescent son Rabi). Through Tara’s character, Mukherjee has presented the dialogic nature of the diasporic experience that does not highlight the native/alien hierarchy, rather brings out the cross-cultural interaction and its consequent impact, particularly, on women psyche.

Tara considers her migration to America, a way to lead a liberated life away from the shackles of traditional Indian ethos and patriarchal codes that keep the women on the margins. Her move to America liberates her from clinging to her nativity. Five years of marriage with Bishwapriya Chatterjee convince her that he is a traditional Indian at home. Her Americanization coaxes her to divorce
Bish as she refuses to be an appendage of her husband as expected of a traditional Indian wife.

When I left Bish . . . it was because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled. I wanted to drive, but where could I go? I wanted to work, but would people think that Bish couldn’t support a wife? In his Artherton years, as he became better known on the American scene—a player, an advisor, a pundit—he also became, at home, more of a traditional Indian. (DD 81)

Tara’s divorce with Bish and her consequent association with Andy (her live-in Hungarian Buddhist lover) are both carnivalesque features that imply subversion of male hegemony and traditional code of conduct by marginalized women. Negating any form of male oppression, Tara depicts the feminist tendencies in a woman who expresses her defiance against any cultural or patriarchal suppression through uninhibited sexual behaviour. Tara’s divorce with Bish and her extra-marital relation with Andy represent the traditionally unaccepted forms of women’s behaviour that indicate women’s protest against and liberation from patriarchal society. Tara’s carnivalesque attitude justifies Lyotard’s conviction that, “it is both possible and necessary to break with tradition and institute absolutely new ways of living” (Gandhi 7), in order to assert her femininity and subvert the traditional and patriarchal Indian authority.
Tara’s survival instinct makes her adopt assimilation. She, like most of Mukherjee’s protagonists, rejects the tradition bound society of the East and reaches out for the more individualistic society of the West. But she cannot achieve the invisibility and anonymity she seeks because her physical differences from the natives “otherize and objectivize her rendering her vulnerable to the violence of gaze” (Grewal 193) and constantly remind her of

That dusty identity (which) is as fixed as any specimen in lepidopterist’s glass case, confidently labeled by father’s religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), subcaste (Kulin), mother- tongue (Bengali), formative ancestral origin (Mishtingung, East Bengal), education (Postgraduate and professional), and social attitudes (conservative). . . . I feel not just invisible but heroically invisible, a border-crashing claimant of all people’s legacies. (DD 78-79)

This “dusty identity” illuminates Tara’s past and influences her present to such an extent that she decides to indulge in a “roots search” that takes her to Mishtigunj in search of her ancestor and her namesake, Tara Lata, the mythical Tree-Bride. “Even in the far-flung California, the Tree-Bride speaks again. I’ve come back to India this time for something more than rest, . . . I’m like a pilgrim following the course of the Ganges all the way to its source” (DD 289). This speaking across the boundary is a dialogic event that gives rise to cross-cultural interaction.
Past also comes to haunt Tara in the form of Chris Dey (alias Abbas Sattar Hai). “Just when I [Tara] thought I had lost my old self-protectiveness and was looking out on the world with trust. Just when I thought I was adjusting so well to being a California girl” (DD 63). Chris Dey claims to be the illegitimate son of her sister Padma’s short lived liaison with Ronald Dey. She decides to straddle cultures and continents to unravel the mystery and locate the missing links in the story told by Chris Dey about her sister Padma’s flirtatious connections with Ronald Dey; and also to erase the blot caste by Chris Dey on her respectable family history. Her journey back home is suggestive of her diasporic in-betweenness.

Mukherjee considers immigration to be “a two-way metamorphosis” (Holt 2), and in this work she has successfully portrayed that, in a multicultural scenario, it is not just the past that collides with and influences the present, but the present also colours and illuminates the past. At the time of cultural clash, the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ are ‘co-present’ in all of us which arises the possibility of dialogue between cultures at an individual or internal level. This dialogue further leads to the co-existence of multiple identities within one personality. Tara is one such displaced identity who believes that co-existence of cultures and the ‘roots search’ is an attempt to understand the stranger (the other) as well as the “stranger within ourselves” (Kristeva 2). Tara’s fluid identity is a strategy of survival in a multicultural and marginalized space where “They [such fluid
identities] assume multi-vocal narratives which incorporate multiple voices of the cultural web and offer a polyvocal polity which metamorphoses into a kind of cultural dialogics” (Nayak K. 58).

Both the works of Mukherjee discussed in this chapter exhibit the cultural dialogics leading to hybrid identities of Jasmine and Tara Chatterjee. Such identities, as defined by Stuart Hall, are “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (224). This statement of Hall depicts the ‘unfinalized’ nature of ‘self’ discussed by Bakhtin in the context of language.

Dialogism, according to Lynne Pearce,

has infiltrated Western intellectual thought at many different levels. Not only is it an area of literary theory and textual practice which cuts across other approaches and positionings (structuralism/post structuralism/marxism/feminism/ psychoanalysis) but it has also been espoused as a new model of academic debate and, in its most grandiose aspect, presented itself as a new epistemology. (226)

Keeping this observation in mind, it may be concluded that, in this study Bakhtin’s concept of ‘dialogics’ is appropriated to refer to the negotiation between cultures leading to “diaspora-ization” (a term used by Stuart Hall), which further culminates in hyphenation and hybridization.
Jhumpa Lahiri, being the second generation immigrant herself, stands at a cross-roads of culture where she finds herself isolated in two separate cultures—one impenetrable culture of the past and a totally dissimilar one of the present. Hence, the representation of multiple identities of the protagonists in her works is the perfect metaphor for her own as well as general diasporic experiences.

She creates not mere 'diasporic characters' but 'distinctly individual characters' and writes not about 'a specific cultural experience' but about the 'human beings and the difficulties of existence'. Her focus is the 'mindscape of characters' and 'human predicament in its wider perspective'. (Das 15)

The second generation immigrants like herself, are depicted by her as hovering in the in-between spaces-between self and other, familiarity and strangeness, presence (present) and absence (past). These in-between spaces also indicate that,

The dialogic liaison between two parties inevitably brings into existence a third, and the birth of the “third” party generates its own third space, the creative, generative location for the evolving new culture. Like the “character zone” in Bakhtinian theory of the novel, it is autonomous, coming into being and existing not because of but in spite of the will and intent of the cultural representatives of power and authority. (Rath 15)
Such second generation immigrants refuse to be marginalized as the ‘other’; instead, through dialogic relations, they attempt to constitute ‘another culture’ and ‘another history’ that commingles with that of the host society. In other words, through dialogism they strive to assimilate with the host culture.

One such second generation immigrant in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* is Moushumi, who represents Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism and carnival. Through dialogism she develops a cordial relation with the host culture, whereas, her constant revolt against the ethnic, cultural and patriarchal norms is indicative of the carnivalesque features.

Moushumi, daughter of Shubir and Rina, is a second generation Bengali born in London and raised in America’s multicultural society. Though Moushumi practices her native culture, tradition, custom and values within the confines of her home, yet she belongs more to the New World as far as her habits and behaviour are concerned. Her education at New York University and frequent visits to England and France for her research work have depleted her native cultural consciousness and left her doubtful about India and America. This scepticism about her Indian, English or American origins raises the identity issue which she admits when she narrates to Gogol that:

- she had hated moving to America, that she had held on to her British accent for as long as she could. For some reason, her parents feared America much more than
England, perhaps because of its vastness, or perhaps because in their minds, it had less of a link to India. (NS 212)

But to preserve the little ethnicity left in her, she decides to marry an Indian, Gogol, in a Hindu ritualistic way because she “had always been admonished not to marry an American” (NS 212-213), and she never wanted to produce “pale, dark haired, half-American grandchildren” (NS 216) for her parents. This marriage is Moushumi’s attempt at building a bridge between two cultures that leads to their congruence and unity. “Always and every differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks. . . . The bridge gathers as a passage that crosses” (Bhabha 5). Thus, this bridge across cultures (the ethnic and host culture) is an attempt by Moushumi to develop a dialogic relation that further leads to the cultural engagement.

“Identity . . . is essentially a concept of synthesis. It represents the process by which the person seeks to integrate his various statuses and roles, as well as his diverse experiences, into a coherent image of self” (Epstein 101). In this novel this ‘synthesis of identity’ occurs when the various cross-cultures narratives assume a ‘living’ dialogical quality in the Bakhtinian sense. This further turns the novel into a dialogue about gender and culture, as epitomized through the character of Moushumi (in The Namesake) and the dual cultures she belongs to.
Moushumi, now twenty seven and married, feels the American multicultural milieu gnawing at her barely surviving novelty, and her relationship with Gogol ends in divorce because she feels “they had both acted on the same impulse, that was their mistake” \((NS 284)\). Moushumi’s attempts at struggling out of the ethnic cultural trappings refer to the carnivalesque features. Her desire to step out of the traditional limitation where “she feels no sense of authority” \((NS 202)\) is a vivid display of carnivalesque subversion of cultural and patriarchal authority. Even before her marriage, she “privately vowed that she’d never grow fully dependent on her husband” \((NS 247)\), and refuses to accept Gogol’s surname in the beginning of their conjugal life. Both these attitudes reject the Indian ideals of married life.

Moushumi, as her name symbolizes, is variable and changing in nature because ‘Maushum’ is the Indian name of ‘a season’ which is subject to change. Therefore, men in her life are like the changing season. Her love for three men—Graham, Gogol and Dimitri—reverses the patriarchal role, where men freely indulge in multiple intimacies. Moushumi’s Americanized and ‘carnivalised’ attitude surfaces when these affairs make her feel “strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day” \((NS 266)\).

Moushumi’s greater indulgence with her American friends after her marriage, and her infidelity towards Gogol due to her pre-and-post marital relationships with Dimitri Desjardins (her first love) is an attack on the Indian ideals of marriage. “She wonders if she is the
only woman in her family ever to have betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful” (NS 266). Moushumi’s revelation of her affair to Gogol shocks him: “He felt the chill of her secrecy, numbing him, like a poison spreading quickly through his veins. . . . He felt only the anger, the humiliation of having been deceived” (NS 282). This is an evidence of the reaction of a repressed patriarchal authority that cannot readily collapse or accept defeat from the feminine assertion.

For Bakhtin, carnival emphasizes the free and familiar contact among people without regard to hierarchies. “Regarded in this way, carnivals become little more than pressure-valves that enable ‘the folk’ [lower or marginalized classes] to literally ‘let off steam’ before settling down again” (Waugh 231). Similarly, the character of Moushumi in Lahiri’s The Namesake is one such doubly marginalized subject who ‘lets off steam’ by repressing her ethnicity and allowing the American lifestyle to make inroads into the remnants of Bengali past that her family continues to cherish.

Moushumi’s carnival experiences reveal that she celebrates her femininity and opposes all forms of cultural and patriarchal limitations because, according to Bakhtin, “Carnival time,” liberates “them from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times” (Rabelais and his World 10). Hence, Moushumi suspends the hierarchical precedence and asserts her ‘self’ in the multicultural maze of the ‘other’. Through the character of Moushumi, Lahiri successfully portrays the second generation immigrants who
transgress the ethnic norms and enter into the dialogic relation with the ‘other’, and helps us to co-relate Bakhtinian concept of dialogism and carnival with her cross-cultural experience.

All the works discussed in this chapter consist of a diversity of individual voices that act as centripetal and centrifugal forces operating in the midst of heteroglossia and leading to cultural centralization and decentralization. In these works:

Every moment of the story has a conscious relationship with this normal language and its belief system; it is in fact set against them, and set against them dialogically: one point of view opposed to another. . . . This interaction, this dialogic tension between two languages and two belief systems, permits authorial intentions to be realized in such a way that we can acutely sense their presence at every point in the work. (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 314)

Hence, ‘heteroglossia’ enters these novels in the form of a ‘double-voiced discourse’ as dialogues between ‘self’ and ‘other’, between ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’, and is diffused with authorial speech that surrounds the characters and expresses “the refracted intention of the author” (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 324).

These cross-cultural, ‘heteroglossal’ writings call for a dialogic encounter across cultural boundaries where
the self defines itself not just in its own terms but in terms of the relationship, in its moral, aesthetic and spiritual dimensions, with the other. If one recognizes this relationship with the other as one’s source of creative autonomy, then the relationship with other ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identities require a voluntary conversation and dialogue with otherness. (Bhattacharjee 190)

This as well as the other chapters of this dissertation utilize Bakhtinian concept of dialogics to analyse the ‘self’ as a sight of contestation for marginalized women in the selected works of Desai, Mukherjee and Lahiri. As argued by feminist critics like Dale Bauer, Susan McKinstry, Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow, dialogism disrupts patriarchal harmony and allows the liberation of a feminine voice. Such critics create a feminist dialogics to form a resistance against any form of gendered oppression. On the other hand, Ken Hirschkop and David Sheperd have further portrayed Bakhtin as a cultural critic and a social theorist in their works. Bakhtin is also read by some as a political thinker, as a philosopher, by others as a religious or an ethical thinker. Therefore, Bakhtin is a “broken thinker [with] the pieces of his thought, . . . strewn in virtually every direction” (Wall 669). This thesis is an attempt at gathering those pieces of Bakhtin’s thought and utilizing them in the cultural and feminist aspects. By appropriating Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism in the
diasporic arena and laying emphasis on women’s cross-cultural experiences, this thesis attempts to relate dialogism with feminism and diaspora theory, and depicts displaced women’s “struggles over culture, tradition, religion and women’s place in preserving and betraying their traditions and customs” (Siddiqui 1).

Vijay C. Mishra provides a summary of the chief Diaspora Theorists and their specific cultural fields:

- Stuart Hall (black hybridity and diasporic empowerment),
- Paul Gilroy (diasporic flows and spaces), Homi Bhabha (diasporas as sites of a post-colonial question of translatability), Gayatri Spivak (subalternity and transnationality), Edward Said (exile as the intentional condition of being “happy with the idea of unhappiness”),
- the Boyarian Brothers (diaspora deterritorialization as the exemplary state of late modernity), William Safran (diasporas as narratives of center and periphery), James Clifford (diasporas as double spaces/sites), Appadurai (diasporic mobility and migration as the condition of the future Nation-State) and Radhakrishnan (the presenting of a double-consciousness in an ethnic definition of diasporas). (25)

With the help of various agendas discussed by these numerous theorists, an attempt has been made in this dissertation to study the intercultural experiences of diasporic subjects on a wider scale by
focusing on the in-between diasporic space where creolization, assimilation, hybridity, multiculturalism and syncretism are negotiated.
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