Chapter IV

Cultural Encounter

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the ‘middle passage’ of slavery and indenture, the ‘voyage out’ of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. Culture is translational because such spatial histories of displacement – now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of ‘global’ media technologies – make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, a rather complex issue. (LC 247)

In the process of global dissemination, immigrants are attracted from various parts of the world to the centre of imperialistic power, with promises of better opportunities and rights, in comparison to their less developed homelands. The immigrants who encounter a new culture often try to find synchronization between the native culture and the adopted one.

As the immigrants are able to absorb the best of both native and alien cultures, they grow into international citizens. Such people make negotiations with the acquired new culture and tradition. This could be viewed as a sign of growth, independence and adventure in an individual. The diasporic people who originate from Asia but live in western countries provide an interesting example of the new hybrid culture. Homi Bhabha in Nation and Narration says that, “The cultural representation of this ambivalence of modern society” should be “explored” (2). The immigrant zone has
expanded the scope and effect of an intercultural friendship and social relations that have proved vital for the maintenance of the Indian component in a culturally ambidextrous, cosmopolitan identity. This division of cultural loyalties in the diaspora has contributed to the extensive revision of a key feature of Indian English fiction. There are innumerable literary works that focus on biracial ethnicity, and South Asian self-identity. One common area that has drawn the attention of several writers in acquiring new political and cultural resonance for the South Asian diaspora is the cultural conflict. It has altered their conceptions of what constitutes the Indianness vis-a-vis the East-West encounter and done away with the binary formulations offered by some of the earlier writers.

America has become the connoisseur of people all over the world. Immigrants, as they become part of the American culture, incorporate the paraphernalia of their own traditions into it and that transforms their culture also. The ever-growing South Asian community in America especially second-generation Indian Americans started producing works of literature. Indian writing in English has been enriched by non-resident expatriates who have not only assimilated and naturalized the medium but have also accepted their changed identities and have formed emotional ties with their places of residence.

One of the significant themes of modern literature is the depiction of cross-cultural crisis, a subject which has assumed a great significance in the present world of globalization. Though it has been a long time since Chitra Banerjee left India for the American continent, familial ties continue to bind her to the country of her birth. In an interview she confessed: “I have to live with a hybrid identity. In many ways I’m an Indian, but living in America for nineteen years has taught me many things. It
has helped me look at both cultures more clearly. It has taught me to observe, question, explore and evaluate” (qtd. in Chetty 133).

Being an immigrant, Chitra Banerjee was caught between the conflicting cultures in her attempt to find an identity of her own. This search for identity finds its best expression in her novels. Patrick Williams says in his *Colonial Discourse and Post–Colonial Theory: A Reader*: “What is often called the black soul is a white man’s artefact . . . It reveals the deep psychic uncertainty of the colonial relation itself; its split representations stage that division of ‘body’ and ‘soul’ which enacts the artifice of ‘identity’; a division which cuts across the fragile skin – black and white – of individual and social authority” (116).

Chitra Banerjee believes that cross-cultural understanding should go beyond the towers of academia and thus she deals with the crisis of consciousness successfully through exquisitely wrought prose, philosophy and psychology. The immigrant’s relationship with the old home and the new home is neither static nor monolithic, and her novels and short stories, emphasize the heterogeneity of the immigrant experience.

Homi Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* says “Immigrants, refugees or minorities who live in the midst of the metropolitan centers in the North and the South represent the most tangible and proximate presence of the global or transnational world as it exists within ‘national’ societies” (xxi-xxii). Chitra Banerjee’s novels offer glimpses of the author’s personal life and viewpoints. Being an immigrant woman in a white society, she focuses her attention on the lives and problems like loneliness and cultural conflict of American immigrant women exclusively. She intends to expand America by adding the minority point of view, clear-cut assimilation, and transformation. The transformation affects both sides and it is in this binary, but fluid
interaction between origin and modernity, traditional values and emancipation, collectivism or individualism, that her female characters are constructed and developed.

Chitra Banerjee further adds that the American dream is so fascinating that the immigrants take a hazardous journey by breaking all their cultural, social and moral obligations to make their new lives successful. She proves Homi Bhabha’s words in *The Location of Culture*: “A right to difference-in-equality can be articulated from the perspective of both national minorities and global migrants; and in each case such a right represents a desire to revise the customary components of citizenship” (xvii). Chitra Banerjee’s novels are an attempt to negotiate between the two cultures with varying degrees of success by dealing with the immigrants’ attitudes, concerns, and lifestyles.

America holds out to the immigrants the promise of a bright future, a world free from inhibitions, racial differences based on multinational customs, religions, traditions, languages, etc. Chitra Banerjee says in her article “Do South Asian Women Need Separate Shelter Homes?”: “Coming to US gave me the distance I needed to look back on my culture with objectivity, to pick out what I valued and realize what I didn’t agree with. One of the latter was the double standards in effect in many areas for women, and I strove to remove these from my life.”

The conflict of two cultures hinges on the values inherited from birth on one hand and the values acquired through education on the other. This conflict, commonly known as “East-West encounter,” finds its articulation either as a mental attitude, or as a set of values or as an ingredient of a character’s personality – a sort of the individual’s quest for identity. Her novels reveal a gradual development of her
fictional craftsmanship. Even the recurrent theme of East-West encounter is treated from a different angle.

The protagonists travel from one circumstance and geographical location to another, which is a journey of rebirth towards a higher plane. Tilo, Sudha, Anju become symbolic of the duality of cultures, the East and the West. The contemporary literary writing includes mainly two aspects in its contents, politics and culture. Politics symbolizes the centre of power while culture includes the social sharing of ideas among various communities, races and religion. Chitra Banerjee’s novels deal with the culture of both India and America and how the heroines face these two different cultures. The East-West conflict gives way to the clash between the male rational approach in facing life’s realities and the female view based on faith and sentiments. Against this background the author forges her diverse and powerful theme through a vivid portrayal of Indian characters steeped in a unique love-hate relationship with America. The novels acquire added significance as they examine the questions of East-West encounter and cross-cultural relationships.

This chapter focuses on the way the writer develops brief and succinct images of women caught between the values of the old world and the new world, how women cope with cross-cultural relationships, and how women ultimately try to achieve self-esteem and autonomy denied to them within their own somewhat insular and bigoted community. It also portrays the immigrant’s attempt to assimilate themselves, to find a place in the mainstream of American life, leaving behind the whole life – style of India; and secondly in what way, if any, the novels broaden the horizons of the American experience. The attempt to find and fuse a viable self-image within the mainstream United States culture is a crucial factor in Chitra Banerjee’s short stories and novels.
Homi Bhabha in his *Nation and Narration* says, “Man is a slave neither of his race nor his language, nor of his religion, nor of the course of rivers nor of the direction taken by mountain chains. A large aggregate of men, healthy in mind and warm of heart, creates the kind of moral conscience which we call a nation” (20). The immigrants from the Third World countries undergo considerable suffering. The emigration to America is achieved at a heavy price. Immigration necessarily calls for participation in the multiracial and multicultural complex. The novels present the changes that an eastern country citizen attains when he encounters the western culture. The immigration implies not only a desire for social and cultural conglomeration but also a desire on the part of the immigrant for transformation into new personae. The immigration and transformation thus become the key factors in what constitutes the American experience. The immigration is followed by a process of adjustment and transformation of the personalities of the immigrants.

The author explores India and America as two different worlds epitomizing two different cultures and for the immigrant Indians, the new life in America is like ‘being thrown into the sea’ even before learning how to swim. It is really a new and a very different setting. For the immigrant Indians, it is a mixed experience too; at one time it acts as a boon that shatters the inhibitions and taboos, with which they have long been associated, and at another time they experience the void and nothingness of a superficial culture. This is typical of the entire immigrant Indians for whom freedom does not come without a price.

Chitra Banerjee’s protagonists, mainly immigrant Indians, dream of walking past their lived experiences and practices to experience the new land, and explore unknown realms. Sudha is the New Woman of the South Asian diaspora, undertaking a journey similar to Chitra Banerjee’s, a journey of self-discovery and self-
knowledge. America becomes the promised land, “as amazing as the fairy kingdoms of Pishi’s tales” (SMH 179), the land across the ocean at the end of the rainbow, where Sudha decides to go, to save her daughter. In “The Ultrasound,” Anju’s feminist notion is designated and it negates her pre-existing notions of feminism and fairness.

Although, in India, Sudha gets the unending, unselfish support of Ashok who is her first love and who stands by her throughout her troubles, the plot weaves its way to an American airport where Sudha arrives with the support of the “Sister of [her] Heart,” her cousin Anju who is married to Sunil, a computer programmer who has migrated from India to America. The same Sunil had once desired the exceedingly beautiful Sudha even as his marriage ceremony to Anju was proceeding. Yet Sudha’s long road of suffering leads her to America and to Sunil and Anju, not to Ashok, who loves her unselfishly through her marriage (to someone else), pregnancy, and divorce because Sudha feels that inspite of having its own problems America “would give me the advantage of anonymity.” She says “No-one in America would care that I was a daughter of the Chatterjees, or that I was divorced. I could design a new life, earn my own living, give Dayita everything she needed” (SMH 294).

Anju’s expectations forces Sudha to migrate to America, it is too easily forgotten that anonymity and newness may also result in loss of identity and socio-cultural isolation. Sudha comes to America forsaking love, family, and home, and is expected to embrace a western style – isolated and individualistic life despite her cousin’s support. Chitra Banerjee’s characters seem convinced of American lifestyle and about its ultimate superiority. This is well expressed in these words of Sudha: “Best of all, no-one would look down on her, for America was full of mothers like
me, who had decided that living alone was better than living with the wrong man” (SMH 294).

Immigration brought not only new opportunities for these Indian American immigrants but also challenges such as dislocation, isolation, identity crisis, and a sense of differentiation that could easily bring back colonial memories. The writers emerging from this population are poised to portray these crises, but they also found themselves susceptible to an existing dominant tradition of immigrant narratives that characterized immigration as pure opportunity and the adoptive country as a mythical paradise. Reviewing the novel *Sister of My Heart*, Peter Nazareth comments, “In Chitra Banerjee’s work, despite sex, class, and caste oppression, women need not end up as victims. America chips away at ossified Indian tradition for people to see . . . that the imperative of life is deeper than *arranged* marriage. America and India are twinned” (820). His comment explains that in this twinning process, America is more powerful and empowering of the two.

*Sister of My Heart* illustrates how Sudha manages to escape her Indian fate, and the dead ends that many immigrants have to face in America. Sudha’s flight to America is a slow but steady immersion into the mainstream American culture. The immigrants who lived away from their homes are away from their cultures, and are grafted on to the other culture. However, they wish to keep their memories alive and preserve their heritage. The multiple selves are painstakingly constructed and maintained to make sense of the new world. Chitra Banerjee highlights a series of strategies that makes possible successful Americanisation. Her model is based on the adaption to American otherness through a concatenation of permutations while keeping Indian diversity only for strategic purpose, a rather ‘opportunistic’ credo which works magic in America, the country of ‘opportunities.’
Anju, Sudha and Jayanti of “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” leave their respective countries in search of their dreams. This migration or “cultural transplant” leads to a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice. Thus the characters are caught drifting between the two worlds, two cultures, two identities, hoping that the twain would meet. Homi Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* argues that migrant subjects are constituted by cultural indeterminacy and hybridity, which reject fixed identity, which reveal a kind of difference, which is vital in constructing. He says,

A doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once that makes it impossible . . . to accept the colonizer’s invitation to identity: ‘You’re a doctor, a writer, a student, you’re different, you’re one of us.’ It is precisely in that ambivalent use of ‘different’– to be different from those that are different makes you the same – that the Unconscious speaks of the form of otherness, the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement . . . (64)

In most of the stories of *Arranged Marriage*, America stands for freedom, enlightenment, and promises of fairy-tale fulfillment. Chitra Banerjee’s novels lay bare a powerful collage of experiences of the ‘dislocated’ and ‘resettled,’ intertwining the social and personal, and fashioning to show how the transplanted live in the new land. The dislocation is an inescapable physical and geographical reality, which leads to an envisioning of the diasporic culture in the light of new sensibilities.

The novels manifest the cross section of the mind set of the immigrants when they are placed alongside the Americans who have already undergone the first stage of settlement and transformation. The common thread which underlines in all Chitra Banerjee’s novels is the theme of immigration and transformation. The immigrant’s
dream of wedding themselves to the American soil and becoming Americans, the
troubles and tribulations they have to go through to achieving this goal
notwithstanding. When the immigrants uproot themselves from their countries and
come to America, either by choice or out of necessity, then they are actually trapped
forever in – between two distinctly different worlds. Expectations and self-
expectations double and uncannily haunt the celebrating tone of the transformational
processes.

Many of the abusive, failed marriages in Arranged Marriage are set in India
while the small numbers of marriages which seem to be working with some
semblance of health are set in America. And that may account for the perception of
the “passably good marriages in America versus usually bad marriages in India”
(Rustomji 284). The women in the first generation diaspora arrive in the host
countries through arranged marriages which their parents have organized for them and
come to the West as embellishment. They faithfully and submissively go after their
husbands like any pigeonholed Indian women in the host land far from the protective
life of Indian ménage and always stick to the conventional values absorbed into them
by their families in India.

There is also Ahuja’s wife in The Mistresses of Spices, caught in the trap of an
arranged marriage with a balding, ageing man, restlessly seeking alternatives of her
suffering and discovering, much to her horror and disappointment, that the voices of
tradition and social expectation are not different for Indians in America. Though the
story certainly makes it clear that she has been wounded emotionally and spiritually in
order to come to terms with her new life in America.

The story “Clothes” depicts an arranged marriage that works well until
external calamity strikes. In this story, Sumita dreams of a handsome prince who will
take her to his “kingdom beyond the seven seas” \textit{(AM 18)}. One day, the prince of Sumita’s heart comes, “all the way from California,” \textit{(AM 18)} to marry her and carry her to his kingdom beyond the oceans. Her father shows her on the globe where California is situated exactly. For Sumita, too, America is made of desire and promise and she is thrilled by the expectations of a new phase in her life, losing herself in the exotic world of America, hypnotized by its magnetism even as she touches it on the metal globe on her father’s desk: “California . . . a chunky pink wedge on the side of a multicolored slab marked Untd. Sts. of America. I touched it and felt the excitement leap all the way up my arm like an electric shock” \textit{(AM 18)}. But then, “it died away, leaving only a beaten-metal coldness against my fingertips” \textit{(AM 18)}.

The Indian immigrant woman arrives at America with very mixed feelings. The mind frame combines the experience of displacement spurred by physical migration. Along with this the woman remains bearer of the culture, the preserver of heritage and is psychologically programmed to enact pre-ordained roles that have been defined for her by traditional patriarchy at home in India and by extension abroad. Jayanti fantasizes about the fictive white professor who is drawn as the uncle’s polar opposite; he is handsome, refined and romantic. He is the one Jayanti imagines as a husband, the man with whom she will fall in love when she breaks away from the Indian tradition of arranged marriages as she declares “No arranged marriage like Aunt’s for me!” \textit{(AM 45)}.

Roksana Badruddoja in her article “Resisting the White pole – A Feminist ethnographic study: Second – generation South Asian American women, U.S. Racialization projects, and the arranged marriage” points out: “Undoubtedly, values surrounding marriage prove to be a particularly contentious arena: modernity is mapped with America/falling in love and pre-modern or the traditional with
India/arranged marriage” (41). Chitra Banerjee’s protagonist has come a long way by immigrating to America to pursue education instead of submitting herself to the Indian customs of early marriage and by asserting her liberation from the traditional customs of arranged marriage. Manisha of stays at America and her nature totally changes. She thinks on her own and gives importance to her desires. She thinks individualistically. She comes across cultural conflicts and ponders over them to resolve them independently. Meanwhile, she meets Bijoy, a Bengali, who is a psychology professor at California. She falls in love with him and takes a bold decision to marry him. This reveals her strength and firmness. One is education while the other is life. Deepa Mashi, the protagonist’s aunt cautions Manisha against taking all things for granted and emphasizes: “Oh, you Americanized girls! The really important things never change” (AM 111).

The author’s concept of the “melting – pot assimilation” is visible on the characters of Anju and Tilo who strive to merge into the American nationalized community by entering into wedlock. Tilo, who once defended her Indian genealogy, breaks it with courage. She believes that her marriage with Revan, an American will give a new definition to her American existence and make her strong. In Sister of My Heart Anju waits for his highness to arrive from America and says that “It’s going to happen to me any day now, probably as soon as Mr America gets here” (SMH 136). But in The Vine of Desire Anju finds that her life is not happy as she expected and she tries to live independently like an American.

Rakhi in Queen of Dreams proves that marriage and separation is common in American culture. Though her husband Sonny is a number one DJ of a popular night club, she leads her life separately. She spends most of her time in her shop and this helps her to forget her sorrow. In “Affair,” Abha, the perfect wife and homemaker,
realise that the concept of duty gradually loses its stranglehold on the new country. She leaves the security of her loveless marriage and the beauty and calmness of her kitchen for the vagaries of a life of struggle. Meera in “A Perfect Life” leads live-in relationship with Richard. In “The Disappearance” the protagonist disappears after marriage. Mahesh in “Meeting Mrinal” wants to be free from his arranged marriage.

The wisdom that comes of experience of parents is proved by the ending of the story “Doors.” Preeti’s mother has foreseen that a marriage between a young woman raised in the individualistic society of America and a young man born and brought up in India will not work out. She feels that her future son-in-law will one day yearn for his wife to be “obedient and adjusting and forgiving” (AM 184) in accordance with what she calls his “prehistoric values” (AM 184). Likewise, Deepak’s friends question his choice of marriage partner as ABCDs (American – Born – Confused – Desis) are notorious for being independent, self-confident and assertive. Heedless of these well-intentioned warnings, Preeti and Deepak embark on what they see as a lifelong relationship, stronger than a traditional, arranged marriage, confident that their love will conquer all.

The conflict between the first generation and the second-generation expatriates clearly reveals the difficulties of the process acculturation. The distance, both geographically and emotionally between Geeta of The Mistress of Spices and her parents continues to increase. She wants to be an American not Bengali. Shamita Das Dasgupta in her article “Gender Roles and Cultural Continuity in the Asian Indian Immigrant Community in America” comments: “This trend towards conservatism with age may suggest that parents have been somewhat successful in inculcating their children with Indian cultural values, and that this process becomes more rigorous as their adolescents approach marriageable age” (80). Similarly Geeta, a daughter of the
exiled Indians, born to them in America, is reproached by her grandfather, “Well, 
Madam comes in late as usual, nine p.m., saying I ate already” (MS 88). Her allegedly 
free behaviour with men like working with them till late in the evening, being brought 
home with them and her using too much of make-up upsets the grandfather. She is not 
interested in the match suggested by her grand father. Geeta replies: “tell me, you’re 
joking. She laughs and laughs. Can you see me with a veil over my head sitting in a 
sweaty kitchen all day, a bunch of house keys tied to the end of my sari” (MS 88). The 
situation comes to a head when Geeta, believing in her parents’ tolerance, announces 
that she wants to marry not only out of love, but that her boyfriend is a chicano. The 
attitude of Geeta’s grandfather and her parents’ shows that they may approve foreign 
manners, foreign etiquette, foreign fashion but not marriage with a foreigner.

“This ‘second generation’ consists of individuals who are born and/or brought 
up in the U.S. With the children of immigrants coming of age, the task of retaining a 
distinct ethnic identity has become decidedly more complex” (Dasgupta 72). Chitra 
Banerjee is highlighting the impossibility of nuptial longevity in a country that thrives 
on change. In America, the Indian concept of formalized relationships and 
institutionalized togetherness holds no water. In “The Word Love,” Americanization 
has been accepted in totality when the young woman decides to live with her 
boyfriend outside the institution of marriage. The protagonist-narrator has her own 
problems with her widowed mother back in Calcutta. The nameless protagonist, a 
Ph.D. student at Berkeley, has fallen in love with an American and is living with him 
without the knowledge of her mother in India – “you’ll tell your mother you’re living 
with a man” (AM 57). Meera in “A Perfect Life” also continues her live-in 
relationship with Richard with the knowledge of her mother in India. She describes: 
“I’d been afraid that after we slept together he’d either lose interest in me or start
pressuring me to marry him. Or else I’d get pregnant. That was what always happened in India” (AM 74).

The love-hate relationship of the expatriates is dealt with Anju and Sunil, Rakhi and Sonny, Asha and Dinesh, Abha and Ashok, Preeti and Deepak, Ahuja and Lalita. The immigration is naturally followed by a process of adjustment and transformation of the personalities of the immigrants. The writer is fully aware of this aspect of the immigrants. The transformation of the immigrants is effected in several ways. The simplest and the easiest one is that of effecting marital union between the characters from two different countries irrespective of their castes, cultures or value-systems they might have inherited and brought along with them into the new country. In fact, before their love-and-marriage or only love-relationships develop, the characters more or less go through a process of what may be called a partial liberation from their past values.

In the novels and short stories, Chitra Banerjee presents the three generations of mainly Indian Bengali expatriates to America, who came to America to escape political or economic difficulties of their native land, or to study, or as professionals “as part of the brain drain.” It has become a trend among affluent and educated people to send their children at a very young age to foreign countries for pursuing higher studies. Jayanti of “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” is a Bengali girl who willingly takes up her higher studies in Chicago. The nameless heroine of “The Word Love” is sent to Berkeley to pursue Ph.D. Sumita in “Clothes” wishes to take up college education to fulfill her husband’s dream. Deepak’s friend Raj in “Doors” comes to America for the sake of his higher studies.

In India there are some people like Sunil, who want to leave the country because of poverty and lack of opportunities. Sunil moves to America and plans to
earn more to repay the debts incurred for his education. Sunil readily accepts the
demand of Gouri Ma for Anju’s education during his first visit to Chatterjee family
and says “‘Promise,’ . . . ‘as much education as she likes’” (SMH 139). Even though
they get their education, most of them find it difficult to be happy and successful in
the west. Sunil is the representative of these Indians who live miserably both at home
and abroad. The Indian parents, once they settle down in America imagine that all is
well with their children. The children of the migrants do not face the same problems
like their parents, the first generation immigrants. In fact, they feel proud that their
children need not suffer like them because they provide all sorts of luxuries for their
peaceful living. Mrs. Gupta thinks that Rakhi and her daughter Jona having born in
America are assured of a safe life and a fine education in America.

The term ‘American Dream’ often refers to the act of pursuing a sophisticated
life in America. The marginalized people in the eastern countries wrongly think that
they will attain dignity if they fly to America and gain financial success. The story of
Bikram in “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” depicts the life of an Indian in Chicago,
who, in spite of his dreams ends up as a garage mechanic, a victim of discrimination.
The immigrants take up ordinary jobs in the new country of their dreams to earn their
livelihood and survive. “Ahuja is a watchman at the docks” (MS 14) and Daksha’s
husband who “went into 7-Eleven . . . told his boss, ‘I spit on you and your job your
job your job’” (MS 62).

After leaving the house of her husband Lalita is afraid of her future and
becomes frustrated. The Indian women in the organisation understand her condition
and “they can help me [her] set up a small tailoring business” (MS 272). Asha in
“Meeting Mrinal” decides not to spend any more time in the kitchen and takes up a
job: “I’m taking classes instead at the local college, not something fluffy like
Quiltmaking or Fulfillment Through Transpersonal Communication but Library Science, which will (I hope) eventually get me a full-time job at the Sunnyvale Public Library where I now work afternoons. The last two quarters I’ve been taking a fitness class as well” (AM 275).

Abha in “Affair” wants to take up a job for her survival: “I’ll go to that Mughal restaurant. Offer to cook for free for a few days. Surely when the owner saw how good I was he’d give me the job” (AM 271). Anju knows that Indian women took evening classes or became librarians. So she takes up a job inorder to bring Sudha and Dayita to America. Women accept inferior types of work with more composure than men, to whom this means a greater sense of loss and frustration. Sudha looks for a job for her survival as a care taker of the old man.

*The Vine of Desire* chronicles Anju’s discovery of her own literary voice, through the shape she seeks to give to the chaotic incidents in her life which drive her to the edge of suicide, in writing assignments for her creative writing classes in college. Anju’s assignment “Draupadi’s Garden,” is a glimpse of Chitra Banerjee’s own process as a creative writer, blending myth, imagery and lyricism, all derived from her cultural tradition in order to re-imagine the transformation of women’s identities in the South Asian diaspora:

What would Draupadi plant in her garden? Would it be the agnirekha, flame-flower, flower of virtuous courage, flower of the heroes her husbands have become? Would it be a sprig of the parijaat, the tree of fragrant bliss which their mentor Krishna wrested from Indra, the king of the gods? Is it the asha-lata, the mythical desire vine which gives you whatever you wish for? . . .The asha-lata gives what you wanted,
but it always turns out different from what you imagined it to be. (VD 345-46)

The literary migrants who live away from their roots and culture develop a distinct sensibility. Living in the mainstream American society, acculturation becomes inevitable for individuals from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. In a broad sense acculturation is a social process by which social and cultural changes occur when people from different cultures come in direct contact with each other. Chitra Banerjee proves the quest for national identity by defining, redefining, analyzing and explaining it from all possible angles especially for women, because male migrants face fewer problems than female migrants.

For some of the old immigrants, the assimilation of American culture was obligatory to some extent, enhancing their survival chances in a new land. Others willingly accepted the American way because they wanted to come to this land of liberty, and raise their children to be perfect Americans by birth. One of the significant changes is assimilation which happens first and foremost as soon as they step into the western or foreign country. In his article named “Crisis of Unbelonging in Some Expatriate Stories from the Canadian and Indian Context” in Writers of Indian Diaspora, P.A. Abraham says,

Caught between two worlds the expatriate negotiates a new space, caught between two cultures and after languages, the expatriate writer negotiates a new literary space. Therefore, an anxious sense of dislocation is characteristic of expatriate writings. The shifting designation of ‘home’ (Where’s it?) and the attendant anxieties about homelessness and the impossibility of going back are perennial themes in these stories. (51)
In the novels of Chitra Banerjee, there is a gradual (sometimes radical) replacement of the older version by the new. As a writer who has moved from one geographical and cultural space to another, from India to the American continent, Chitra Banerjee’s writings speak of the inevitable changes involved in such transitions. There is a re-visioning of ideas and concepts which belong to two different worlds separated by vast oceanic distances. “Culture is open to revision, revitalisation or subversion” (Appadurai 218).

Unlike the expatriate with his nostalgia for the past, the immigrant plunges into the present and gets enthusiastically involved in the environment around him. While the exile parades pain and grievance, the immigrant celebrates the fact of being alive in a new world, of being reborn. Immigrants are energetic, resilient, and able to accept changes. They themselves change in the encounter of cultures and they also bring about changes in their environment. The assimilation starts for Sumita even before entering into America and she dreams of her entry into American style: “He will be standing at the customs gate, and when I reach him, he will lower his face to mine. We will kiss in front of everyone, not caring, like Americans, then pull back, look each other in the eye, and smile” (AM 23). Therefore, the immigrants are many times born and the assimilation is a spiritual rebirth, a recurring theme of Chitra Banerjee’s fiction. Thus her stories reveal the degree of interest in the theme of Indian immigrant women living out their dull or not-so-dull lives in America.

Chitra Banerjee presents a new cultural scenario, as presented by Manju Jaidka in the essay, “The writer as Trishanku; Indian Writing in the Foreign Space”: “. . . there is another slow but inevitable process going on: with the gradual replacement of the older generation by the new, comes the fading away of old values and traditions, an ‘assimilation’ or ‘acculturation’ into the new cultural situation” (15).
Chitra Banerjee tries to picture the image of the immigrant women trying to assimilate themselves to the alien culture. Anju’s life in America is a good example for this: “I balance the bag of groceries on my hip and brush my short hair from my face as I try to unlock our apartment door. The key sticks in the lock, as usual, and I have to jiggle it – quite a feat, considering that I’m also holding onto Sunil’s newly cleaned jacket” (SMH 205).

No doubt America adds to the self-confidence of the Indian male, endowing him with a certain light-heartedness and ease that allow him to trust his partner’s vivacity and enterprise, which come in place of domesticity and docility; but America may also turn him into a reckless philanderer, as seen in the character of Sunil, Anju’s Americanized husband. But he is not supportive to Anju and argues with her regarding Sudha’s arrival to the Chatterjee house. He also warns her that she is safe in America. Anju doubts him and asks: “Maybe you’d have wanted me to have an abortion too, if we’d been in India and my baby hadn’t turned out to be a boy.” She wonders “Does it mean he’d be the same way towards me if ever I got into trouble? Does he love me at all? What if something happened to our baby? Would he love me still?” (SMH 274-75)

Chitra Banerjee analyses the tensions and constraints that women of Indian origin are subjected to in the diasporic context. Her novels fictionalise the process of Americanisation by tracing a young Indian woman’s experience of trauma and triumph in her attempt to forge a new identity for herself. The challenge faced by an immigrant woman is two-fold. She faces a challenge not only from the way she is perceived in a new cultural background but also by the stereotypical roles that define her by the culture to which she belongs. Change in the perception of roles played by women is the need of the hour. Anju adapts herself to the American style quickly and
assimilation makes her life easier: “‘Shit!’ I say, bending awkwardly to pick things up. ‘Shit!’ Of all the American terms I’ve avidly gleaned in the three years I’ve been here, it’s my favourite” (SMII 205). Though the main focus of the novels is on the problems of cultural retention and resistance to change and the cultural assimilation of the immigrants, it also deals with the impact they have on the lives of the natives.

The novels suggest that breaking away from one’s ethnicity and absorbing the new culture is the only way for survival. Neela Banerjee in her “Mistress of Self” says: “For Asian American writers, Chitra Banerjee spoke about the importance of being true to one’s cultural heritage, and not being afraid of the dramatic.” Anju welcomes Sudha at the American airport. And in a sense, these relationships between women echo the relationships between the cultures and the physical landscapes of India and America. By making Sudha leave India for America, the novel makes her an escapist and makes Indian Society seem hopelessly irredeemable. Sudha’s westward move to solve problems generated at home also makes her more responsive to the calls of Indian feminism.

Since it is necessary for the immigrant to conform to the culture of the society to which he has migrated, he has to change his behaviour pattern also. People who have been tradition–bound have to step into a new environment which forces them to follow the existing custom in the new country. Some of the stories of Chitra Banerjee have characters that show how a person gets assimilated into a new culture. They think that there is nothing wrong in changing things if things are not working out well for them. Changing an unhappy situation seems better than brooding over it. This assimilation occurs not only in fiction, but also in the practical lives of many immigrants who migrate to various places from their homeland. There is less of a
cultural divide between America and India due to globalization and faster access to communication.

In an interview with Terry Hong to *The Bloomsbury Review* “Responding With Hope to 9/11: A Talk With Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni About Her Latest Novel, *Queen of Dreams*” she says,

> It was a big adjustment, moving from a big city like Calcutta to Dayton, Ohio, which, at that time, didn’t have many Indians and was not cosmopolitan. I felt a real sense of being “other.” People were so startled to see an Indian person in Indian clothes – people actually stopped their cars to look when I walked down the street. I think all people come to a new country with preconceived notions. Mine were based on books and films I’d seen about America – and life was very different from the movies, as well. So there was an adjustment on both sides. When I got to Berkeley for graduate school, it was very cosmopolitan.

Minority discourse is characterized not only by an eagerness to adapt and assimilate but also by a culture of protest and resistance. Culture is not merely an organizational principle holding together the members of a community; it is also a means of establishing its separateness from and resistance to other communities. As a second generation immigrant Rakhi adopts an American life style easily. It started as early as her birth but her assimilation to American culture is a highly difficult one and she feels that she is in “a land that seemed to me to be shaded with unending mystery” (*QD* 4). Yet, living as an immigrant offers her an immense possibility of creativity and she is empowered enough to create new possibilities of belonging and identity. How diasporas look forward to having people from their country while in a foreign
land, or people from the countries with shared past history and form composite communities is shown in *Queen of Dreams*. Thus Chitra Banerjee has shown so dynamically the shifting concepts of ‘home’ and ‘displacement’ in the successive generations of migrants.

Mrs. Gupta, though living in America, does not feel the urge to integrate or assimilate with the culture of the adopted country. She is proud of her Indian identity and retains much of her Indianness. Being the ‘queen’ of dreams she tries to retain the powers of the dream she has acquired in India. When she decides to marry Mr. Gupta she never reveals about her secret life. She is neither willing to give up the powers, nor willing to reside in the caves with elders. Striking a balance between the two choices, she resolves to choose the third where she could keep “the lesser ones, so that I might help others in the world” (*QD* 175).

Mr. Gupta and Mrs. Gupta are typical Indian immigrants in America. They live there peacefully without assimilating to the culture of their adopted land and thus it proved Madhumita Bhattacharyya’s words published in *The Telegraph*: “It is interesting to see how people lose touch or continue to keep in touch with their own cultures.” As a result of their lack of assimilation into the mainstream, they lead an isolated and cocooned existence.

Chitra Banerjee’s novels deal with the theme of East-West encounter through individual relationships and experiences. Its central characters are nowhere men, i.e. Indian immigrants in America who belong neither to India nor to America. The novel thus is a psychological study of the problems of alienation and rootlessness. The night before she had left Calcutta, her aunt had given her a gift – a pouch with a handful of earth collected from the walkway in front of the caves, “ground that centuries of dream tellers have stepped on” (*QD* 176). She wonders how it would be of any use
to her in America. She tries scattering some in her garden, and even adds a pinch with her food but to no avail. Her dreams would not come. Her link is inextricably bound to Indian soil as the California soil does not possess the essential ingredients to provide power to dream dreams. She places the pouch of Indian soil under her pillow and kaleidoscopic dreams scented with homely things burst on her.

Mrs. Gupta does not assimilate herself into the myth of America. Her journals sharply resurrect the long forgotten Indian myths, beliefs, tradition, and culture. She even continues the dreams which are so essential for existence, and in reality it is only a mixture of all. As a dream–teller she keeps her childhood life as a secret from Rakhi. Though she has understood her daughter’s curiosity to know about India, she hides it intentionally. Shortly before her death, Mrs. Gupta admits that her decision of not revealing the truth about India was a mistake.

Socially and culturally positioning herself as an immigrant Indian, Mrs. Gupta neither acculturates nor assimilates but just adapts or adjusts to the life around her, without changing or transforming herself. She expresses her adaptation and proves her authentic Indian surface. She is able to identify the real problem as to why Rakhi’s Chai Shop is at the point of crumbling: “And whose fault is it if I don’t know who I am? If I have a warped Western sense of what’s Indian?” (QD 89) Mrs. Gupta’s reaction is initially expressed through her body language: she “bites her lip,” (QD 89) something she has never done before. Rakhi also notices that “her teeth are small, with serrated edges like a child’s” (QD 89). Her facial expression provides the daughter with a vivid picture of her mother’s underlying mental state and reveals her vulnerability. Noticing her mother’s similarity to a child, Rakhi asserts a grown-up’s position. Yet the mother re-establishes her authority by explaining her motives: “You’re right. It is my fault. I see now that I brought you up wrong” (QD 89).
Mrs. Gupta’s refusal to transmit her culture to her daughter is a typical of South Asian mother’s act in particular and ethnic mothers in general. Living in a western majority culture, ethnic mothers often hold themselves responsible for their children’s and particularly their daughter’s cultural education. In America, where the nuclear family takes the place of the traditional, extended family, the mothers become their daughters’ almost exclusive role-models and cultural educators. This situation further aggravates the tensions and collisions in the mother–daughter relationship.

Referring to Chai Shop’s rival Java, Mrs. Gupta says: “‘The reason you don’t have enough power to fight that woman there is that she knows exactly who she is, and you don’t. This isn’t a real cha shop’ – she pronounces the word in the Bengali way – ‘but a mishmash, a Westerners’ notion of what’s Indian. Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe if you can make it into something authentic, you’ll survive” (QD 89).

While Rakhi’s mother fails to acknowledge the potential possibilities in the integration of Indian and American cultures, the father not only introduces the daughter to his Indian heritage, but also helps her integrate it with her American identity. The father’s stories provide Rakhi with the necessary cultural context to imagine India in a realistic way. His storytelling facilitates a dialogic interaction with his daughter, enabling her to direct his stories in a course more relevant for her needs. His talents as a chef and later as a singer make the Indian culture more substantial and accessible to Rakhi’s Americanized mind. Helping his daughter save her coffee shop, he suggests that they transform it into an authentic “Indian snack shop, a chaer dokan, as it would be called in Calcutta” (QD 165). During his adolescence in India the father worked as a helper in a snack shop, where he learned to make various authentic desserts.
Assimilation or acculturation is the only way for an individual to keep a fine balance between illusion and reality and lead a meaningful life preserving his identity as well. The sharing of the culinary secrets not only strengthens the father–daughter relationship, but also transmits cultural knowledge and customs. Rakhi and her father, transform Rakhi’s business into an authentic Indian place: “he would cook sweets, stirring the white granules of sandesh in a huge iron work until they became a smooth paste, or squeezing the dough of jilebis . . . fry chili pakoras instead, their pungent smell reaching all the way to the bus stop, making passengers late for work because no one could resist stopping for Keshto’s pakoras” (QD 168).

Chitra Banerjee also shows that most of the second generation people adjust well and make a space for themselves in the new country. Rakhi and her husband forge their own identities, making up their own groups comprising of diaspora couples from other countries and a few Americans as well. Mr. Gupta has carved an identity for himself in American set up. Thus the novel takes the Gupta family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. Rakhi’s problem of complete assimilation to the host culture and tradition is complicated and complex. Though she is born in America, it does not offer her the passport of being an American. Yet, the stamp of a true American is seen in her behaviour and activities. Her resilience of spirit facing the odds in life and accepting challenges creatively reflect the individualistic trait of the American. She comes to know about Indian culture and great Hindi music through her father. So she makes acculturation her strength, as towards the end of the novel she learns to appreciate Indian instruments which produce music that is not purely Indian but an American mix. She moves to a deeper philosophy of life which equips her to set right her estranged life with Sonny, her husband, in the dance hall “on the web of the world . . .
Sonny and she have touched orbits once more” (QD 307) paving the way for an integrated family life, very much similar to that in an Indian setup. Assimilation, they assert, would be the answer to the discontents of the diaspora.

Unlike Rakhi, Preeti is a private person. She loses her peace of mind and tranquility when Raj from India becomes a long-term house guest. Raj’s presence brings out the Indianess in Deepak that has lain dormant since he has come to America with Preeti, the “exotic creature – Indian and yet not Indian” (AM 189). Not only does he acquire a long-lost taste for Bollywood films, but his accent becomes significantly more Indian and his duty as a host leads him to allow Raj’s welfare to take precedence over his wife’s. Deepak and Preeti discover that they have diametrically opposed concepts of space.

Preeti being the only child is unaccustomed to sharing space and emotions with siblings. Her clear-cut conception of individual space is a totally westernized understanding of the need for privacy and closed doors. Her almost obsessive door locking could represent her subconscious attempt to shut out any traces of Indianess that may still remain. For Preeti, it is an individual right and it must be respected. But for Deepak this attitude is bordered on the offensive because of his Indian family ethos: “Even family members sometimes need time and space away from each other. In many family [families] no one ever intruded . . . Well, maybe they should have, Deepak interrupted in a hard tone that made Preeti stare at him. Maybe then you’d be a little more flexible now” (AM 198). It is a complete reversal of Deepak’s Indian upbringing within the boundary–less atmosphere of an extended family, where “they had constantly spilled into each other’s rooms, doors always left open for chance remarks and jokes” (AM 189).
Somdatta Mandal in his “The New Bengal Movement in Diasporic Indian English Fiction” explains the clash of culture “Through the eyes of people caught in the clash of cultures, and by constantly juxtaposing Calcutta with a Californian city, Chitra Banerjee reveals the rewards and the perils of breaking free from the past and the complicated, often contradictory emotions that shape the passage to independence” (15). Preeti bursts out at Raj when he enters her bedroom to tell her some good news without even knocking the door. It forces her to rethink her situation in the house. She has become Raj’s bhaviji rather than Deepak’s wife. The latter’s male bonding with his friend has relegated her to a highly un-American secondary position, where her duty to her guest must override any inconvenience suffered because of extra chores or distaste at Raj’s irritating habits. When Preeti announces that she is moving in with her friend Cathy hoping that this temporary separation will help them both to straighten things out, the reaction shown by Deepak proves her mother to be right when she warned her that the couple might one day show signs of cultural incompatibility: “‘It’s never too late to stop yourself from ruining your life,’ her mother said. ‘What do you really know about how Indian men think? About what they expect from their women?’ . . . ‘You can’t leave. What would people say? Besides, you’re my wife. You belong in my home’” (AM 184-200).

Like Preeti, Anju also adopts American culture easily. In her letter to Gouri Ma she writes, “I’m staying in a nearby city with a friend, a woman I met at the university, who took me in when I was at the end of my rope” (VD 270). Bengali rhythms and nuances push back the limits of Americanization, for instance the cuisine and culture of the Bengali diaspora that has been familiarized among their American friends: “A community of interest is assuredly a powerful bond between men” (18) is suggested by Homi Bhabha in his Nation and Narration. As the Hindi film music was
also incorporated into the calypso music as well as into the bhangra beat, the traditional bhangra tunes gradually moved to a modernized western version. As Dasgupta remarks, “Cultural celebrations and communal festivals that used to serve as avenues to assuage immigrant nostalgia have now taken on the added purpose of familiarising the next generation with their Indian heritage and traditions” (72). The mix of the old and the new becomes symbolic of universal cultural transformation for new generations and the Asian–American cultural scenario is being constantly remixed into newer forms with every passing day. It also explains how a specifically diasporic cultural politics of nostalgia thus ironically has resulted in a transnational impact.

The Americans enjoyed the Bengali and Mughlai governments, songs of Sehgal, Rafi and Kishore, the jazz music, the bicultural and multicultural ambience. After the catastrophe of fire in the ‘Kurma Shop’ Rakhi understands her mother’s words that, “Calamity happens so we can understand caring” (QD 237). The bond of affinity between Rakhi and Mr. Gupta develop after the calamity. Disaster makes the customers more informal in their relationship to Rakhi. They understand the fact that they all belong to one country. It makes them relate and they form a distinct ethnic group and community. The customers begin to flock around the ‘Kurma Shop’ to hear Gupta’s Hindi songs. They rediscover the joy like an “unexpected oasis tucked into an arid stretch of dunes something they thought they’d never find here in America. It’s a pleasure to watch their pleasure” (QD 196).

The father’s affirmative response brings a crowd of ethnic musicians to the store. Rakhi notices that “some (musicians) wear Western clothes, and some are in kurta-pajamas, but what I notice most are their faces. Lined, unabashedly showing their age . . . The word foreign comes to me again, though I know it’s ironic. They are
my countrymen. We share the same skin color” (QD 193-194). Thus ethnic associations of the diasporic community promote the idea of one Indian culture, one set of Indian beliefs, one Indian lifestyle and so forth. It is the ethnic difference between the musicians in the band that makes it unique. As Rakhi comments, “good music crosses all boundaries, like good food” (QD 196). The musicians enjoy playing together so much so that they seem to perceive their performances as a ceremony, something they are part of.

The ceremony created by the musicians in Rakhi’s coffee shop appeals to the basic human need for emotional connection and artistic expression. As the groups grow stronger and acquire financial stability, they could expand their function in a variety of directions. Chitra Banerjee’s literary landscape has been designed by a conscious effort to identify and integrate the psyche of the two cultures and metaphysical mappings transform the elusive reality itself. These writings reflect the hyphen, but they proudly accept the status of ‘Otherness’ in the diasporic consciousness. Thus the immigrant narrative provides criteria for exploring American multicultural identities and literature. In fact DJ’s have taken traditional, familiar stuff and reinvented it, redefined it via mixes and beats. One of the things which makes it so significant and dynamic is that it encourages exchange of cultures on both sides.

The concert is one of the factors that forces the desi remix culture in America to remain a subculture. Regional and national chauvinism, gender and class inequality, and complex forms of internal and external racism all have an impact on the music produced. Anju, Sudha and Sunil at the Anniversary of Chopra enjoy the concert: “The regular lights in the hall have been replaced with a couple of pulsing, disco-style spotlights. The DJ hired by the Chopras starts the music” (VD 133). Chitra
Banerjee feels that her position as a woman writer has been meaningful and that she represents only a single vision of the diverse Indian American community.

Chitra Banerjee presents Indian Americans and Americanised Indians in her novels to explain cross-culturalism. Indian Americans are conscious of their Indianism, whereas, Americanized Indians care for their oneness with the alien culture. The experiences of the family of Rakhi in the alien culture are emotionally portrayed in the novel. Being born and bred in America, she behaves like an American in language. She fits into neither Bengali nor American cultures fully and suffers the pangs of alienation. She belongs to the other breeds of women who were born and brought up in the American culture and for them “home” and “belonging” exist neither in fragmentary nor in partial memories.

Rakhi revises her understanding of art and ethnic identity while looking at her own paintings: “feel detached from the work I did before – as if it were painted by someone else, and not someone I particularly admire. There’s a static feel, particularly, to my paintings about India. As my mother would say, they’re not authentic” (QD 197). Rakhi decides that she wants “to create something new, something different and magical,” (QD 197) yet it is only when she comes across the work of other Indian painters that she is able to start reconceptualizing her own art. These paintings enable Rakhi to explore new possibilities for artistic creation and ethnic self-definition: “. . . I hungered for all things Indian because my mother never spoke of the country she’d grown up in – just as she never spoke of her past” (QD 35).

Art and identity are shown as interdependent components of Rakhi’s self. She absorbs and understands the new ways of artistic expression. So she breaks the
binaries between what traditionally is seen as American or Indian. Sudha also examines the paintings at Chopra’s house:

She’s examining one of the paintings, a miniature, the head of a princess dressed medieval-style in a diaphanous veil through which the jewels at her nose and ears shine. It’s beautiful, or would be if it weren’t hung next to a wincingly orange batik of a mother elephant with her calf. What’s going through her mind at her first exposure to wealth in America. (VD 128)

Chitra Banerjee, by subjecting an American girl to the feeling which is generally experienced by expatriates/diasporas, perhaps wants to imply that her stories are not written with the purpose of locating reductive post-colonial, or feminist positions, but rather to failures about the multi-cultural nature of the society that has begun to accept the expatriates as their equal, despite their cultural difference.

The immigrants from different parts of the world are inspired and haunted by one common desire: the desire to settle permanently in America. They converge in that country, intermix, and promote a new culture. Tilo attempts to restore confidence to the little boy Jaggi with her spice. It combines the pressures to conform with courage and transforms him into an aggressive young man. He has been offered protection by a group of boys, who in exchange have asked him to “Carry this packet here, drop off this box there” (MS 121). He is carrying out his duties conscientiously waiting to turn fourteen when he will get his coveted gift, “cold and black, shining and heavy with power in my [his] hand, pulsing electric as life, as death my [his] passport into real America” (MS 121). In this context what Homi Bhabha says in his The Location of Culture may be considered:
For Du Bois, a minority only discovers its political force and its aesthetic form when it is articulated across and alongside communities of difference, in acts of affiliation and contingent coalitions. Many member states proposed an amendment that immigrants, for instance, should not be considered minorities. It was held that ‘the very existence of unassimilated minorities would be a threat to national unity; and hence, the provisions relating to the right of minorities should not be so applied to encourage the emergence of new minority groups, or to thwart the process of assimilation and so threaten the unity of the State. (xxii-xxiii)

Tilo is shocked and wonders whether it is her spice-remedy, or Jaggi’s parents or America that have driven him to become a drug trafficker who is perhaps on his way to become an armed gangster. The little boy became Jagjit by getting his back on those “jeering voices, the spitting mouths, the hands,” (MS 39) in the playground that had assaulted him. As there are immigrants who assimilate and prosper economically in America, there are others who lose their jobs or worse, their children. In his book *Asian-American Writing: Fiction* Somdatta Mandal writes:

For first – generation South Asians, issues of belonging become increasingly complicated the longer they stay in North America, and even more profoundly complex as they bring up children here, children who are socialized in the North America context – its schools, its movie theaters, its bars, its malls, its streets. Boundaries between ethnicities, class, gender and religion dissolve and re – emerge, as second generation South Asians move from home to school and college, to workplace and to peer group. In the fissures of these
topographies of consciousness arise the ingredients of contested identities and contested forms of belonging (or not belonging) in North America. (23)

The immigrants devise themselves to new cultural “routes” which will take them imaginatively and physically to many places and into contact with many people and help them realize their ambitions. This will forge a new relationship between their past, present and future. The ‘voiceless, invisible’ woman learns the art of adopting an American way of talking, walking and dressing. Yet she keeps her traditional past in her psyche which helps her in a crisis. Indian characters in search of American life retain sufficient Indianness to be exotic but float gleefully into American materialism. From this category of experience, Chitra Banerjee wishes to carve her own specialty within the broader genre of American Literature.

Chitra Banerjee’s world of immigrants and their desperate need to belong to the new world bring a sense of cross-cultural adventure to her novels. Sudha dismisses Ashok and tells Anju “I won’t let you put me down” (VD 129). She would like to lead her life in America without anyone’s support even her sister of the heart. Chitra Banerjee’s battle against her expatriate status involves not a return to the past, her home country but to accept the role of the immigrant, to be a part of redefining America. Mr. Gupta and Mrs. Gupta the first generation migrants can adjust well and stop lamenting of the lost origin. Stuart Hall in his “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” says,

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic . . . Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent . . . instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always
constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises
the very authority and authenticity to which the term, ‘cultural
identity’, lays claim. (392)

One can see the conflict in terms of culture, identity and existence as soon as
they leave their lands. It is Anju’s dream to migrate to America in order to have better
prospects, freedom and marriage whereas Sudha is driven to America by the burning
traumatic homeland realities. Anju adapts herself easily to every circumstance of life.
In spite of occasional memories of life in India, she is never tormented by the clash of
traditional Indian values and the American world she faces. The twenty-fifth wedding
anniversary of Chopra “Celebration!” (VD 134) begins with disco-style spotlights and
Chopras with DJ. “A few, like Sunil and Anju, fidget at the edges of the party,
watches who know they don’t quite belong” (VD 134). But Sudha joins Lalit and
responds to the music well. Sudha who has never been to a dance before “moves
fluidly, comfortable with her body’s rhythm . . . She closes her eyes and sways to the
beat. Sometimes she clicks her fingers and mouths the words” (VD 135).

The topics of conversations in such parties are strange to Anju, who has
believed that she would be “free” to experience a life different and distanced from that
which she has left behind in India. She is often reminded of her Indianness which she
finds difficult to shed and all her attempts to Americanize fail miserably and Anju is
at sea in her “adopted” culture. Anju tries to persuade Sunil to dance so that she can
have fun.

“There is something in man which is superior to language, namely, the will”
(NN 16). Anju learns to speak American-English by watching the television. Sudha
also follows the same Californian style when she introduces herself to Lalit. “Hi,
yourself,” (VD 131) she replies. It’s what she’s heard women on TV shows say when
they don’t want to appear too friendly. The expectation of a different culture, and the pull towards the unknown realm, is altogether a new experience, and this aspect is well substantiated and the protagonist craves to assimilate in her speech certain English words as a sign of westernization; “‘Sorry,’ I say, ‘so very very sorry,’ like the nuns had taught me to in those old, high-ceilinged classrooms cooled by the breeze from the convent neem trees” (AM 35). There is Jaggi, the little Sikh boy, teased in school for wearing a turban and not speaking English fluently: “Jagjit who has learned his first English word. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot . . . Asshole, his second English word” (MS 38).

The second important change which the immigrants have to experience is the difference in the clothes they have to wear in their adopted country. Dress becomes another sign system that denotes the adjustment made by the immigrant people. While in India, many people wear many kinds of Indian dress typical of the region in which they live. But as soon as they land in another country they have to give up their traditional way of dressing. There is a compulsion to be accepted by the people of the new country. Sudha in America wonders about Sara’s dressing style of wearing jeans: “She wears cutoff jeans, makes the swing go way past safety. No, it’s a grown woman. Her black hair streams out, sealsleek, as the swing sweeps forward. She wears her tight purple T-shirt with a nonchalance I envy” (VD 81-82).

In *Arranged Marriage*, Chitra Banerjee uses clothes as an example to show the changes that come over people. The dress is one of the means through which one’s cultural identity is established. The saris of Kancheepuram, Benaras and Bengal evoke memories of Sumita’s home country. Back in the States, living in one cramped apartment, Somesh and Sumita secretly dream of living the American dream. Once Somesh has made enough money to finish paying the loan on his shop and strikes out
on his own, they will be totally independent. In the meantime, Sumita maintains the
status quo and remains the meek, submissive daughter-in-law: “I model each one for
him . . . I scold Somesh to hide my embarrassed pleasure . . . The T-shirt is sunrise –
orange – the color, I decide, of joy, of my new American life. Across its middle, in
large black letters, is written Great America” (AM 24-25).

Sumita is forced to wear the white dress after Somesh’s death. Earlier she
could wear western dress but now she has to wear white. Thus the colour of the dress
becomes an index of the cultural conflict that takes place. In order to get mixed up in
the American society, Tilo dresses up in a western outfit. Tilo too wishes to pass off as
an American; she does not want to be an odd man out when she walks on the streets
of America. Tilo feels:

. . . I pull on my no-nonsense pants and polyester top, button my
nondescript brown coat all the way to my calves. I lace my sturdy
brown shoes, heft my brown umbrella in readiness. This new-clothed
self, I and not-I, is woven of strands of brownness with only her young
eyes and her bleached-jute hair for surprise. She tries a hesitant smile
which resettles her wrinkles . . . (MS 131-32)

Thus the immigrants get assimilated when they are exposed to many new
things in the new world. In Queen of Dreams, Belle, the friend of Rakhi bitterly
complains that Rakhi is not dressed properly: “You’re getting old . . . Besides, they
probably think you’re the outrageously dressed one. Outrageously old-fashioned, that
is” (QD 25). Mrs. Gupta clads herself as Indians do either with a saree or
salwarkameez. It is as if the dress she wears reflects the home she belongs to, and she
wants it to be looked upon as immaculate. Thus Mrs. Gupta’s asserts her Indian
identity.
Apart from dress, food is yet another seminal cultural metaphor. A very significant construct in the Asian-American literature is the predominance of the food metaphor, which reflects not only the culture but also the relationships. Though a human need, the reference to food is marginal in male writers and it is a major feminist metaphor in gender studies. This is because women have always been the prime manufacturers of food in the domestic circle. The spices’ ordinary representation is associated with food and desires because they make food tasty and therefore more desirable, which is especially true in the Indian context.

Chitra Banerjee’s female immigrant characters in almost all the novels either assert their presence through their culinary skills or complicate their association between home and food. Her writings are scattered with details of traditional Indian food and flavours and wardrobe giving shape to her stories. She has pictured the characters as they prepare some American food items at their home; it may be surprising for the other Indians whose food habit is entirely different, but in fact, it is true that many immigrants have given up their customary food habits. In The Vine of Desire, Anju cooks for her sister, Sudha, who is going to visit America, “Anju who is a terrible cook, has spent the day making lasagna because, she says, Sudha has never tasted any in India . . .” (VD 11). Anju’s craving for fresh fish is an important cultural measure in a land where chopped and canned fish items are mostly preferred.

Both Anju and Sunil are assimilated into the American culture, keeping their Bengali cultures aside. Throughout their relationship they manage to maintain a fairly average American lifestyle with a Bengali subculture. They live in a tiny flat in New York. Though Anju is not an expert in cooking she prepares Indian dishes to welcome her sister-friend: “The refrigerator is stuffed with dishes: spaghetti and meatballs, potato salad, tuna casserole, banana bread, vanilla pudding, apple pie. It is the most
Indian of ways, what the women of her family had done to show love through the years of her childhood” (VD 20).

The novelist has also used food to show the incompetence of Indians in America. Sonny is fond of Mrs. Gupta’s Indian dishes while Rakhi likes Chinese stir-fry, fifteen minutes from start to finish: “He brings back care packages filled with his favorite gourmet dishes – Palak paneer, tandoori chicken, pooris – items that take hours of preparation time” (QD 29). Mrs. Gupta is trying to make a spicy Indian snack from American ingredients--Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts--but as usual, there’s something missing. Even in simple things like cooking ingredients one could find the sense of alienation in the immigrants’ life, and explore cultural transitions: “At home we rarely ate anything but Indian; that was the one way in which my mother kept her culture,” says Rakhi (QD 7). Her father offers Indian cooking, as pleasurable exotica. Except the protagonist of “Meeting Mrinal,” who regrets that much of her life has been preoccupied with “mincing and simmering and grinding spices,” (AM 275) the other women work in the kitchen with a sense of joy.

Sumita is also surprised when Somesh tells her that for the Americans, drinking is a normal routine: “It’s a part of their culture, not considered immoral . . . there’s nothing wrong with it” (AM 21). Sumita remembers what her father used to tell about those “the village toddy shops” (AM 21) where alcohol was sold, “dark, stinking dens of vice” (AM 21). Caught in the web of immigrant dilemmas, she has indeed begun to wonder what America really is. Sara tells about her Indian brought up: “My poor mother did whatever she could to bring me up as a good Indian girl. Bharatnatyam lessons, elocution classes, a convent education, the works” (VD 86). Sudha would also like to enjoy the freedom of America: “I bought myself a bus ticket to California. A last bit of adventure . . . Don’t look so scandalized! It isn’t hard. I
love the freedom, the risk. It’s like being in a play” (VD 83). She “accepts a glass of wine from a proffered tray” (VD 130) at Chopra’s anniversary.

As Marta Lysik opines, “The American West changes, and so does its both famous and infamous region of California. With its constant migrational flux, it is the most ethnically diverse state subjected to complex cultural transmutations” (1).

Anju’s life in America starts in an unexpected way as she could not accept American culture easily. Sunil wants to maintain a distance in his relationship with his wife as he is addicted to American culture. When she comes to know about Sunil’s personal character, she wants to come back to India. He comes late in the night and is addicted to alcohol. She has not dreamt such a life in America. She has to be very careful in using words in front of Sunil, due to his criticism about women. Indian women immigrants are able to form a bridge between two cultures as they are trained to be adaptable and to accommodate themselves to the husband’s families and the husband’s lifestyles.

At times, the Indian culture is transplanted and metamorphosed in the multi-cultural world. Meera’s independence and her live-in relationship with Richard, a look alike of her favourite Hollywood icons initially gives her an illusion of “A perfect Life”: As “A good many American young women have gained sexual freedom” (SS 420), Meera’s notions of a perfect life are an ideal amalgam of intellectual and sexual compatibilities, which she imagines would usher a sense of completeness: “in bed we tried wild and wonderful things that would have left me speechless with shock in India had I been able to imagine them” (AM 74). But the redeeming factor in Meera is her ultimate ability to transcend her physical existence to reach a higher plane of thought.
Sexuality is an individual practice, which if not legitimized by marriage, can be construed to be destructive to the family. So it is not openly talked about and definitely relegated to the privacy of the home. As Abha reasons, “Sex for me was a matter between married people, carried out in the silent privacy of their bedroom and resulting, hopefully, in babies” (AM 234). Meena, however, has no qualms about indulging in free physical contact as she kisses both Abha and Ashok on the cheek, “not something Indians did as a rule” (AM 246). Meera describes that her live-in relationship and sexual intercourse are without caring about Indian culture, “Eventually Richard and I planned to get married and have children, but neither of us was in a hurry” (AM 74).

Anju’s realization of Sunil’s infatuation with Sudha and his restraints coupled with misunderstanding make her think of leaving America and Sunil, but she is unable to do it because as she says: “in some dark, tangled, needful way I can’t quite fathom, I love Sunil more now than ever before” (SMH 209). Anju never blames Sudha; instead she says “Dear Sudha, thank you very much for breaking up my marriage?” (VD 322). Manju Jaidka has rightly pointed out the condition of the immigrant as follows: “The loss of one’s homeland is invariably the consequence of having consciously opted for another . . . having made a choice one [the immigrant] is doomed to accept and suffer it, to hang out there for better or worse. And yet the loss is unignorable: the feeling it brings with it is that of an exile” (12).

Homi Bhabha says in his book Nation and Narration “Nowadays, a far graver mistake is made: race is confused with nation and a sovereignty analogous to that of really existing peoples is attributed to ethnographic or, rather linguistic groups” (8). Asian Americans, like all people of colour in America, can acculturate into American life in terms of values, customs and cultural forms; however, due to embedded racial
barriers they will not be able to completely assimilate or become fully integrated into the American society. In *The Vine of Desire*, Sudha confronts the positive and negative sides of American life through her association with Myra’s family. In her essay “The Reluctant Patriot” Chitra Banerjee says, “. . . Holding that rectangle of red, white and blue in my hand made me realize how much America, the country I had come to as an unthinking, 19-year-old immigrant from India, meant to me. How over the years the values it stood for—liberty, equality, justice, tolerance, the pursuit of happiness for all—had seeped into me and shaped me.”

Chitra Banerjee’s early experiences have had a great bearing on her writing and outlook on life. Her novels present the history and ethnic identity of the immigrant women portraying the realities of race and class distinctions in American society. She strongly opposes racial prejudice. She writes about the devastating effects of racism. She also perpetuates the stereotypes that Americans are violent, self-centred and materialistic, lacking in the poetry of life.

Through Tilo, Chitra Banerjee talks of the boundaries that separate communities and people. Tilo cannot protect Mohan from the racist attack on his store which leaves him crippled, emotionally and physically. Neighbours pool together the ticket money to send Mohan and Veena back home, for nothing is left for them in America. Tilo explains the stories in American air: “The man who finds his grocery windows smashed by rocks, picks up one to read the hate-note tied around it. Children sobbing outside their safe suburban home over their poisoned dog. . . . the teenagers speeding away in their car hooting laughter. The man who watches his charred motel, life’s earnings gone, the smoke curling in a hieroglyph that reads arson” (*MS* 173). In “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” uncle Bikram grieves: “This damn country, like a dain, a witch – it pretends to give and then snatches everything back” (*AM* 54).
Rakhi also finds herself struggling with her business, relationships and the devastating events relating to 9/11. Rakhi says, “We see clips of firefighters heading into the blaze; we see the buildings collapsing under the weight of their own rubble . . . We look at them all, then at each other in disbelief. How could this have happened—here, at home, in a time of peace? In America?” (QD 255)

Haroon, the taxi driver is suspicious of everything American and his fears are finally justified one dark night as he is struck down in a racial assault by frustrated white American boys. “How come your door wasn’t locked today? Did you read or not in India Post just last week how some man broke into one 7-Eleven? Shot the owner – his name was Reddy I think – in the chest three times” (MS 111). Sumita becomes surprised on learning that the name of her husband’s store is ‘7 – Eleven’, which seems quite a strange, exotic and risky name to her, because back in her home, she knows people always named their shops piously “after gods and goddesses – Ganesh Sweet House, Lakshmi Vastralaya for Fine Saris,” (AM 21) as a signal of good luck.

Sumita becomes strangely surprised when she sees the violent spouts of anger in her husband’s heart, when one day he spits up “The bastard!” while speaking of his disloyal and arrogant partner. But for Chitra Banerjee, assuaging the pain of diasporic life is more complex. Jaggi is estranged and racially marked. A timid child, he is assaulted at school for not knowing English, for not belonging: “Talk English sonofabitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole” (MS 39). It is not only in America that the Indian migrants and their children undergo these humiliating and discriminatory experiences, the diasporas meet this kind of treatment in every dominant culture in another nation. In her essay “The Reluctant Patriot” Chitra Banerjee says,
My own South Asian community has suffered from hate crimes and racial profiling. Sikhs in turbans and beards have been beaten and even shot to death; women in veils have been called terrorist bitches; businessmen in suits and ties have been asked to get off airplanes because their skin color made the crew nervous. The other day, outside our local grocery, a man shouted at my children and me, using an obscenity I won’t repeat, “Ay-rabs, go home!”

In Chitra Banerjee’s writings, the struggle of the protagonists is depicted as they progress to assimilate and find themselves stranded in the middle of nowhere, desperately trying for a way out and suffer in the process. This dilemma is the core of Chitra Banerjee’s writings. “The Americans hate us. They’re always putting us down because we’re dark-skinned foreigners, kala admi. Blaming us for the damn economy, for taking away their jobs. You’ll see it for yourself soon enough” (AM 43). Dhaksha’s husband also is referred to as a “Bastard foreigner taking over the country stealing our jobs” (MS 62).

The hungry yearning for “homehomehome” (AM 55) when disillusioned by the stark reality of the coveted American culture makes evident the realization of a lost essence of the past. The ultimate realization is that “the beauty and pain should be part of each other” (AM 56). The woman is also subjected to insidious racial discrimination and has to struggle against this in almost all walks of life. The discrimination affects them from different angles, from the general to the personal. And the Indian-American woman is left a “hyphenated” entity struggling to come to terms with her new life. Uncertainty dogs her at every step as she wages the battle all alone.
When Jayanti arrives at America she stays with her aunt and uncle. One day she persuades her aunt Pratima to go for a walk with her. Unfortunately some boys follow them and throw slush on their face:

I don’t see which boy first picks up the fistful of slush, but now they’re all throwing it at us. It splatters on our coats and runs down our saris, leaving long streaks. I take a step toward the boys. I’m not sure what I’ll do when I get to them – shake them? Explain the mistake they’ve made? Smash their faces into the pavement? – but Aunt holds tight to my arm. (AM 51)

This remind her of British Colonialism and American slavery.

Chitra Banerjee’s protagonists struggle to find solace, assimilating the two worlds; but the conflict that arises makes the protagonists, at times, schizophrenic and disillusioned. This phenomenon gulps down the minds of the protagonists in their aspiration to achieve something in life. In “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” Jayanti worries: “But here my imagination, conditioned by a lifetime of maternal censorship, shuts itself down” (AM 45).

“You come too late, much too late, there will always be a world – a white world between you and us” (339) says Homi Bhabha in The Location of Culture. In America the devastation caused by the terrorists on September 11, 2001 shattered all complacency and Chitra Banerjee has felt an urgent need to write about it. She has experienced sorrow since a national tragedy to bring her community together. In Queen of Dreams, this terrorist attack is explicitly inter-woven into the narrative, since it has shattered their lives for a long time to come. Therefore, she believes that it is important to maintain a degree of cultural identity and strong family bonds that the Indian culture promotes. Her aesthetic stance on multiculturalism reveals that the
immigrant groups selectively acquire linguistic and other cultural practices of the
majority culture without rejecting their own ethnic identity and culture.

Chitra Banerjee’s discussion of violence as a necessary mode of resistance to
the rhizomatic persistence of “The West” as a colonialism of the mind is dealt in her
novels. The psychologistic struggle upon which Rakhi insists may provide a crucial
background against which to understand the affectivity or functionality of the
violence that surfaces in *Queen of Dreams*. Chitra Banerjee explains it in her
interview with Karthik Ramaswamy in *Niruvana*:

> . . . in some ways it’s my most political novel, dealing most directly
> with an event of national importance and its aftermath. Yes, it helped
> me express the terrible pain I felt after 9/11 because, in addition to
> suffering the effects of this national tragedy, my community (and other
> communities like mine that “looked like terrorists”) had to suffer from
> hate crimes that erupted in so many parts of America.

Violence, Chitra Banerjee asserts is the price one pays to remake home out of
the hurly-burly of the unsettled magma between the two worlds. The following lines
of Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* can be considered here: “As the
contradiction among the features / creates the harmony of the face/ we proclaim the
oneness of the suffering / and the revolt” (342).

Rakhi confesses that in America talking about the murders was like talking
about the weather. Chitra Banerjee similarly refers to the pervasive spirit of violence
in the cities. Rakhi represents all immigrant wives who have their own problems of
adjustments when placed in the contexts of cultures at logger-heads. About the
humiliations and insults that the immigrants have to suffer, she says:
I hear Sonny yell, ‘Watch out, Riks!’ But it’s too late. Someone’s got me in a choke hold. I hear him laugh in my ear. Sonny’s rushing at us, an intent look on his bloodied face. He lungs with the pipe . . . Now two men are coming at Sonny together. I grab one, a fist strikes the side of my head, and I learn there’s truth to the saying about seeing stars . . . The man with the switchblade is kneeling over Jespal. Someone’s holding Sonny with his arm twisted behind his back. He’s yelling for help, but of course no one comes. The man raises his knife and Jespal screams. (QD 268)

Sumita realizes that America, with its melting pot theory of immigration, has a healthier attitude towards Indian immigrants. Although America has racial problems, there are ways and means to get legal redress in the courts. She finds the situation quite acceptable: “An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force. This is not to deny the attempt by nationalist discourses persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism of self-generation, the primeval present of the Volk” (NN 1).

Although parents want their children to take advantage of the educational and employment opportunities in America, they also want them to maintain their ethnic heritage in other spheres of their lives. The parents’ clinging to the past, as Rakhi’s mother suggests, indeed splits the children’s identities, suspending them between India and America, the past and the present. This split, however, is not only inevitable, but also desirable; since it is through the integration of their bicultural identities that American–born children of first or second generation parents succeed in constructing their personal and ethnic selves.
The parents remain foreign, the children become American. Unbridgeable gulf is created between the two. The difference in taste, customs and language bring about domestic conflict. As a second generation South Asian Geeta of *The Mistress of Spices* is shocked by the elements of racism that she perceives in her parents’ reaction to Juan. Her parents have “given” plenty of independence to her but they cannot accept her boyfriend. Her Indian parents are rigid in their own old Indian ways and would not grant them the American style of living as much as they feel the pull of their native civilisation.

Preeti of “Doors” does not even want to know about Indian culture. She considers Raj an intruder who has brought unhappiness to her conjugal life. She is one of those whom Indians call the “ABCDs – American-Born-Confused-Desis” (*AM* 185). Preeti dreams of unadulterated happiness, but it is just an illusion. And sure enough, even after a good start, her mother’s warnings become “true” when Deepak invites an old friend from India to live in their house, who enjoys Indian snacks and movies, and neglects the value of privacy and closed doors. So even a love match between an Indian and an Indian-American does not work because of the mismatched values.

The story “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” is perhaps one rare example in which the author makes an attempt to look at the complexity of America rather than presenting a simplified and glorified land of freedom and fulfilled dreams. In the story, a young Indian girl comes to America as a college student with many dreams, which are complicated by her encounter with her immigrant aunt’s unsophisticated husband (both of Indian origin) and the racist slurs of the neighbourhood boys. The eager young Indian student Jayanti is aghast when confronted with a group of white
Chicago boys calling her “nigger”: “I want to scream, or weep. Or laugh, because can’t they see that I’m not black at all but an Indian girl of good family?” (AM 51).

Chitra Banerjee points out through Jayanti that it is not that easy to settle down in an alien land: “Things here aren’t as perfect as people at home like to think. We all thought we’d become millionaires. But it’s not so easy” (AM 43). Jayanti carries within her prejudices that make her judge people according to hierarchies of caste, colour and class. Inspite of her European personality, the Indian pulse in Jayanti makes her realise that the life of Calcutta has its own life and value yet she cannot tolerate the criticism of her friends who are ‘racial pursuits.’

In “A Perfect Life,” Meera, an Indian-American professional woman, describes her concept of desirable men in terms of a Hollywood hero:

Richard was exactly the kind of man I’d dreamed about during my teenage years in Calcutta, all those moist, sticky evenings that I spent at the Empire Cinema House under a rickety ceiling fan that revolved tiredly, eating melted mango-pista ice cream and watching Gregory Peck and Warren Beatty and Clint Eastwood. Tall and lean and sophisticated, he was very different from the Indian men I’d known back home . . . When I was with Richard I felt like a true American.

(AM 73)

Nostalgia or thinking about the past is one of the observable facts most immigrant women and men experience. It makes an individual always to connect himself/herself to the past and relate it to the present. As Tilo renders service to the people around her, the customers remind her of her home – home in India destroyed by the pirates and home on the island of spices. Though at times there is no proper understanding between herself and the First Mother, Tilo wants to go back to the
island. Probably this longing for home and her aspirations for a happy life with family members makes Tilo think of having her own family.

For Sudha the loss of the old culture is neither an exciting nor an exhilarating experience. She is disillusioned on all planes – physical, mental and emotional. Freedom from the bonds of caste, gender and family instead of making her hilarious, leaves her utterly lonely and desolate: “We’ve been running from place to place, hoping for shelter, for such a long time. And finally I thought I’d found it here. Sanctuary, if only for a few months. Enough time to lick my wounds, catch my breath” (VD 244).

The old man in The Mistress of Spices confronts a complex socio-cultural matrix where he tussles to find his space by balancing the Indian life and the pristine self in the American culture. The sudden metamorphosis which the migrant women are subjected to is excruciating for him. Besides, he is encumbered with the onus of imparting the cultural norms to his son. The loneliness of being in an alien land is revealed by the author through the eyes of the first generation diaspora. He tries to share his frustration to Tilo: “When she [Geeta] explains I tell to her, You are losing your caste and putting blackest kali on our ancestors’ faces to marry a man who is not even a sahib, whose people are slum criminals and illegals, . . . O Ramu send me back better I die alone in India” (MS 89-135).

For the immigrant Indians, the past and its associated traditions have their own beauty and assurance, inspite of their limitations. This realization, which comes with the experience of freedom, makes one sympathetic towards one’s own prejudices against one’s own culture and tradition. Dasgupta comments in this regard:

Among the Asian Indians, a new immigrant community, the maturation of America-born and raised second generation has posed a
dilemma. For the first time, the immigrant parents have had to deal with an internal threat to the continuation of their identity and beloved culture. Thus, the immigrant parents have been attempting to ensure the transmission of cultural/ethnic values to the next generation. Since the survival of the community as a distinct ethnic group is dependent on the children’s faithfulness to traditions, tremendous efforts are being expended to inculcate them with certain beliefs and customs.

(81)

Freedom and riches in the West are often bought, particularly by the immigrant, at the expense of the love and support provided by the extended family or the community. Hence the same Anju, who used to complain about the noise and lack of privacy in her mother’s home back in India, because of the host of servants and gossiping aunts, yelling neighbours, and shouting road vendors, now misses the din and bustle in her desolate apartment in America. Indeed, America provides the advantage of anonymity but it also adds the burden of responsibility and loneliness. Anju worries: “I don’t like walking into an empty apartment. There’s something about the air – unpeopled and stagnant, as though it’s from the bottom of a well that dried up a long time ago – that makes me uncomfortable. That’s when the longing for the house of my childhood shakes me the most” (SMH 206). Thus it approves Homi Bhabha’s words in his The Location of Culture: “. . . his existentialist evocation of the ‘I’ restores the presence of the marginalized . . . illuminates the madness of racism, the pleasure of pain, the agonistic fantasy of political power” (58).

In many cases, this diasporic condition involves a lot of confusion and anguish, and may take a turn for the worse. People who are not able to come to terms with the adverse conditions of the displacement, lose their grip on life, and succumb
under the pressure. Anju and Sunil have been separated and started leading their life alone. Sunil’s life becomes aimless. Rakhi feels lonely and scared about her future after divorce: “I’d refinished them in the long evenings that followed my divorce, and it seemed to me that they still smelled of that time, that sad mix of freedom and fear” (QD 23).

The abrupt superimposition of western values disorients the lives of the first generation women as it demands an urgent need to restructure their identities to translate themselves into the western way of living to reconcile both cultures which in turn bring about the mental visions of loneliness and cultural conflicts. Asha in “Meeting Mrinal” feels lonely in her own home:

The nights when sleep eludes me, I sometimes stand in the passage and watch the thin strip of light that shows from under the door he always locks religiously behind him . . . At night in bed I run my fingers with bitter satisfaction over the trim new lines of calf and thigh, my flat, hard stomach. A pleasant tiredness tingles in my palms, the soles of my feet. It helps me sleep, most nights. (AM 274-75)

The tug-of-war between the distant past and isolated present is made further cruel by the absence of family/society. Community and culture are a shelter as well as a safeguard behind which an individual grows and finds his roots. And when that shield is removed, such a person becomes unprotected, uprooted and dislocated. For immigrants like Mrs. Gupta, Lalita, Anju, Sudha and Tilo preserving Indian traditions in America, mean a lot. Having no burden of nostalgia to fall back upon, they are able to acculturate themselves fully with the mainstream society, thereby becoming an essential part of it. Homi Bhabha’s The Location of Culture says,
Our nation-centered view of sovereign citizenship can only comprehend the predicament of minoritarian ‘belonging’ as a problem of ontology – a question of belonging to a race, a gender, a class, a generation becomes a kind of ‘second nature,’ a primordial identification, an inheritance of tradition, a naturalization of the problems of citizenship. (xvii)

The diasporic novelists are constantly in search of answers to questions of identity, pulled apart as they are between their country of origin and the country of adoption. They exist between the two poles of being and becoming and remember their past through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth as their present renders them rootless. This experience has substantiated the themes of international and inter-cultural interface. Her protagonists face a multi-cultural society and exhibit a deep awareness of the social reality surrounding them. The multi-cultural ethos with which they are confronted leads to the struggle for a new life but not a complete break with the past. In “Identity Crisis of Indian Immigrants: A Study of Three Novels” Shyam M. Asnani says,

Though the writer’s individual talent should be rooted in the tradition of a particular society and culture, the real strength of the modern literary imagination lies in its evocation of individual’s predicament in terms of alienation, immigration, expatriation, exile, and his quest for identity. Culturally and even linguistically estranged as the individual feels about himself, the whole question of his social, emotional, ethnic or cultural identity assumes mythic proportions and thus becomes an unattainable ideal. (184)
The fear of being unloved and becoming a destitute in a foreign land is pictured in the novel. It is their helplessness that forces them to stick to the role of a wife. With that the bleakness of their future, the fear of being alone is added to. Lalita’s view is: “I thought of running away, but where could I go? I knew what happened to girls that left home. They ended up on the streets, or as kept women for men far worse than him. At least with him I had honour – her lips twist a little at the world- because I was a wife” (MS 102).

One of the most important goals for many Asian Americans is keeping the culture alive. The discovery of a new self slowly makes Sunil forget his own native culture. On his return to his native land he finds that his native taste and touch have turned alien to him. He undergoes a series of adventures and misadventures to a final self-realization and reconciliation. Living at first a life of what can be called a mainstream white American boy, Raven is struck by a years-long identity crisis triggered by a sudden recognition at an unexpected and the only meeting with his great-grandfather, a Native American. The layers of emigrant angst and suffering in *The Mistress of Spices* are evocative, complex and enduring.

“Exile and nationalism are conflicting poles of feeling that correspond to more traditional aesthetic conflicts: artistic iconoclasm and communal assent, unique vision and the collective truth” (NN 60-61). The Indian expatriates attempt to create identities in the American landscape by retaining, to the extent possible, a sense of Indianness as the final arbiter of emotional relationships. They also forge a viable relationship with the external environment which is so often hostile. Thus the leather-jacketed Jagjit instinctively responds to Tilo’s use of his childhood’s “Jaggi mera raja beta” (MS 122) and takes the syrup she makes for him; Geeta works towards an affirmation of relationships which would involve the various people she loved and tie
them into a common bond of family, Haroun ultimately finds love, meaning and a purpose beyond the cruel racial incident which could have left him embittered and alone. The past, in the form of traditions and memories leaves an impression in the mind of the expatriate and it is in this past that they turn in moments of loneliness and emptiness. For all their faith in the past, for their pain of non-belonging, however, there is a way in which Chitra Banerjee’s migrants are forced to live in a vacuum, almost without a past.

The synthesis of two cultures makes Anju a complete human being and it has given her a true perspective where she can see traditional Indian and contemporary American way of life. In an interview with Preeti Zachariah, Chitra Banerjee explains about immigration “I came from a traditional family and it was an exciting but challenging transition to move to America and live on my own. The world around me was suddenly so different. Immigration was certainly a transformational experience and I tried to explore its intricacies in my early collections such as Arranged Marriage.”

Chitra Banerjee’s work reveals a kind of approach towards life where a protagonist has to work hard to establish her own identity in the society for survival, for a new way of life. The protagonist Anju is really the mouthpiece of the novelist who as a representative of the modern female world does not want to live in the boundary of the Indian male. Though Sunil is brought up as a traditional Indian, he acquires the American habits of living and loving. Sunil found his own way of amalgamating both the cultures and goes across the fixity of cultures.

Anju adopts a new way of life and atmosphere in which she can survive. It is really true that Anju got satisfaction and self-realisation in America – the only land on earth that gives one ample opportunities to work at making a dream a reality. Her
concern is about her mother, so she decides to stay in America. The lifeless paper is the only means to send news. In her letter to her mother Anju describes:

Sunil and I have separated. He wants a divorce. He told me he loves Sudha, has loved her a long time . . . My life feels like there’s a gaping hole at the center of it. I tiptoe around it. One misstep, and I’ll plunge in. I can’t write any more now. But mostly, I want you not to worry. I was worse before. I wanted to hurt myself. Now I’ve decided otherwise . . . (VD 270)

Sudha’s inner monologues and silent reflections capture her deliberations on cultural differences and an immigrant woman’s emotional adherence to her traditional beliefs while intellectually exploring the new avenues opened to her by the modern value systems. There is a sympathetic nuance of her voice as she appraises the two cultures, Indian and American, and rejects the possibility of adopting either one, in isolation from the other, as the only area for an immigrant woman’s growth. Homi Bhabha explains it in his *The Location of Culture* “represent a certain defeat, or even an impossibility, of the ‘West’ in its authorization of the ‘idea’ of colonization. Driven by the subaltern history of the margins of modernity – rather than by the failures of logocentrism . . . in some small measure, to revise the known, to rename the postmodern from the position of the post-colonial” (252).

Sudha decides to land on her native soil with the little awareness that her stay at America has changed her outlook. In turn, her hope of getting solace in her native soil succeeds:

America isn’t the same country for everyone, you know. Things here didn’t work out the way I’d hoped. Going back with you would be a way for me to start over in a culture I understand the way I’ll never
understand America. In a new part of India, where no one knows me.

Without the weight of old memories, the whispers that say, We knew she’d fail, or Serves her right. \textit{(VD 321)}

Sudha describes the American experience as one of “fusion” and immigration a “two-way process” in which both the whites and the immigrants grow by the interchange and experience. There is an inevitable psychological violence in an immigrant’s life which is of positive character and value as it hardens their will to survive. The transformation in them is smooth. She is happy about her life and income “for the first time in my life, I’ll have my own bank account. It makes me feel – finally – like a grown-up!” \textit{(VD 350)}

Meena appears to have chosen American individualism over loyalty to her cultural traditions. Judith Butler’s article “Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir’s Second Sex” says that “vision of the body as a field of cultural possibilities makes some of the work of refashioning culture as mundane as our bodily selves” \textit{(49)}.

Abha decides to use her culinary skills to earn financial independence. Her slow realization that her marriage to Ashok is empty runs parallel with her gradual sexual awakening and the understanding of her own selfhood,

\begin{quote}
Had I been wrong all this time, when I refused to let him turn the lights on as we made love, when I lay stiff and submissive under his thrusts until he was done with it? When I escaped thankfully to the bathroom to wash myself as soon as he moved off me? . . . Had I ever really been myself? I didn’t think so. All my energy had been taken up in being a good daughter. A good friend. And of course a good wife. \textit{(AM 243-69)}
\end{quote}
She decides to take control of fate and look for alternate realities. Sumita, the docile wife who mostly stayed at home with her in-laws, makes this resolve: “I curled my body inward, tight as a fist, and felt it start to sink. The sun grew pale and shapeless; the water, suddenly cold, licked at the insides of my ears in welcome. But in the end I couldn’t” (AM 33). It summarises the embattled spaces occupied by the Asian immigrant women that involve the twin processes of “migration” and “relocation.” In between these two phases is a transitory psychological paralysis which is the consequence of “cataplexy of uprooting” and “shock of arrival” and it ultimately ends up in a “Trishanku” existence (Jaidka 28). Sumita’s case testifies what Homi Bhabha’s says in *The Location of Culture*: “The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation” (7).

The story “Doors” is a perfect blend of the two cultures – Western and Indian. Inspite of her mother’s warning Preeti marries Deepak. Being a lonely child, she is a private person and always wants the doors closed. Hospitality has its own definitions and parameters in these two societies. The cultural, racial and communal conflict takes place as a result of her immigration and her subsequent marriage to an Indian. The inexplicable intimacy between two persons of different cultural and locational background hints at the shared notions of their detachment. Both of them seem to be dissatisfied with their marriage. The culture he is born into requires of him to earn and provide for the future whatever be the cost and he withdraws his love and other emotional attachments from his wife in pursuit of the cultural aims. Hence, he has a vague notion that things are not alright between the American – Indian couple’s home front as well. This is the view which brings clashes between the couple. Thus the extent of cultural shock depends on the individual’s susceptibility.
Similarly, Preeti finds herself a misfit; a woman of her nature born and brought up in a totally different culture and environment could not understand Indian ways. Preeti realises that by insisting on the shutting of the doors, she is shutting herself even from her husband. As Mita Banerjee says: “The new complexities and dynamics emerging in the context of modern transportation, new means of electronic communication, transnational labor, and new (at times “anti-American”) nationalisms have transformed not only the notion of cultural origin and new home but also the idea of America as a multicultural society” (311).

Living together, dating and staying as unwed mothers are common things in a liberated society like America, but in India at least some sections of people still value social norms, customs and traditions. In India even if they have an unhappy marriage, people do not part easily. In the story “The Bats,” the main character is vexed with the domestic violence in the hands of her husband and runs away to her distant uncle in a village. The mother is optimistic about her family life even after repeated blows she gets from her husband. This clearly shows the demarcation between the cultures of America and India. The end of the story “The Word Love” encapsulated both the strength of her spirited struggle to refashion herself and the difficulty of achieving wholeness when one is torn between two cultures. Sarah E. Stevens in her article “Figure Modernity: The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China” says, “Cultural reflections of the New Woman archetype highlight the transformation of a backwards or bourgeois woman into a New Woman” (83).

In the story “The Disappearance” the main female character disappears without giving any reason for the disappearance. She had been a well-bred Indian girl and her husband didn’t expect her to behave like other American women. This refashioning of the self is not an easy task. It is often heroic and one has to pay in
equal terms. Tilo has re-created a little India which boasts of all the spices that ever were – even the lost ones. “I think I do not exaggerate when I say there is no other place in the world quite like this,” (MS 3) she says of her store.

The mistress feels that the Indians come to her store in quest of happiness: “All those voices, Hindi Oriya Assamese Urdu Tamil English, layered one on the other like notes from a tanpura, all those voices asking for more than their words, asking for happiness except no one seems to know where” (MS 78). The concept of self-awareness or self-consciousness as propounded by De Bois holds good while considering Tilo’s discovery of her identity. Though De Bois talks about the relationship between the whites and blacks, it applies to Indians and Americans as well. Gupta comments in his Race and Racialization: Essential Readings: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. . . One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body . . .” (144). The store becomes a common space of exiles belonging to different ethnic groups as indicated by Chitra Banerjee’s creative intention: “I extended my subject matter from dealing exclusively with the Indian-American community to include three other ethnic groups living in the inner city – Latinos, African Americans and Native Americans” (Marcus). Tilo’s cultural ‘enclosure’ is rendered then in patriarchal terms.

Raven gives Tilo the name ‘Maya,’ as ‘she belongs to both India and America,’ and Marta Lysik says “Her identity is marvelously real, for the changing of names marking a dynamic identity, evokes the concept of hybridity” (12). The survival of the mistress of the spices, speaks of her hope of bettering the society. As
Andrews says “the Almighty is just, merciful and benevolent, and that He included all men in His plan of human development and reaching out of protection” (103).

Tilo and Raven could find the earthly paradise which both of them aspire for. Merlin says about Tilo’s acquiring a new American identity and a life of her own choice: “Ultimately, she is forced to rethink her role as a healer beyond the simplistic split between her desire to help others and to help herself. In so doing, she conjures up a new American identity” (207). Through fact and fiction, Chitra Banerjee successfully portrays the characters and their lives in the contemporary American society.

The new order, or the ‘new city,’ is to be inhabited by the offspring of not only one-coloured couples like Haroun the taxi-driver and Hameeda, but also of hybrid unions as represented by Maya and Raven, and Geeta and her chicano fiancé Juan. Geeta herself, nevertheless, cannot be identified as just Indian anymore, “Geeta whose name means sweet song . . . Geeta who is India and America all mixed together into a new melody . . .” (MS 87). Chitra Banerjee succeeds in a big way in welding the socio–cultural theme of immigration and transformation with the theme of love and romance which makes the American dream of the immigrants a realizable possibility. During her interview with Susan Comnions Chitra Banerjee says, “Having explored so many of the stories of women coming over here, I wanted to explore another side of the diasporic experience: What happens to the next generation? That’s a very timely question, because with the Indian community in the states getting older, the experience of the second generation is becoming more important.”

Hybridity in Chitra Banerjee is then made possible only through the active venturing of the Self towards the other. She succeeds in presenting a balanced picture of the world of immigrants in America. Not all of them are winners, but all of them
are not losers. Chitra Banerjee’s compassion for India, her pride in its rich heritage is expressed through the numerous use of stories, popular songs and carefully sprinkled Bengali words as Khan says “that embellish her text like uncut gems and add to the knowing of reader’s pleasure” (107).

With a female protagonist from the Third World, the author illustrates her success in conveying the theme of rebirth or ‘refashioning’ of the self by immigrant experience. Each of these stories portray a different woman at a different stage in the subtle, complex, and traumatic process of becoming a new woman who is at home with the sometimes terrifying freedom of the new American Culture.

Chitra Banerjee’s novels portray independent, introspective and self-determined women who have accepted their life as immigrants and observe the host country with sensitivity and objectivity. The conflict between the earlier generation and the subsequent generation will persist as it involves a complex discourse on cultural representation, nation, ethnicity and home. However, the women with the passage of time learn to become independent and a majority of them refashion themselves by dismantling the stereotypical portrayal of women. This can be considered as a positive sign in the endeavour of those women who are constantly on the look out for some change and transformation.