CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The role of ethnicity in the make-up of the American cultural identity and the need for or resistance to revision of the canon of American culture has resulted in the multicultural critique. Multiculturalism has become an inescapable reality today in the U.S. The advocates of multiculturalism do not seek to submit or challenge the possibility of a unified national culture; on the other hand they argue for a different sense of common culture, one which will recognise the reality of cultural differences, without imposing a hegemonic supposedly universal discourse, on what it sees as “Other,” but which rather gives free play to the possibilities of change, interaction and hybridisation. Multiculturalism has different dimensions—geographical, cultural, linguistic.

Multi-ethnic writing can be viewed as an on going dialectical process of cultural hybridisation, working within, and between subcultures, so that the mainstream culture cannot remain
unaffected. This does not mean that, the dominant culture disappears; but rather, it becomes part of a larger, looser, structure, within which, literary text which foreground the experience of 'minority' as opposed to 'dominant groups,' both present themselves and are received as representatives, even paradigmatic forms for an entire social formation, and not for the ethnic or social group with which the author's text is associated. This is echoed by Reed Way Dasenbrock in his essay on multicultural literature, where he reviews Kingstons's *The Woman Warrior* as a multicultural text. According to him the novel "addresses a multicultural audience, both the Chinese and non-Chinese, and above all imbues the audience with multiculturalism, making non-Chinese readers more aware of, and sensitive to, Chinese and Chinese American culture" (*PMLA* 14). There is in other words a defamiliarisation. Mukherjee or Tan does not choose between writing for a "universal" and a "local" audience, "[they] write to two audiences simultaneously and structure their text accordingly" (13). This has been emphasized by Mukherjee in the following words: "I see my job as a writer, to make my complicated world understandable to mainstream reader" (*Belles Letters* 9). But there is nothing unstable or undecided about this duality, because the defamiliarization makes the less informed reader more informed.
Mukherjee has insisted on being read as an immigrant writer whose literary agenda is to claim the America that is being improvised by newcomers from the Third World. Gurleen Grewal feels that "evident in Mukherjee's self-definition is a refusal to be marginalized as a writer of alien material, an insistence that her themes are central—not marginal—to contemporary American society." (Critical Perspectives 181).

In her talks and interviews, Mukherjee insists on being read not as an Indian, or expatriate writer, but as an immigrant writer, whose literary agenda is to claim the America that is being improvised by newcomers from the Third World. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* can be considered a multicultural text together with *Middleman and Other Stories* and *Leave It To Me*. Asian American writers like Bharati Mukherjee, and Amy Tan, belong to those hyphenated Americans, who are in the process of losing their original identification and reinventing and re-forming a new identification that is a combination of the Old and the New—ethnicity and modernity. This is the multicultural condition of multiethnic American society. It is as the writers Buekner and Ratner opine in the work *Multiculturalism in the United States*: "...at the same time that Americans become more like one another, they develop a sense of being part of a subgroup that marks them as different from one another" (Intro 5).
The foregoing analysis of the novels show that ethnic writers in America translate their ethnicity into their creative writings and it is an inherent component of the writer's creative self expression. Bharati Mukherjee, a first generation Indian American who celebrates her Americanness in exuberant tones, as well as second generation Chinese American writer Amy Tan, both manifest ethnicity in content and form in their fiction. It is, as Dasenbrock has said, "of being of the planet, while also being of the country and a village." "...living from within outward in concentric circles" (94). He is of the opinion that the writers of every country, who most interest others, are those in whom one perceives the uniqueness of their country. That is why one delights at the Spanishness of Don Quixote, or the Englishness of As You Like It, or the Germanness of Faust. Read from this view point, Amy Tan's fiction is commendable for its portrayal of China and Chinese culture: the social history of China in the 1920's to the 1940's; the period of the Manchu revolution in the late nineteenth century; the sufferings of the Chinese women oppressed by a rigid patriarchy, the Chinese culture with its belief in 'yin' people, all become subjects for literary expression in the hands of the story-teller Amy Tan. In this she has surpassed other Chinese American contemporary writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Diana Chang or Jade Snow Wong. The literary forms and techniques adopted by this Asian immigrant to
voice her subjectivities, are worthy of commendation for its aesthetic appeal.

The novels of Mukherjee as well as Tan, are notable for depicting the paradigm of expatriation and immigration and the consequent transformation effected on the immigrant character. Both these writers' preoccupation with their gender, makes their narratives, masterpieces of textual coalition, of gender and race. The woman's experiences, as well as the changes she effects as accommodation strategies in a culturally diverse society is played out in the story of Jasmine, Tara, Hannah, June Mei, Waverly, Rose Hsu, Lena, and Pearl. Therefore, these writers exemplify contemporary Asian American writing that is engaged in an attempt to build bridges that span generations and nationalities, connecting Asian American to each other, to minority groups, and to American society. The variety of South Asian immigrants that inhabit the literary space created by Mukherjee, is an illustration of this ongoing literary endeavour. Old myths and stereotypes, while being reinvented, reinterpreted and challenged, become part of the creative exercise undertaken by Asian Americans to redefine and reshape their identity, within a multiethnic and multicultural American milieu.

The inclusion of Tan and Mukherjee in the study of literature in American school / college curricula is an evidence of their
multicultural status; for multiculturalism, does not subordinate a
culture in favour of another; on the other hand, it is a simultaneous
co-existence of many cultures together, each without fear of
erasure. The literary agenda followed by these writers, manifest
their multicultural attitude. Tan's prose style is simple, lucid, and
conversational and hence appealing to students of literature.
Mukherjee's, rapid, fast moving narration, make her novels
interesting and mesmerizing. Themes of fluctuating identities, such
as that in *Jasmine, The Holder of the World* or *Leave It To Me*, must
be understood as central to the achievement of multiculturalism in
the U.S. The writers who create such characters are themselves
part of the evolving multicultural tradition in contemporary
American literature.

These writers are engaged in the double movement of
appropriation and are chiefly appreciated for making accessible to
American readers the strange world of China\India\Asia. They
employ the Diaspora paradigm, which entails a disarticulation of
identity from natal and national resources, and includes the exilic
imagination, but is not restricted to it. The exilic experience, like
that of immigration, is the condition of voluntary or involuntary
separation from one's place of birth, but unlike immigration this
physical separation is offset by continued bonds to the lost
homeland, together with non-integration into the affiliative order in
which the exile subject is contingently placed. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim would assign the literature of the transnational, the minoritism of a Kafka as example of this. However, the works written from the position of the ex-colonial or postcolonial attempt acts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, *the Kitchen God’s Wife*, Gish Jen’s *Typical American*, share a common set of assimilatory themes. These novels beginning with an ex-filiiative position, plot the acculturation of their Asian protagonist into a U.S society, represented as desirable. They exhibit many of the marks of affiliation that symbolically reknit American sociopolitical hegemony. Read together, they indicate a different although multifaceted tradition of literature written and published within the borders of the United States, produced by Asian women of the diaspora. It is a tradition that includes such disparate works as Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *No Chinese Stranger*; Anna Channault’s *A Thousand Springs*, Kingston’s *A Woman Warrior*, *Chinamen*, *Tripmaster Monkey*, Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter*, and Mukherjee’s *Wife and Jasmine*.

Diasporic narratives placed within a deterritorialized space invite enquiry into revisioned myths, codes, shifts and negotiations. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee relies on frontier myths and the narratives of Americanisation with western locales, mobility and frontier-hero lifestyles. The protagonist moves from India to Florida, to New York,
then to the Midwest, and finally to California. "Metaphorically she moves from East to West and becomes an American "gold digger" (Explicator 56.1.53). In this way, the story presents Jasmine as a new pioneer who will follow the same dream of the early settlers: to travel west and to prosper. By moving to California at the end of the novel, Jasmine hopes to find complete assimilation into the national culture. But her path is full of borders and obstacles, both physical and metaphorical. The act of killing her rapist is again reminiscent of the frontier outlaw who takes retribution into his\her own hands. But this frontier hero\heroine differ from the classical western novel, in that, she is not haunted by psychological issues of repression and guilt which are central to frontier characters. On the other hand, for Mukherjee's protagonist, the west liberates her inner self, so that a chaotic unconscious can be calmed. Her Hindu philosophy and religion enables her to find a new morality that allows her to leave behind those things that limit her personal freedom. Mukherjee incorporates the American West into the novel through intertextual reference to the western novel Shane. Jasmine's departure for a frontier even farther west, parallels the American myth played out in the western novel but with a distinctive gender difference. Shane was a free individual because he was a man. Jasmine, who is given the name Jane by the banker, is still bound by the feminine decorum that society expects.
When she leaves town she does so with considerable guilt because she has abandoned the man who needs her, to go with her former lover, Taylor.

Mukherjee becomes a multicultural writer in combining in her novels elements, both from ethnicity and the host country\culture. The study of her fiction of Bharati Mukherjee is a matter of considerable significance for an Indian reader. It provides entry into the immigrant experience of the Asian Indians, to the sensibility they bring with them and the new sensibilities they forge. The Indian reader back home builds his picture of the life of his diasporic kinsmen from the lives of Dimple and Amit Sen, Rab Chatterjee and Jasmine. Krishna Sen calls this “a two-way mirror” (IJAS 27.1.21). As literary texts, they reveal the impact of ethnicity and gender upon creative writing. In the epigraph to Jasmine, taken from James Gleick's Chaos, Mukherjee presents a diasporic vision. The migrant no longer remains the Picaro of literature whose wide ranging adventures were held together by a strong ,clear, native, vision: immigrancy is a cultural location from where the narratives that write morality, identity, or gender are suddenly glimpsed off-centre from a peripheral space. Diasporic experience is quintessentially multicultural, multiethnic, multivalent, a kind of cultural postmodernism.
Orville Schell’s review of *The Joy Luck Club* for the *New York Times* draws attention to the sociohistorical circumstances of the millions of Chinese who were part of the diaspora of World War II, and the fighting which resulted in the triumph of the Communists, which subsequently lead to the alienation of the expatriate who got cut off from the mainland, and after 1949 left to fend for themselves culturally. According to Schell, Tan’s novel reveals the vulnerability of Chinese women in America, caught up in a cultural transformation crisis. What each person’s story conveys is the terror of a vulnerable human consciousness, torn and rent in culture’s contortions; and although like other Chinese American fiction, this novel also, articulates the urge to find a usable past, it is made up of a series of intense encounters in a kind of cultural lost and found. The structure of this novel presents this two-fold impression, and is reminiscent of earlier works such as Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, and William Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished*. These novels also, “feature distinct, individual narratives, and as a group simultaneously dramatise the panorama of a critical transition in cultural values” (*Critique* xxxiv. 3. 193). In *The Joy Luck Club* Tan organises her material in terms of generational contrast by segregating stories of mothers from that of their daughters. While the daughters’ stories usually involve their mothers, the mothers’ stories tend to feature a
distinct life, involving rather rigid family experiences in old China and their current relationship to their American daughters. The younger characters of Tan’s fiction are the new generation of Chinese Americans who have re-defined their identity within the multicultural milieu. These American-educated young Chinese women are the pioneers of this new society, They acknowledge their ethnicity and simultaneously demand a space within the country’s nationhood. The protagonists Tara, Jasmine, Debby June, Waverly, Rose, do not, make claims of ethnic purity; instead they reclaim America for themselves: they are Asian Americans.

The phenomenal success of the novels of Tan and Mukherjee, both as popular fiction as well as canonical texts is an evidence of their remarkable achievement for articulating their ethnicity and rendering the same through suitable literary strategies. The aesthetics in their fictions offer a rare combination of ethnicity and Americanness or traditionalism and modernity. They have succeeded in creating a legitimate space for their creative self expression, and in continuing the ethnic female tradition started by other ethnic women writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Gertrude Stein, and carried on by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maxine Hong Kingston, among others.

As most of Mukherjee’s and Tan’s protagonists are women, gender can be considered their preferred site for the exploration of
the immigrant psyche: its transformations, alienation, adaptation or conflict. Their criticism of oppressive patriarchal practices in their old country as well as their celebration of the "redemptive" liberationist postures subsequently adopted by the women characters, when they emigrate to the U.S, have to be noted. In these narratives, the stories, codes, and myths about the old world and new world, collapse into each other. For instance, in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* the practice of sati a traditional convention among Hindus, is re-presented as a metaphoric immolation of the old self and the passage into a new dimension of selfhood. Dimple's act at the end of the novel is also motivated towards a release from the bondage of patriarchy. Sita [Dimple] becomes the avenging woman in the diasporic narratives; just as Kali becomes an emblem of the "liberated" woman. The same happens with the Kitchen God's myth in Tan's novel.

Multiculturalism therefore affects synthesis, not antithesis, of ethnicity and modernity, the old and the new. There is a fluid transition and essential identity of the two worlds. This is the crux of multiculturalism. Tan and Mukherjee have come to be included in the school / college syllabi as writers of the evolving multicultural tradition. Their novels exhibit ethnicity and modernity (Americanism). With their innovative prose style, theme and characters, they have negotiated a space within the literary agenda
of a growing multicultural society. Therefore, the ethnic literary scholar voices the transformation brought about by the interactional character of American society. Katherine Newman’s remark best exemplifies America’s changing socio-literary scenario: “Differences produce similarities...which still remain very different” (MELUS 7.1:17).