PREFACE

In Bharati Mukherjee’s novels, the central characters are women who are non-conformists in an alien culture. The feminine experience in Bharati Mukherjee’s text emerges from a deep tension between the desires and aspirations of the expatriate self on the one hand and the dominant oppressive forces of the society on the other. The dialectics of power that textualises Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction is a reactionary interaction of social dynamics and personal identity. Bharati Mukherjee interrogates the authenticity of the self’s discursive image in the face of a society whose limits extend into diverse geographical regions.

The first chapter titled The Semantics of Self is an in-depth philosophical study of the concept of self. If philosophy is the love of wisdom and if wisdom is complete self knowledge or self consciousness, then presumably the best way to begin philosophizing would be an immediate turn to the self. But the issues that it analyses are varied. Can the turn to the Self be accomplished immediately? Or has it already been accomplished unknowingly? The conclusion drawn regarding the nature of Self in the modern context is the plurality of selves. To assert the reality of the self is to face the puzzling burden, or rather the issue of defining its nature. Man must therefore define himself in terms of a community of selves since self does not exist by itself. It is not an autonomous entity but a dependent being. In the context of the feminine self, the following chapters make an in depth analyses of Self in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels.

In Chapter II titled, Self in The Early Novels of Bharati Mukherjee, the major theme, which cuts across is the feminist rejection of and rebellion against socio-cultural forces, which marginalize the newcomers like Mukherjee’s immigrant women characters. Tara in Bharati Mukherjee’s Tiger’s Daughter (1972) is psychologically torn apart between the cultural clash of two
environments as she visits India after staying in America for seven years. Tara experiences a strange fusion of the American self and the Indian self in her psyche. She finds refuge neither in her old Indian self nor in her newly discovered American self. Bharati Mukherjee's next novel, *Wife* (1975) is a feminist probe into the psyche of an Indian wife who becomes maladjusted, as she cannot balance freedom and marriage in USA. In *Jasmine* (1989), the social backdrop is the feudal village of Hasnapur. She migrates to USA to escape widowhood. There she develops multiple identities. Unlike Tara and Dimple, she develops an identity of a new and emerging woman and is positively in the process of becoming a true American, in the multicultural society of America. Tara, Dimple and Jasmine, the women protagonists of the earlier novels are immigrant Indian women trying to establish an identity in America. In the early novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*, the feminine selves are rebellious and maladjusted but in *Jasmine*, the protagonist rebels but finally assimilates into the alien culture. But in the later novel, *The Holder of the World* Bharati Mukherjee makes a reversal of situation, where a seventeenth century New England woman, Hannah Easton, spends her life in India. Thus Bharati Mukherjee is successful in presenting the cross-pollinations of culture and revaluation of American history from a feminist perspective. The Self undertakes journeys from one locale to another in India or from one state to another in America; and each journey into a new geographical locale is marked with the transformation and the re-discovery of self.

In Chapter III, titled *Self in the Later Novels of Bharati Mukherjee*, the feminine self transcends geographical barriers of space and time and brings a sense of global connectedness between culture and female identity. In *The Holder of the World* (1993), Bharati Mukherjee traces diaspora in the reverse order, which is migration from West to East. She takes up the historical tool to trace how American and European identity is shaped in the Indian atmosphere. Like
Mukherjee’s other characters, the narrator of her novel, *Leave It To Me* (1997) is a woman playing multiple roles. The rootless society with an adopted culture infects the equally divided self of the female narrator who is forever experiencing a mutation of self.

In the last two novels, *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and *The Tree Bride* (2004) there is a tracing of family history and search for ancestral roots. In the transnational and trans-cultural space, the self is dislocated in space and time, away from its roots and has a homing instinct. Thus *Desirable Daughters* traces the complex process of growing up of three Bengali sisters, in diverse geographical spaces. In the last novel, *The Tree Bride*, the search for roots and mapping of gender identities is done in both colonial India and in the locale of Postcolonial America. In this novel, she has gone back to her first love, that is the obsession with history and the legacy that she inherits from it. She has given a detailed portrayal of colonialism, in the form of first person narrative of British history in India. The reverse assimilation of some British men like John Mist and Nigel Coughlin into British Hindu is shown. They completely sever their roots to accept and embrace total transformation into British Hindu.

In the Fourth Chapter, *Bharati Mukherjee and the other Indian Women Novelists*, Bharati Mukherjee is compared with four other Postcolonial Indian writers -- Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakurani, Meena Alexander and Jhumpa Lahiri. Kamala Markandaya depicts rootlessness and alienation with a sociological vision. A clear cut pattern emerges from her novels and it strongly indicates that if one has roots, one survives and if one’s roots are pulled out one dies spiritually. In *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Nowhere Man*, she depicts how people suffer from identity crisis and a split of their self when they migrate from their native soil. Anita Desai explores the immigrant experience from an intellectual point of view whereas Kamala Markandaya probes the emotional
implications of social dislocation. Bharati Mukherjee depicts social alienation of the immigrants and the expatriates. In Kamala Markandaya’s novels, the central theme is East-West encounter, with political and racial implications but in Bharati Mukherjee the immigrant experience is subjective, psychological and shows the struggle for identity formation in an alien milieu. Finally in the last chapter, Bharati Mukherjee is compared with the second generation immigrant writer Jhumpa Lahiri. The diasporic consciousness in Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri is compared and contrasted from the perspective of first generation immigrant experience and second generation immigrant experience. Similarly, Bharati Mukherjee tries to strike a balance between tradition and modernity. She suggests search for ancestral roots as a prerequisite for a healthy quest for identity. *The Tree Bride* and *Desirable Daughters* uphold tradition and culture as a remedial solution to the problem of diaspora.

The thesis shall trace the psycho-social and cultural construct of womanhood, a construct which has been challenged, transformed and reinstated by succeeding generations of Asian women writers. The power, the sexuality and the gender identity of feminine women expatriates is problematized in each novel of Bharati Mukherjee. She gives them a mythical framework, to represent any ethnicity in a migrant world. The social locale determines the dynamics of self in its quest for identity. In all diverse social locales, at different points in history, where English, Muslim and Hindu culture intersect, assimilation of exile into the adopted land assumes a celebration of self.