CHAPTER - II

SELF IN THE EARLY NOVELS OF

BHARATI MUKHERJEE
CHAPTER-II
SELF IN THE EARLY NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

The dynamics of self and society is the major concern of Bharati Mukherjee, in her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter*, published in 1973. It has been rated as Bharati Mukherjee's most elegant novel. While writing this novel, she was under the influence of British novelists like Jane Austen and George Eliot; especially in her profuse use of irony and satire to show the complex inter-play of both the Occident and the Orient on the female immigrant psyche. Bharati Mukherjee uses the omniscient author's point of view showing the subtle nuances of an immigrant feminine protagonist confronting the duality of her world. In her interview with Sybil Steinberg, Bharati Mukherjee observes:

> It is the wisest of my novels in the sense that I was between both worlds. I was detached enough from India, so that I could look back with affection and irony, but I didn’t know America long enough to feel the conflict. I was like a bridge poised between two worlds (Bharati Mukherjee Interviewed, *Publisher’s Weekly*, 1989:46).

The protagonist, Tara, belongs to the Indian upper class Bengali Brahmin family. She is groomed with British education and belongs to an upward moving class of Postcolonial Calcutta. However, she clings to her Brahmanical roots and religious rituals. In the second chapter, Bharati Mukherjee traces the colonial history and feudal background of Tara. She describes the pomp and show of Bengali *Zamindar*, Harilal Banerjee of Panchpara who is the great grandfather of Tara. Aristocracy is mapped by the splendour of his daughter’s wedding. Harilal is dressed in a milky white starched dhoti with gold buttons and walks brandishing a gold headed cane. There is an ironical affirmation of a happy wedding in Jane Austenian style. The guests are served *pilau* saffron rice, fried eggplant, fried fish and mutton curry. His daughter, Santana and her barrister husband, inherit Harilal’s mansion. But as a man of futuristic vision he migrates to Calcutta.
Bharati Mukherjee highlights upon this social change in the life of feudal Zamindars like Harilal. At Calcutta, Santana’s barrister husband pursued his legal profession for some time. But he could not bear the colonial subjugation which stifles his feudal arrogance for a long time. Consequently, he resigned from the colonial bar, bought a tobacco factory and distanced himself from the British aristocracy. He was the ancestor of the Bengal Tiger and The Tiger’s Daughter, Tara.

The backdrop of the novel is the present day Calcutta with its focus on Catelli Continental Hotel at Chowringhee Avenue. Bharati Mukherjee calls it “the navel of the universe” (03). It echoes the colonial past where Europeans drank tea on the first floor. It was the venue of the east-west encounter; it was often thronged by the elite, intellectuals and the capitalist class of Calcutta. However, its pavement was littered with political slogans and lined with colonies of vendors and beggars of Calcutta. Moreover the city was disturbed by riots and unrest. It divided the people into capitalists, that is the factory and tea garden owners on one hand, on the other hand, was the rebellious poverty stricken working class mobilizing riots, to win their political demands.

Thus the present democratic socialism was juxtaposed against a feudal and colonial set up where white supremacy is replaced by capitalist power which in turn, is oppressed by agitation of workers who gherao houses and burn buses. It is to this Calcutta that the westernized Tara returns, after spending seven years at America. Roger Baker observes: “Tara’s westernization has opened her eyes to the gulf between the two worlds that still make India the despair of those who govern it” (Times Literary Supplement, June 29, 1973: 736).
Tara is the shadow of the novelist with strings of autobiographical echoes. Both originate from Bengali Brahmin class and both suffer the pangs of migration and displacement. In fact, the author voices her own immigrant and expatriate experience through the protagonist. Through the character of Tara, Bharati Mukherjee explores the multidimensional anxieties of émigré and diasporic life where the problems of alienation, accommodation and assimilation prevail. The personal identity of the individual comes into conflict with the demands of the immigrant’s adopted homeland. Subhendu Mund makes a fine observation of the diasporic writer’s inbetweenness:

... the present diaspora tends to alienate the immigrants from their roots in spite of themselves, compelling them to live between two worlds: the imaginary and the real, the past and the present and the virtual and the material... Notwithstanding the diasporic conflict, the sentimental attachment that one had to one’s homeland was perhaps not imaginary: it kept renewing itself by frequent physical and emotional contacts with the native land (The Atlantic Literary Review 109).

Two significant aspects of the immigrants and expatriates of Indian origin are, some sense of loss and some urge to reclaim, to look back with nostalgia and apprehension. When Tara returns to India, she discovers a country which is very much unlike her nostalgic memories. Jasbir Jain maintains that Tara arrives with a “foreignness of spirit” (JIWE, Vol. 13, 1988: 16) and reviews India sans her native eye. Her social class and Brahmin lifestyle is relegated to the background. With a critical eye, she forms new impressions of poverty, political unrest and hungry children. She abandons her aristocratic Brahmin-class outlook to view Indian society through David’s eye, her liberal democratic husband. Each time she sees the beggars at Sham Bazaar or the social butterflies of Catelli -- Continental, it was always coloured by the opinion of her husband. She surveys the portraits of her galaxy of forefathers and it strikes her that David does not believe in the genealogy of class. It is through this Americanized telescope that Tara silently reviews the political unrest, poverty and hunger. However, she is unable to save her Indian roots. She tries to remain
connected to Indian culture. She is scared she might be rejected by her mother as she is no longer a Brahmin. So she views the new world with irony and satire. Shivarama Krishna points out this “ambivalence” of Tara’s observation (Indian English Novelists ed. Madhusudan Prasad 1982: 71). Her passive social documentation makes Roger Baker consider the heroine, Tara, lacking in emotion. He further adds: “Bharati Mukherjee controls her emotion with a skilled balance of irony and colourful satire”. (Time Literary Supplement, 1973, 07).

Tara is the only daughter of the Bengal Tiger. The latter, a firm administrator of tobacco factory has expanded his empire. This fearless Tiger has magnanimously provided medical insurance, night classes to illiterate laborers. He had also taken the decision of sending his only daughter to America for further studies. This migration and displacement shows, Tara struggling in the foreign school at Vassar. The author registers Tara’s fear and insecurity from a feminine perspective. She wrote long letters to Camac street girls. She prayed to Goddess Kali too. “Tara was seized by a vision of terror. She saw herself sleeping in large cartons, while men made impious remark at her” (43).

Her academic advisor forced her to join summer school. On her way to Madison, she jostled against David, the man of her dreams. She was somehow attracted to marry an American husband. Perhaps, it was an attempt to assimilate herself into the American culture. Bharati Mukherjee, like Salman Rushdie postulates that the expatriates and émigrés are but semi-assimilated Indians who hardly cherish a real desire for a permanent return to the homeland. Hence they assume the status of the dangling man, oscillating between the claims of the occidental and the oriental culture. With this baggage of nostalgic memories and American education, she straddled herself to return home, to the India of her dreams. She had encountered culture shock at America but she
confronts the shock of being an outsider in India. She discovers that she is more an outsider than a native. She is more concerned with complex and confusing web of politics, poverty, privilege, hierarchies of power and class in India. She finds herself imbued with the “alienness of spirit”, attributed not only to her American domicile, but also to her early education at a private school run by Belgian nuns. Tara’s struggle to strike roots, to belong, and her vacillation between two worlds is a dilemma which most immigrants have to encounter in an alien soil. It reminds one of Matthew Arnold:

Wandering between two worlds
one dead, the other powerless to be born.
With nowhere to rest my head. (Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse 85-87)

This enigma of arrival, to the India of her dreams, is another revelation, which is shocking and disappointing. The railway station appeared like a hospital and marine-drive looked shabby. The unpleasant train journey from Bombay to Calcutta predicted the disaster of coming home. Tara ironically and contemptuously remarks of her train companion:

The Marwari was indeed ugly and tiny and insolent. He reminded her of a circus animal who had gotten the better of his master. The Nepali was a fidgety older man with coarse hair. He kept crossing and recrossing his legs and pinching the creases of his pants. Both men, Tara decided could effortlessly ruin her journey to Calcutta (20).

Homecoming to the Bengal Tiger’s mansion was exciting. She is home to a class that lived by Victorian norms, changed only by Hindu imagination. It is the upper middle class, convent educated westernized, society with a hangover from the British Raj. In fact, Bharati Mukherjee herself belonged to this segment of society. The Tiger’s Daughter is the autobiography of a class rather than an individual. Diasporic life has its own tensions. It stimulates, rather urges them to ventilate their subjective and collective experiences, usually in the autobiographical fiction. “In their endeavor of self-expression they make fictions out of their variegated experiences. As a consequence, the fiction tends
to become autobiographical. In her interview with Ranjita Basu, Bharati Mukherjee maintains:

I was writing about the passing away of a way of life that I and many young Bengalis growing up in the Calcutta of the fifties experienced. Many of the characters are meant to operate both believably and symbolically. There is a *nouveau riche* class coming in, and that is personified by one principal character. There are those who have been prepared by their western education for a gracious Calcutta that is on the eve of disappearing and there is a new people with great deal of political vitality and reformist ideas. It is a nostalgia for a Calcutta that has already collapsed (*Times of India*, Sept, 27, 1992).

Bharati Mukherjee has shown the class struggle of Calcutta, between three factions of people: the Bengali Zamindar, like Bengal Tiger who symbolize the rich capitalist class and the *nouveau riche* class with political ideas, is represented by Tuntunwala. The belligerent communist socialists are the working class, resisting the dominance of the rich class by rebellious riots and unrest. To the third category, belonged the beggars of Sham Bazaar, the squatters of Jayonto Chaudhuri’s slums and hoards of destitutes huddled in the railway station. Tara belongs to the mercantile aristocracy which is threatened from within by the aggressive militant working class. Calcutta of her childhood is no more. With her liberal education, Tara is able to record the mutation of time with sensitive precision and observation. However, she is passive to the problems around and is ineffective to deal with them pragmatically. Roger Baker states: “Tara herself remains so ineffectual a focus of distress and is so unwilling a catalyst, it is hard to care whether or not she will be able to return” (*Time Literary Supplement*, 1973, 736).

Tara’s divided sympathies can do very little for the future of the India. She is an unwilling “catalyst” (Ibid) and ineffectual focus of distress because her passive perception is that of feminine immigrant psyche. The dynamics of her divided self struggles to assimilate into the American culture and later returns home to India to become painfully aware of the apathy of a dying city.
Tara’s friends Nilima, Pronob, Reena were a cross-section of Calcutta’s upper class. They spoke mainly in English changing to Bengali in midsentence. They talked about movies, imported gadgets, stereos, transistors, blenders and percolators. Tara finds her old friends materialistic and superficial. They gave attention to her hair, her lipstick, sun glasses but never enquired about the well being of her husband. Tara is startled at their tremendous capacity for surfaces. Calcutta and riots is discussed and she is treated as an Americanwali. She mutely suffered the changes in the city. She somehow could not communicate with these friends with whom she had done her schooling many years ago.

In this context, Tara’s consciousness can be understood with reference to feminist consciousness as understood by the Marxist. Marxist feminism holds the contradiction in our society and to the presence of specific social condition, which bring about a significant alteration in the status of women. When the position of women within the social frame is altered; new conceptions of self and society, come directly into conflict with older and orthodox notion about a women’s role and her destiny. Sandra Lee Bartky observes:

...feminist consciousness is the experience in a certain way of certain specific contradictions in the social order. This means that the feminist apprehends certain features of social reality as intolerable... Feminist consciousness turns a ‘fact’ into ‘contradictions’, from the vantage point of a radical project of transformation(Feminism and Philosophy 23-24)

Thus Tara has altered her social status by getting married to a foreigner. Her new conception of self and society comes in conflict with the old orthodox views. These social contradictions and altered conditions in the city of Calcutta made her hostile to the social milieu. She passively resists them as a silent observer, unable to make any significant changes to restore the old order in the society. She is grievously disappointed with Bombay and Calcutta’s squalor and poverty. At home, she could not participate with religious rituals of her mother. She forgets the next step of the ritual while bathing the Shiva-lingam with sandal wood paste. She has become alienated from her culture. She could no
longer participate in the family piety and sing *Raghupati raghava raja ram*. On her third day at Calcutta, she discovers that her aunt Jhama had lost her husband in cancer and worse still she was saddled with a club footed child. She in her bid to show concern suggests the use of plasters and special shoes for the child. But she was misunderstood, snubbed and humiliated by aunt Jharna; “You have come back to make fun of us, have’nt you? What gives you the right? Your American money? Your mleccha husband” (38).

Tara suffers this humiliation silently. She is not able to communicate with her friends, nor with her family members and relatives. She is also not able to communicate with her American husband about her distressing Indian experience. Sivaramakrishna rightly considers Tara as “a vision of life which is visionless because it is voiceless” (*Indian English Novelists*, ed Madhusudan Prasad, 73). As all communication fails, she starts disliking and rejecting everything Indian. She finds in India nothing to her liking. She visits the Catelli-Continental, the nerve centre of Calcutta; it evokes emotion of escape in her. There is of course no escape from Calcutta. She is tied to it. In this context F.A. Inamdar comments, “Tara’s effort to adopt to American society are measured by her rejection and revulsion of Indian modes of life” (*The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee*, ed R.K. Dhawan: 40).

Bharati Mukherjee has delineated Tara’s Indian experience through a series of episodes and incidents. She makes her protagonist so vulnerable to the extent that things only happen to her. She encounters trauma and humiliation at each distressing confrontation and finally decides to return to America. On the third day of her arrival at Calcutta, she is offended by Aunt Jharna. Her friends do not approve of her marriage to an American. Pronob, Vice President of a match factory enquires about her life at America in a small apartment. He touches upon the weak spot about Indians living in America. He comments: “I
hate to be an immigrant. I wouldn’t mind giving up the factory, but I’d hate to be a nobody in America. How do they treat Indians, Tara?”(59).

This candid inquiry by a friend makes Tara voiceless. She envied the self-confidence of her friends. She knew how difficult it is as an immigrant to look for jobs and apartments. And the great granddaughter of Harilal Banerjee was doing just that in the alien land.

Tara meets another legend of Bengali Brahmin Zemindar at Catelli Continental. He is startlingly handsome, dressed in blazer with shining buttons and white trousers. He felt let down by the society although he had done whatever was expected of him and his class:

He had inspected his tea plantations, attended annual trade meetings in London, interviewed young trainees from the management schools, consoled widows and placed the sons of faithful employees, and in short, done all the things expected of him and his class(39).

He is a regular visitor to Catelli to order coffee and reflect on the deep consequences of fate. Personal failure did not disturb him. He identified himself with the city of Calcutta engulfed on all side by riots and refugees. Like the city of Calcutta, the lineage of Bengali Brahmin capitalist was collapsing. He met Tara and her group of friends at the Catelli. Joyonto Roy Chowdhury considers this group of tall and elegant people as the last pillar of his world. As a senior member, he mocked at their ignorance predicting a revolution. He had that instinctive urge to protect these Brahmin children of his class, especially Tara, who appeared so vulnerable.

He befriends Tara and offers her to take some fresh air. Surprisingly, she accompanies a stranger to a funeral ghat. She encounters a Tantric in loin cloth who offered to read her palm. She escapes by shutting herself inside the car. Joyonto goes into a stupour and falls unconscious. Tara cannot help him and escapes with his chauffeur. Later, he takes her and Reena to Tollygunge where his large estate is occupied by slum dwellers. Joyonto’s estate is encroached by
squatters. There is no compound wall, only rows of hovels and huts made of canvas cloth and corrugated sheets. Tara’s mind dwells upon the reaction of David to this slum. David would have certainly jotted down his observations on a note-pad. But Tara preferred to passively watch naked children playing near the tube-well. A slum girl threw water at her and cried, “chase the pagli” (119). Later, a girl with bandaged hand stared at her saree greedily and started crying “I want that” screamed the little girl,- “I want a sari just like that I want that! I want that!” (122). However, we find Reena more pragmatic and confident. She is not voiceless and passive observer of events like Tara. Rather she took the situation under control. With a notebook in hand, she started noting down the names of slum dwellers with their signature. She handed them to Joyonto for the next eviction notice whereas Tara only internalized the situation, thinking of David to overcome the harassment: “She thought she loved David very much. ....She was unable to convey through an aerogramme how much he loved David”. (110).

At every epiphany, she seeks out for David. She could no longer bear the alienation, in her own homeland. She books her air tickets back to America. Bengal Tiger plans a picnic and visits to Darjeeling in order prolong her stay. But visit to the hills also proved painfully excruciating. She again faces aggression by road-side hooligans on her way to the Observatory Hall. They harassed her by making noisy comments and took photographs of Tara. She defends herself by punching them on their stomach. But she is so upset that she could not dress well for the beauty contest. She comes back from Darjeeling disappointed with no mind to stay longer. But the final epiphany of Tara takes place during her visit to Nayapara. The sexual exploitation of Tara is committed by Tuntunwala, the nouveau riche class with a promising political career. He took advantage of Tara’s western background and took undue liberties with her. She is again voiceless and tight lipped about it. She
desperately needed to communicate but to whom? She finds all avenues closed. She becomes a stranded self:

Tara’s first reaction had been to complain to Sanjay and Pronob to tell them...... But the outrage soon subsided, leaving a residue of unforgiving bitterness. She realized she could not share her knowledge of Tuntunwala with any of her friends. In a land where a friendly smile, an accidental brush of fingers can ignite rumour-- even law suitsuits --- how is one to speak of Tuntunwalla’s violence (199).

Her terrible silence and series of harassment at different junctures piles up to precipitate her decision to return to David. She is unable to express authentically her feelings in her letters to David.

Her voices in these letters were insipid or shrill, and she tore them up, twanging at the waste of seventy naya paisa for each mistake. She felt there was no way she could describe in an aerogramme the endless conversation at the Catelli Continental, or the strange old man in a blazer who tried to catch her eye in the café, or the hatred of aunt Jharna or the bitterness of slogans scrawled on the walls of stores and hotels(63).

She becomes an inert onlooker to the poverty and degeneration around. She experiences existentially the feeling of pathos but it is not available for voicing. Sivaramakrishna considers this as the reason for Tara’s “voicelessness”. The voice represented within her argues: “How could she explain the bitterness to David, who would have laughed at her friends, and wished them luck as refugees and beggars in Sham bazaar, what would he care?” (45).

After each traumatic experience, she takes refuge in David’s thoughts. It symbolically suggests the second self developed in her, which was dominant then. The struggles and trauma of immigration in the alien land had resulted in the making and remaking of the second self. She realizes after a series of disappointment, that the alien land is more a home to her. Therefore she repents to have come to India without her husband and is unable to keep him off her mind:
Perhaps I was stupid to come without him she thought, even with him rewriting his novel during the vacation. Perhaps I was too impulsive, confusing my fear of New York with homesickness. Or perhaps I was going mad (21).

In fact, Tara’s indulgence with India’s poverty is a questioning of Indian situation. It is an innocent endeavor of Post-independent generation trying to overcome the colonial experience and westernization and creating the India of their dreams. In the end of the novel, Tara is on her way to get her air tickets and is caught in a violent demonstration. Joyonto Chowdhury, a symbol of the old world order is brutally beaten to death. Pronob the youth tries to save him but is injured in the process. This proved the death of the old order and a beginning of a new one. The old Calcutta was dying and the new city was emerging. This is a course of history which could not be stopped.

The riots and unrest was a mass uprising against the aristocrats and capitalists. The mob attacks at Catelli was like breaking the palace in French Revolution. The best of aristocrats like Joyonto and Pronob were sacrificed in the riots to protect their class. Joyonto tried to protect Tara and Pronob makes desperate efforts to defend Joyonto. But they all succumb to this violence. In this class struggle the nouveau riche Tuntunwala emerges to dominate, and lead the working class, and to hold the reins of the city of Calcutta. The onslaught of the mass, breaking into the bakery shop, echoes the mad fury of the French revolution. Tara too, does not survive the violence. She is locked inside a Fiat car. We find, “Tara still locked in a car across the street from the Catelli Continental wondered... whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely (210). Martin Levin observes: “Tara’s passage to India is a better barometer of 1972 than most of the alleged non-fiction pouring from the press” (New York Times Book Review, June 8 1975, 17).
The novel ends inconclusively. It is not known whether she is able to escape from Calcutta. Perhaps Tara’s predicament suggests that the process of uprooting from native soil was akin to death. The immigrant self of Tara is still not rooted in the alien soil. Bharati Mukherjee has herself gone through the angst of immigrants like Tara. So Bharati Mukherjee has relegated much of her own psyche to her characters. In reply to Ameena Meer’s question whether The Tiger’s Daughter is the story of a young Indian girl coming back to Calcutta after long been married to an American is more autobiographical than others? The author explains:

...when I wrote, I certainly didn’t think of it as autobiographical. But my father felt he recognized himself in the portrait and there were other people just as well. In Tiger’s Daughter, I was writing about a class and a way of life that’s become extinct. Calcutta soon after changed; the government became a communist government. I felt my world was that kind of Nineteenth century world that became outmoded in Twenty century a class aware of the enormous changes about to come and hoping the changes would not come( Bharati Mukherjee interviewed, BOMB Magazine, V-29, 26 ).

In the same interview the writer disclosed that “in the Postcolonial Calcutta, Austen was handed to us as a model in schools. It was my most Jane Austenian book, presenting a closed, contained society, with irony and affection” (27). Further, she talks of immigrant writers: “there’s a death and a series of rebirth. It is very painful and traumatic discarding the old self The Tiger’s Daughter was written while I was still an expatriate. Then comes a reconstruction of one’s self which is very difficult” (Ibid 27). The anatomy of change of the society and the social class determines also a corresponding dynamic self of the immigrant protagonist.

In The Tiger’s Daughter, the splintered self of an Immigrant and the dynamics of class struggle became the sole preoccupation of Bharati Mukherjee. She reconstructs herself from an expatriate to an immigrant. So also Tara reconstructs herself after a series of traumatic experiences. The making and remaking of self continues within the framework of a social class struggle. The
passive feminine psyche is the silent observer who does not rebel openly but resists inwardly. She distances herself from her social class of childhood friends and experiences acute alienation. Social feminism insists that the transformation of the legal, economic and social structure that includes culture, is a necessary step in the transformation of women’s psychology. Alfred Alder recognized:

All our institutions, our traditional attitudes, our laws, our morals, our customs, give evidence of the fact that they (women) are determined and maintained by privileged males for the glory of male domination (Understanding Human Nature 123)

With a powerful capitalist like Tuntunwala holding the reins of Calcutta and socialist worker striking back, women like Tara, can only be silent observers and mute onlookers. So assaults and interferences by men in the life of Tara occurs at regular intervals. She has a dominating father at home and her husband, David influences all her thoughts and decisions. She resists passively the making of a new self but she is subjected to physical and emotional exploitation by male antagonists like Tuntunwala. Consequently, she fails to grow into a complete individual. She is found cloistered and suffocated inside the car surrounded by male hooligans. This is symbolic of her divided self suppressed by male dominance on the one hand and class struggle on the other.
WIFE 1975

The next novel Wife shows migration from east to west that is from Calcutta to New York from the perspective of diaspora culture. However, in the 1960’s, the USIS pamphlet paints the social and cultural landscape of America as follows. Lewis Perry observes:

In the wake of the 1960’s, some analysts viewed society at large as catering to immaturity and anti-rationality…… taken together, such analysts suggested that the counterculture of 1960s had succeeded in portraying American society as self-centered, alienating, and unfulfilling even though it failed to establish any conviction that alternatives were available (Intellectual Life in America 445).

Further, in a vigorous article of Cultural Criticism, called The Culture of Narcissism, Christopher Lasch opines “the typical ‘repressed’ patient of the past was giving way to a new type of shallow, impulse ridden character”(Ibid 446). David McReynolds in his article, “Hipsters Unleashed”, sketches the contemporary cultural scene more succinctly as follows:

How is man to know who he is today? By what does he identify? Not by relationship to the soil on which he was born— for we have left the land for the city, where we flit like harried vagrants from one apartment to another. Nor can a person find his identity in the family— for that institution is breaking down. By winning the right to enter the labour market, women have found a degree of economic freedom that makes a marriage less necessary -- our divorce rate is one price we pay for technological progress. The sudden equality of sexes creates tension in both men and women, as they realize that their old roles are destroyed but are uncertain what their new roles should be. This is the society of mass. We know everyone by his first name— trying to imply a relationship which does not exist. Families living in an apartment house are more isolated from their neighbors a few feet away than were families on the American frontier who lives twenty miles apart. The individual is never able to feel that he is an important part of some meaningful whole. Our hearts ache with loneliness but we do not know how to talk to one another. ‘Society’ is a word for which all content has been drained. Society does not mean community, only what David Riesman calls “The lonely Crowd” (ed. The Beats 203).

This was the cultural landscape of America in the 1960s and 1970s when Bharati Mukherjee wrote her second novel Wife (1975). Bharati Mukherjee’s first novel The Tiger’s Daughter (1972) is a social documentary on the anatomy of change in Calcutta city. It is perceived by Tara, as an immigrant woman, who returns to India after seven years stay in the USA. But in Wife, the journey is
from east to west that is from Postcolonial India to the USA. A newly married Bengali wife migrated with her engineer husband to encounter the multicultural milieu of American society. Bharati Mukherjee moves the narrative inward to show the encounter of self and society. The individualistic society of America is juxtaposed against the postcolonial westernized Indian tradition and culture. The institution of arranged marriage in India and the notion of wifehood is subverted and put to ridicule by Bharati Mukherjee. In an interview with Selma Meyerowitz she says:

I was writing a second novel at the time about a young Bengali wife who was sensitive enough to feel the pain but not intelligent enough to make sense out of the situation and break out. The anger that young wives around are trying to hide had become my anger. And that washed over the manuscripts. I wrote what I hoped would be a wounding novel (World Literature Written in English 237).

Mukherjee’s narrative is an effort to expose the predicament and anger of the newly-wed wives in a patriarchal set up. It is a story of a young Bengali wife, who breaks the norm of a Hindu wife. She commits moral and cultural suicide as symbolized in her act of abortion, destruction of the marriage bond in adultery and the climatic murder of her husband. Although Bharati Mukherjee is a moralist yet she allows her protagonist to break the shackles of tradition so that it comes close to a critique of feminist ideology. In an interview with Geoff Hancock, the novelist observes:

Dimple’s decision to murder her husband is her misguided act of self-assertion. If she had remained a housewife living with her extended family in India, she probably would not have asked herself questions such as, am I unhappy, do I deserve to be unhappy. And if by chance she had asked herself these questions, she might have settled her problems by committing suicide. So turning to violence outward rather than inward is part of her slow and misguided Americanization. Wife is a novel that is very dear to me (Canadian Fiction Magazine 1987, Vol 59, 30-44).

Dimple’s misguided Americanization starts when she questions her own individual happiness. This happiness eludes her. She had anticipated that marriage would bring her freedom and happiness. Later, she measured happiness in terms of western ideals which she had failed to measure up to, or a
right she had been denied. From a Hindu religious point of view, *Wife* shows the illusory nature of Dimple's idea of happiness and the hollowness of her American dream. According to Lina M Fruzzetti, the tradition especially the Bengali tradition to which Dimple belongs and her progenitors have long departed believed:

In Bengal, the very idea of auspiciousness or blessedness is associated with marriage and married women. A new wife (*stri*) is introduced to her husband's house as a deity, wife and future mother. *Stri* a term carrying a sacred meaning not only denote one's own wife but also stands for Laksmi (Goddess of Wealth) Durga (the mother Goddess) femaleness, motherhood, and womanliness in Bengali (*The Gift of a Virgin; Women Marriage and Rituals Society* 123).

Dimple, unfortunately does not confirm to these parameters. Perhaps she has no knowledge to such purity of Hindu ideology and so searches for happiness and freedom as per western ideals. She belongs to the Postcolonial generation with partially westernized education. One might consider the title *Wife* as a tragic irony. However, Jasbir Jain considers *Wife* not as a "total rejection or ruthless questioning of tradition or a love hate relationship with the native heritage" (*JIWE* 13). Rather Sudhir Kakar identifies it as the:

Psycho-social country of self shared by many other Indians studying, living and working for long periods abroad in Europe or United States...At some time during this self-chosen exile, a more or less protracted confrontation with the self as battle ground becomes almost inevitable (*Inner World* 12 - 13).

Dimple's self is subjected to repeated laceration. This is borne out by the abundance of repulsive and revolting images of disease, crime and death. Rajini Ramachandra says, "The woman who sees such things around and the mind which creates are one and the same with absolute disregard for the sanctity of art emotion" (*The Literary Criterion*, Vol.26, March 1991:66). *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* are records of her confrontation with herself as battleground. And it includes a dual society, one native and the other adopted as battle ground where self battles within and without. The culmination of this confrontation was the process of assimilation and struggle from expatriation to immigration.
When the novel opens, Dimple is a twenty-four years old timid, docile, obedient, middle-class woman eagerly waiting to get married. She has high expectations of love, freedom, fortune, and happiness, and she is too subservient to ask for it in her patriarchal set-up. She is not educated in foreign universities like Tara of *Tiger's Daughter*. She belongs to the partially educated middle-class culture of Calcutta city. Reading novels and magazines had made her a romantic escapist, by negation of hard realities of life. She is not conscious of social issues like poverty, class, and social unrest like Tara. Rather she is immature and shallow one who believed in marriage as liberation:

Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads... Dimple wanted a different kind of life - an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon sarees - so she placed her faith in neurosurgeons and architects...Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love (*Wife* 03).

On the one hand she desired for high status, dinner and parties; on the other hand her traditional conditioning provided her with a role model of “Sita the ideal wife of Hindu legends” (09). Dimple’s consciousness shows her confusion in adherence to western and eastern cultural values. Consequently, she negotiates between western and eastern value system. Mukherjee argues in *Days and Nights in Calcutta* about the concept of Calcutta women like Dimple.

Pramila Venkateswaran maintains:

Indian women like Dimple are culturally constructed and sketches the possibilities for the Indian women to change her destiny. What Mukherjee does recognize in the importance of looking at the “now”, “the middle” of women’s particular realities, the possibilities for women’s liberation which the Hindu imagination does allow despite the overwhelmingly oppressive tradition, and the importance of applying a reinterpreted Hindu philosophy to suit women’s particular realities. (*Critical Studies* 23-24).

In India, Dimple had never followed traditional Indian customs. She was an avid reader of magazines and advertisements in newspapers and follows their prescriptions for beauty problems blindly. What had gone into the making of Dimple’s psyche is her fantasies of affluence, plentitude which is absent in
actual reality of middle class existence. Dimple expected a lot from marriage. The craving for affluence is her psychic need and a direct consequence of a bourgeois background. She is carried away by fantasies of advertisements. She goes to the extent of writing to beauty experts like Miss Problemwala seeking advice for rectifying an underdeveloped bust. Her foolish and romantic search for the ideal man and ideal marriage fails when harsh realities dawn, after her marriage to Amit Basu. Her illusory dream of happiness and freedom is shattered after marriage. Life with Amit in the stifling atmosphere of a cramped flat suffocates her. Her sense of dissatisfaction with her husband and in-laws makes her emotionally disturbed. She finds herself involuntarily breaking into dialogue with herself: “Happy people did not talk to themselves and happy people did not pretend that they had not been talking to themselves. “Dimple Basu”, she repeated. “Dimple Basu is a happy woman”(21).

To aggravate her problem she becomes pregnant. In her helplessness, she has frequent flare up of temper. She is angry with herself and with her husband and she transferred that anger, by systematically and sadistically killing a mouse. The entire scene is charged with emotion:

“I’ll get you!” She screamed. “There is no way out of this my, friend” She seemed confident now, a woman transformed. And in an outburst of hatred, her body shuddering, her wrist taut with fury, she smashed the top of a small gray head..., it had a strangely swollen body. A very small creature with a flat belly. To Dimple the dead mouse looked pregnant (35).

She identifies herself with the mouse and kills it mercilessly. Later she also attempts to kill the foetus growing insider her. She describes it as ‘vile’ and ‘tyrannical’ something deposited in her body without anybody consulting her. She had visions of deformed babies, and induces an abortion by violent rope skipping. This is her first act of asserting her own will. No typical Indian women would have committed such a ghastly act, that too in the case of a first child. Clark Blaise in Days and Night in Calcutta perceived that:
Despite Indian societies overwhelming demand that women be submissive, accepting and self sacrificing, some women have the rebel in them. Within the society’s rigid definition of marriage, personal happiness is derived from husband, children and family. Beneath the collective traditional voices stir the undercurrents of rebellion. Despite the collective stereotypes of women as docile, unassertive and obedient, the ‘weird’ women emerge fighting against an oppressive society (Critical Study 205).

This perception of Indian women is true of Dimple in *Wife*. She is docile and obedient but a rebel in her emerges when she becomes frustrated with marriage. This rebellion takes the form of abortion. She now pins all her hope on her passage to America. She dreams of freedom, love and personal happiness in the new land. Hindu Bengali wife Dimple and Amit Kumar Basu leave the Calcutta flat and immigrate to New York. The Indian self of Dimple encounters the oppression of Calcutta society, deriving dissatisfaction from her husband and her in-laws. In U.S.A. she encounters a new set of adaptations, alienation and isolation.

The Bengali college girl, suddenly thrown into an alien West becomes the prisoner of the Ghetto. “She never left the Flushing areas in Queens” (Bharati Mukherjee interviewed, *IOWA Review* 1990, 24). She shared a flat with Jyoti Sen and Meena Sen in Queens where the Indian community had set up a little India. Amit does not allow her to work during this crucial adjustment period to the alien community. Like a typical Indian male, Amit believed that, “With so many Indians around and a television and a child a women shouldn’t have any time to get crazy ideas” (69). Ironically enough, it is through her addiction to American television that Dimple’s crazy ideas are formed. She develops a distorted American self by a misguided process of Americanization. American Magazines like *Better Homes* and *Gender* educate her about American family:

*For instance, everything she saw on T.V. was about love, even murder and death with love gone awry. But all she read in the newspapers was about death, the scary, ugly kind of death, random and poorly timed. Dimple much preferred to watch T.V. than read. She gave up trying to make friends with children (73).*
Her friends encourage her to take various activities. But she is afraid to leave her apartment and begins sleeping all day and suffering from insomnia at night. Amit considered her problem to be the result of a culture shock. As a dependent wife of an engineer, she has no interactions with American culture. Amit had to be busy with fulfilling the economic function of making money. As for Dimple, television brought America’s cultural representation within her apartment and she bought the versions of American life what they sell. She is neither able to live the life prescribed by American soap opera nor that prescribed by her Indian cultural heritage. She becomes depressed and alienated and starts hallucinating and talking to herself. “Dimple’s problem” says Jabir Jain, “is her utter rootlessness” (JIWE, Vol. 13, No. 2:12). Boredom is a malaise in the life of housewives. According to Friedman:

...the idea that women can find satisfaction extensively in the traditional role of wife and mother - has left women at least middle-class suburban, white, heterosexual housewives, feeling empty and miserable. Deprived of meaningful goals, these women dust and polish their furniture, as if, they were Sisyphus rolling an enormous boulder up a steep hill only to have it roll down again. What these women fail to realize is that their desire for sex is not really their own. Rather it has been manufactured by the media not only as an opiate to dull their consciousness to make them content with a boring existence- but also as a poison to spoil whatever meaningful relations they have with their husband and children (Feminine Mystique 69).

The problems of adjustment that Dimple faces in the New World and the dislocation and displacement of the self seems to stem from her inability to realize that the cultural identity, she has inherited is not authentically Indian. Dimple’s cultural identity is indisputably non-western cultural identity, but one that is irretrievably impure cultural mix, having been influenced by the many changes that British colonial presence wrought upon the socio-political landscape. She is faithful to neither eastern nor western culture and follows a hybrid impure culture. For a woman of her socio-cultural background, marriage can present itself as an opportunity, to choose between two different models, one is the very devoted and sacrificial Sita of Hindu mythology whose exemplary virtue enabled her to jump into the fire at the behest of her husband.
or Savitri who could bring back her husband from Yama, the God of Death. The other model is the modern women for whom marriage signifies not sacrifice but passion and romance with handsome young men in blue bathing trunks at the pool sides of five star hotels. Dimple’s tragedy is that she seeks to become the model Bengali women passive, discreet and adaptable and yet remains irresistible attracted to the glamour and glitter offered by Bombay’s Bollywood movies, as an alternative to the traditional stereo-types.

Another source of her inordinate frustration and dissatisfaction is her husband Amit. She has an unusually high expectation from marriage and unrealistic model of an ideal husband- impossible to materialize in the pragmatic middle class environment. Her husband though quite handsome could not quite measure up to the standard of movie stars:

In those hours that he was away, any face in a magazine was fair game. She borrowed a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes and chin from a bodybuilder and shoulders and the stomach and legs from a trousers ad, and put the ideal man and herself in a restaurant on Park Street or by the side of a pool at a five-star hotel (23).

These details show Dimple’s immature and shallow attitude, her ludicrous and comic nature. It is her gross level of thinking and irrational and unrealistic approach to life that makes her an escapist and later an abnormal psychotic patient. Her shallow thinking makes her increasingly dependent on television screen and glossy magazine format. It provides a romantic escape from the realistic life of routine existence. She equates the notion of a husband to the material gadgets used for convenience in the consumer society:

She wanted to dream of Amit but she knew she would not. Amit did not feed her fantasy life he was merely the provider of small material comforts. In bitter moments she ranked husband, blender, colour T.V., cassette tape recorder, stereo, in their order of convenience (113).

The weakness lay in Dimple’s psyche. She is foolishly gullible to imitate the Television culture. So with a misconception and misguided approach to American culture, she blindly surrendered to fantasy narratives, soap operas –
like ‘The Guiding Light’ and ‘Love of Life’. These Television culture shows, women with complicated lives who became pregnant frequently and under suspicious circumstances were murdered. Then they were brought to “trial and released; they suffered through the Ping - Pong volley of their fates with courage” (73). In the process, she is alienated from her culture and surrounding. Her loneliness is further aggravated as she did not possess a home she could call her own. In India she had shared a flat with her in laws and in, USA she stayed in the flat belonging to Meena Sen which she considered horrid. But this alienation from the milieu is only expressed in terms of passive- resistance in the form of inactivity, indolence and melancholy: “It was this passive resistance, this withholding of niggardly affection from Amit, this burying of one’s head among dusty lace dollies that she found so degrading”(30).

Karen Horney emphasized the role of a person’s environment which plays a crucial role in his or her growth as persons. She argued that:

> It is the society which constricts and impedes women’s creative growth. A woman’s feeling of inferiority, self hatred, and guilt is the realization of their social subordination. The patriarchal culture creates wave as feminine, passive masochistic and narcissistic. (*Feminine Psychology*, 119)

Tara in *The Tiger’s Daughter* and Dimple in *Wife* are victims to this patriarchal culture. Thus they employ silence, passive resistance as defense mechanism. In the White dominant culture, the immigrant self of Tara and Dimple are twice marginalized. The collision of the native and the dominant culture was an offshoot of the feeling of inferiority, and subordination. Therefore, Tara and Dimple were silent women, only employing passive resistance in response to the alien society. Helene Deutsche seems to reflect similar views about feminity. For Deutsch:
The feminine character has three components: passivity, masochism and narcissism. Passivity is central and is modelled on women's role in sexual intercourse and on their "attitude of receptive waiting and expectancy". This passivity is closely linked with women's masochism, which Deutsch defined not as enjoyment of pain but as an attraction to experiences, such as intercourse and childbirth, that mix pain and pleasure (The Psychology of Women 327).

This feminine passive resistance in Dimple results in lack of communication with the outside world and people around her. She becomes an introvert and starts sleepwalking and talking to herself. She broods nostalgically: "If she were to stand in the lobby and say to the first ten people she saw, "Do you know, it's almost October and Durga Pujah is coming? They would think she was mad. She could not live with people who didn't understand about Durga Pujah" (114).

This cultural longing for festivals, traditions and customs is not fulfilled in the USA. So she feels uprooted from her original culture and endeavours to accept American culture, resulting in hybrid culture engendering identity crisis. Brinda Bose has deftly delineated Dimple's predicament:

During their early expatriate experience in America they are from another world and their identities are in question -- the process of finding identity must be a matter of intense struggle with herself with tradition and assimilation of new culture, where race, gender and American experience meet in Bharati Mukherjee, and combat for the culmination of new identity (Question of Identity, (ed) Nelson, 1993:94).

This struggle within herself makes her desperate. She stopped writing home and gets disconnected from Calcutta. Her nostalgic quest for homeland fails. Rootless and discarded, she resorts to imitation and mimicry of American lifestyle. In the process of Americanization, she chooses her model to be Inna Mullick and Mitt Glassner Even she has an extra-marital affair like a typical American. However, she fails to materialize any meaningful relationship with anyone. But this acquisition of American culture is an ethnic concern. And before changing language, dress and behavioral codes; displaced women like Dimple had to battle first for the preservation and retention of their individual identity which no longer confirms to traditional patterns. So Dimple is confused
and bewildered making vain attempts to communicate with Americans like Ina, Leni and Glassner. It leaves her traumatized because of her fragile sense of identity. She is no longer able to withhold, the female rebel in her, and devises ways and means to commit suicide. She is full of self-hatred, consequent upon the total estrangement of self. Her self-alienation and loneliness became evident: “Her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled her with hate, malice an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne” (117).

Despair sets in. She has bitter feelings about marriage which had betrayed her and has not provided all the glittery things she has imagined. She becomes alienated, undergoing the supposed after effects of alienation i.e. psychosis, psycho-somatic disorder, delinquency, melancholy and contemplation of suicide (Encyclopedia Vol-I; 575).

It may be interesting in this context to consider Spivak’s suggestion that, “psycho biography for an Indian woman was sanctioned suicide” (Wedge 07). It is not easy for her to overcome the aloofness of expatriation. As she breaks Indian tradition and commits abortion and infidelity, it gives rise to a growing sense of guilt. Torn by her psychic and emotional tension, she is no longer able to resist it passively and plunges into violence; “Her own intensity shocked her -- she had not considered herself susceptible to violence. She began to feel that violence was right, even decent”(116-117).

She fails as an Indian wife and is deeply anguished in her attempt to become an American wife. She misreads American culture as she had misread Indian culture. She attempts innovation in different suicide formula and devices:

Between three and four the next morning Dimple thought of seven ways to commit suicide in Queens. The surest way, she felt, would be to borrow a can of Drano from under the kitchen sink and drink it diluted slightly with water. She could see herself as a Before and After type of T.V. commercial: human face and feet and an S-trap for a body... slip a green garbage bag over her head and tie it with a string around the shoulders (102).
Setting fire to a nylon sari was one of the seven types of suicide, Dimple had recently devised. Amit failed to understand Dimple’s malaise. He thought it was culture shock and she would get over it. But things worsened, as her suicidal thoughts are gradually transferred to murder of her husband in a fit of feminist rebellion. Thus, there is transformation of the self -- from a passive self to a rebellious and violent self. The violence of an Indian wife is directed at herself - generally self-immolation but the violence is transferred to the male target -- a feminist act of revenge. The murder itself may be ambiguous but is symbolic in many ways of Dimple’s assertion of power at a critical juncture in her life. In this context Brinda Bose opines:

If too American signifies a politics and an ideology that affirms selfhood in particular, then it is quite certainly what Dimple is in the process of becoming the violent transformation of her psyche, are more dangerous because of these shrill protestations. There is a simultaneous fracturing and evolving of identity going on here. In terms of both ethnicity and gender which is true of the experience of multiculturalism (Critical perspectives 57).

Jasbir Jain does not acquiesce that Wife deals with cultural conflict. It deals with a typically Indian situational crisis affecting one’s self – identity:

Dimple has never been able to relate herself to tradition or to understand it. All her actions are geared towards the future and this bespeaks of the main problem: the utter rootlessness of her life.... The sense of time, as it exists in Mukherjee’s novel is important for understanding of Dimple’s life. The present and the past do not interact in Wife. There is a question of the Indian situation of how do the post –independence generations relate to their own country, how do they get past the colonial experience and free themselves from the Western attraction. For Dimple, however there seems no way out, the distance covered cannot be retraced. She is an immigrant, both in place and mind, hers is the foreignness of spirit (JIWE Vol. 13 July 1985, 17).

The murder is enacted in a cold blooded manner; a foolish enactment of Television serial:

...She was not sure any more what she had seen on T.V. and what she had seen in the private screen of three A.M.....And she said very loudly to the knife that was redder now than it had ever it been when she had chopped chicken and mutton with it in the same kitchen and on the same counter,... Women on television got away with murder (212-213).
In this way she kills her husband. It reminds us of Bharati Mukherjee’s own words, that “anger of newly married wives has washed over the manuscript of Wife” (Bharati Mukherjee interviewed, *WLWE* 237). Again in another interview, Bharati Mukherjee says, there isn’t a role model for Jasmines or the Dimple. They have to invent roles, survive and revise as best as they can. (Bharati Mukherjee interviewed, *The IOWA Review* 23). While they survive and revise, they remain for a while suspended between two worlds, until they have to choose between them, in order to find a space to inhabit. The new world in which they would intervene and negotiate holds promise for a new selfhood as well as new battles against marginalization. Self assertion however is a power that women are only beginning to enjoy. In this way, an Indian wife tries to emulate American violence in her own life, undergoing a violent transformation of self. The passage from expatriation to immigration is a passage from passive suffering to violent action. The intense suffering of a young immigrant whose dreams are shattered goes through four stages of transformation that was rejection, depression, rebellion (violence) and reconstruction. Dimple too rejects her home, tradition, husband and in-laws. Thereby, she goes through guilt and depression. The loneliness and alienation is the result of depression and it led her to violence and rebellion. Last was the stage of reconstruction in the form of self assertion to forge a new self and build a new life. Mukherjee provided her heroine with a weapon to escape the Ghetto. She is in search of new happiness in the new world. If she had been at Calcutta, she would have chosen suicide. So a new Self culminates in a new society. In an interview with Connell, Gearson and Grimes, when she was asked whether her characters in *Wife* are the manifestations of the darker side of psychological transformation and not its positive benefits, Bharati Mukherjee says that:
She thinks of herself as a very comic writer and that too finally in a bizarre way. My Self is meant to be optimistic. Dimple, if she had remained in Calcutta, would have gone into depression and she would have found a very conventional way out for unhappy Bengali wives -- suicide. But in the US, she suddenly lives to ask herself “self” oriented questions. Am I happy? Am I happy? And that to me is progress. So instead of committing suicide, turning the society- mandated violence inward, she, in a misguided act, kills the enemy. So, of course I am not approving of murder. It’s meant to be a positive act, self assertive (BM interviewed, IOWA Review, 20).

Thus Dimple’s problem can be understood in terms of radical feminism. The radical feminist believes that feminist consciousness was the consciousness of victimization. To apprehend oneself as victim is to be aware of an alien and hostile force which is responsible for the blatantly unjust treatment of women and for a shifting and oppressive system of sex roles. This hostile power is for feminist ‘society’ or the ‘system;’ for others, it is simply, ‘men’. This consciousness also brings a sense of solidarity with other victims. In fine, feminist consciousness is the consciousness of being radically alienated from the world and often divided against itself. It perceived women as a being who sees herself as a victim and whose victimization determines her being-in-the world as resistance, wariness and suspicion. Women is an outsider to her society, an alien even to the people she loves, and to the still unemancipated elements in her own personality. She is not at the centre of the societal wheel but often moves in the periphery. In other words, she is a marginalized being. Dimple too harbours a consciousness of victimization. The hostile power she considers is her husband therefore she feels alienated from her world and resorts to female rebellion and violence. John Cocks in the essay, “Some Critical Reflections on Radical Feminism” says that:

Radical Feminism provides itself existing in opposition to patriarchy, affirming the very thing the fathers devalue and degrade. Cocks was profoundly worried by radical feminism because, in its existence as a counter culture, it defines itself in opposition to male culture, thereby defining itself that culture opposition to male culture, as a norm from which it deviates. Cocks found fault with radical feminism for doing itself forever to rebellion, although reversal of patriarchal patterns was essential in women’s progress towards liberation. He believes that ‘dominant culture and the counter culture engage in a curious collusion in which a rebellious feminism takes up its assigned position at the negative pole (Politics and Society 84).
Dimple rebels against male culture by having an extra marital affair, thus toeing the path of the radical feminists. Thus, Bharati Mukherjee from a feminist perspective has provided a weapon in the hands of her protagonist to rebel against the male culture. In a fit of neurotic fury she kills her husband with a kitchen knife.

Anita Desai’s *Cry the Peacock* has striking similarity with Bharati Mukherjee *Wife* with regard to the central episode. Maya in Anita Desai’s novel as well as Dimple in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*, go to the extreme extent of killing their husbands. This final act is the culmination of various factors which engender violence. S. Sujatha arraigns Dimple’s anti-social act as the consequence of culture shock and Maya’s murder as an act of tragic isolation: Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock* and Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* present the theme of disintegration with variations no doubt... Dimple’s predicament is that of an individual enmeshed in the limbo of cultural shock, Anita Desai’s protagonist faces the predicament of the tragic isolation of the individual and consequent sense of the absurdity of human life (*Critical Symposium* (ed) R.K. Dhawan: 70). Maya and Dimple have singular similarities and distinct differences. Both are isolated and alienated psychological patients and unhappiness in marriage is etiology of their malady. Maya suffers from father fixation and regression to childhood memories. But Dimple suffers from depression and hallucination, and their alienation and loneliness is existential in nature. Dimple’s alienation stems from expatriate experience, weakness in her own psyche – Maya loves nature which is regenerative where as Dimple is shallow in her attitude. However, both murder their husbands mercilessly, in a cold blooded manner. Maya pushes her husband Gautama from the terrace as he obstructs the moonlight from her view. On the other hand Dimple, the Indian wife, lives soap opera Life (MS 83). While her husband is having his breakfast:
... she sneaked up to him and chose a spot, her favorite spot just under the
hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner and she drew an
imaginary line of kisses because she did not want him to think she was the
impulsive, and foolish sort who acted like a maniac just because the husband
was sufferings from insomnia. She touched the mole very lightly and let her
fingers draw a circle around the delectable spot, then she brought her right
hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven
times, each time a little harder (Wife 212).

One wonders if Dimple’s stab seven times, is some kind of weird re-
enactment of the marriage rituals where the couple takes seven steps together.
She seems to be symbolically destroying the marriage bond. Thus both Maya
and Dimple are examples of feminist rebellion. Maya confronts Indian society
but Dimple in American society commits the same kind of feminist self-
rebellion. Maya and Dimple represent the soft, docile and pliant Indian women
with a weird rebel hidden inside them. Indian women of Hindu imagination
suppress their hate, malice and frustration passively but Indian women of post-
colonial generation, partly westernized change from passive to violent
protestations. They break social rules, customs and traditions to rebel against
the oppression of society. Dimple is a maladjusted social misfit, with a failed
assimilation to American society. However, from a feminist perspective, she
displayed self-assertion of will by killing the enemy that came between her
freedom and love. She is society’s criminal as she breaks social rules, defiantly
aborts a child, commits infidelity and murder. Her deference shows courage and
anger. She boldly says, “Women on television got away with murder” (213).
Perhaps, she expects to escape the clutches of society by transforming herself
from a passive self to a violent self. Bharati Mukherjee admits that a reinvention
of self takes place to recreate a new self, to celebrate feminist rebellion and
exuberance of immigration so that can proudly claim to American Society “I am
one of you” (Bharati Mukherjee Interviewed, New York Times Book Review 28).
JASMINE (1989)

Jasmine limns out the variegated moods of expatriation – nostalgia, frustration, desperation and despondency like the other novels here too, diasporal dream figures prominently. The novel evinces a divergent rendering of the “schism” in self – triggered identity crisis. Her universe is replete with migration and exile in the west. The self journeys from one locale to another in India or from one state to another in America. So ‘journey’ as a metaphor is a central motif and each journey into a new geographical locale is marked with transformation and re-discovery of self. This universe of migration is described appropriately in the epigraph of the novel :

The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked, and broken up, the twisted, tangled and intertwined (James Gleick’s “Chaos States”).

The new geometry, in fact presents the universe of migration and cross cultural movements that has no centre. In fact the peripheral vision and cultural location, is ‘pocked and pitted’, broken up and twisted. This tangled vision is the vision of Diaspora where an immigrant travels her journey from migration to assimilation. The path of cross-cultural journey is never smooth. It is quintessentially multicultural, multiethnic, multivalent, a kind of cultural postmodernism that cannot be comprehended in terms of clear cut alternatives. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Bharati Mukherjee observes:

Yet immigrants lead dangerous lives, they cannot take shelter in traditional values and they also do not know the rules of the dominant culture. Thus new comers in North America lead raw, raucous lives which contrast strongly with the small crisis of settled sub-urban lives. (Conquering America with Bharati Mukherjee, “video cassette”.

According to Jaiwanti Dimri, “Dimple and Jasmine are antithetical to each other. Jasmine takes over from Dimple... She is running away for life not escaping from life which is again a positive step” A Critical Symposium, (ed) Dhawan: 74). Dimple, instead tried to run away from life offered by the new
world and takes refuge in Television world. Violence is integral to immigrant’s life. Dimple takes the drastic step to kill her husband and the novel ends with murder. But Jasmine began her sojourn as an illegal immigrant by murdering Half-face. The earlier novel ends in murder and the later novel begins with murder and defiance. Jyoti is a kind of rebel and non-conformist from her childhood itself. Her rebellion against fate starts with her battle against widowhood in the feudal postcolonial society of Hasnapur. The village astrologer predicts exile and widowhood to seven year old Jyoti. She is the star student of the village -- school master. She learns English and marries a city -- bred young man Prakash. Later, to escape the excruciating condition of widowhood, in Indian society, she plans to escape to America. Such is her power of determination to fight against fate and prophecy. Jasmine combats her rebellious self against a patriarchal feudal culture. Later her immigrant self, has to battle against the dominant culture of the white, for assimilation and acceptance.

The social backdrop in the novel brings alive the independence era, the violence of partition, the bloody communal riots between Hindus and Muslims and the Khalistan dissidence. Jasmine’s parents are refugees from Lahore, with anguished memories of the partition, which forces them to leave their ancestral home and later to flee to Punjab. The fragmentation of the nation and family as well as the haunting journey from terror to refuge has seeped into Jasmine’s subconscious: ...but the loss survives in the instant replay of family story: forever Lahore smokes, forever my parents flee".(41) Historical conflicts sparked by religious intolerances, directly or indirectly determine the problematic constitution of Jasmine’s shifting individuality her transformation of self. From the beginning, Bharati Mukherjee has delineated Jyoti of Hasnapur as a rebel against blind belief and superstition. As a girl, Jyoti tries to raise herself above such blind beliefs in fate. But the astrologer admonished her about the power of fate: “Fate is Fate. When Behula’s bridegroom was fated to die of
snakebite on the wedding night, did building a steel fortress prevent his death? A magic snake will penetrate solid walls when necessary (04).

In the feudal village while scavenging for firewood, Jyoti gets a star shaped wound on her forehead. The scar becomes her third eye. Through an archetypal image (Shiva's third eye) - Jyoti declares; “Now I am a sage” (03). She is able to peep into invisible worlds, and survive with pain and hope. It is as if she has swallowed the cosmos whole. She puts her pain as an immigrant emphatically; “We have seen the worst and survived. Like creatures in fairy tales we’ve shrunk and we’ve swollen and we’ve swallowed the cosmos whole” (240). The early sign of female rebellion is seen through another significant image -- the carcass of the mad dog and the way she killed it:

Suddenly my finger scraped the soft waterlogged carcass of small dog... The stench stays with me. I’m twenty-four now. I live in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa, but every time I lift a glass of water to my lips, fleetingly I smell it. I know what I don’t want to become (05).

Her heroic encounter with the mad dog using a staff, gave her a “buzz of power” (54). With a modern, unconventional outlook, she breaks the norms of Hasnapur feudal society. She rejects the marriage almost finalized by her father and grandmother. Later she is taken to task for breaking rules:

If you had married the widower in Ludhiana that was all arranged,... If you had checked the boy’s horoscope and not married like a Christian in some Government office... If you had waited for the man I picked, ... none of this would have happened. God was displeased. God sent that Sardarji boy to do that terrible thing. Dida, I said, if God sent Sukkhi to kill my husband then I renounce God, I spit on God (98).

Jasmine learns to identify permissible rebellion against the norms of society which she will later exploit to her advantage. Jyoti proves herself to be the antithesis of village girls who have no minds of their own, “Village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go” (46). Jyoti has a singular mind and confronts herself rebelliously against an oppressive male dominated patriarchal society. She declares, “I know what I
don’t want to become” (05). Her father lays down the patriarchal design for a daughter—“that bright ladies are bearing bright sons that is nature’s design (51). She counters this statement rejecting the role of a woman to give birth to a son. In fact she emphatically declares what she wants to become.

...I said, “I want to be doctor and set up my clinic in a big town: “Like the mustached doctor in the bazaar clinic, I wanted to scrape off cataracts, fit plastic legs on stumps, work miracles. My father gasped. “The girl is mad! I’ll write in the back of the dictionary” The girl is mad!” (51).

Jyoti works out her rebellion by choosing her own husband and then decides to migrate to America to fulfil her husband’s dreams. Like a true devoted wife, she tries to combat fate: “If we could just get away from India, then all fates would be canceled. We’d start with new fates, new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted. We’d be on the other side of the earth, out of God’s sight” (85).

Thus starts the quest for a journey to the unknown land. It is intimidated with the assassin’s bullet and her husband’s death. But she again fights back and escapes her fate as a widow. She prepares fake passport to commit sati to materialize her husband’s unrequited ambition. While she prepares for an outward journey— as awakening of the self — an inward quest, an unfolding of the self. The twin journey helps her to define, “what a girl from swampy backwaters could accomplish” (160). In an essay entitled: “Image of Spiritual Power in Woman and Fiction” Carol P. Christ suggests that:

New literature created by women has both a spiritual and a social dimension? It reflects both women’s struggle to create new ways of living in the world and a new harmony of the great powers that provide orientation in the world.”(Ed. Charlene Sprentank, The Politics of Women’s Spirituality 328).

Women’s social quest concerns women’s struggle to gain respect, equality and freedom in society. In the social quest, a woman begins in alienation from the human community and seeks new modes of relations and action in society” (The Politics of Women’s Spirituality 329).
Thus Jasmine alienates herself from the feudal fatalistic pattern of life and embarks upon the American dream of freedom. In the struggle to establish herself in society, she undergoes a drastic transformation. Further, Carol P. Christ says, “Women’s spiritual quest concerns women’s awakening to the depths of soul...“(Ibid, 329). Thus, Jasmine takes many births, many roles and many selves fulfilling the Hindu concept of reincarnation. Bharati Mukherjee presents this Hindu notion of rebirth and reincarnation through the metaphor of a clay pitcher. In fact it is Indian poet Kabir’s concept which she has borrowed: “The villagers say when a clay pitcher breaks, you see the air inside it is the same as the air outside” (15). Kabir refers to the merging of the self into the absolute — the Atma merging into the Paramatma. Mukherjee talks of the empty pitcher (body, death and birth) with only air inside and outside, explaining the concept of being born again and again in the same life.

Fictional narrative like Jasmine is about cultural and mythical journeys representing the Hindu philosophy of rebirth and regeneration. Bharati Mukherjee understood migration and cross cultural journeys as few other writers do. This understanding stems from her diasporic imagination. In this context, C. Sengupta observes:

The world is in motion, as never before, with migration altering the trajectory of millions of lives. In Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee has put a human face on the admixture of fate, change and will, that mask this modern journey (The Broken Pitcher and the Third Eye 181).

In the personal history of the narrator, journey as a metaphor in the novel stood for, the ever moving regenerative process of life. Jasmine presents a women’s journey from Hasnapur, Punjab to California, making and remaking many selves. Mukherjee invests her novel with the form of Hindu bildungsroman, where the body is merely a shell for the inner being’s journey towards a more enlightened and empowered subjectivity. But the material self exists in the site of oppression and transformation. Mukherjee shapes her heroine as a ‘fighter and adaptor’ who is perpetually on the move. And in this
state of flux, she is in the process of remaking herself and her destiny. The novel is set in the seventies and eighties, when the violent separatist demands of the militant Sikhs, forced many Hindus to migrate from Punjab. *Jasmine* centers on the experience of Jyoti – a teenage Hindu widow, who travels all the way, from Hasnapur, her feudalistic village to America. It is a mythical journey from Hasnapur, Jullunder, Florida, New York, Iowa and ends in the free land of California. Bharati Mukherjee has carved out the assimilation of Third World immigrants into the American melting pot, which is itself enriched by those who describe themselves as New Pioneers. Jasmine is one of those pioneers, a survivor with courage. Using flashbacks and cross-cuts, the novel forge ahead weaving the story of heroine’s life from her early days in Hasnapur to her extraordinary adventure in the United States. The mythical journey of assimilation and transformation in the American landscape has voices like this:

I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon of ride I’m on. Down and down I go, where I’ll stop God only knows (123).

The reader is led from a poor farming village in Punjab, to a city in India (Jullunder), to the swamps of Florida to an Indian enclave in Queens, to Columbia University in Upper Manhattan, and to Iowa, a farming town -- all sharply and vividly sketched and then again towards California. Bharati Mukherjee reinvents the women centered oral tale, telling the tale of Jasmine, in triple voice strands, in the complex triad, Jyoti-Jasmine-Jane Persona. The novel begins with the silent voice of Jyoti. In the traditional feudalistic Punjab of fatalism, casteism and classicism, the power of speech is usurped by the male figures in the family centered society. The dominant voice of father, brothers and eventually of husband suppresses the female voice. It becomes quite difficult for woman like Jasmine to break up the established husband-wife relationship. “Despite all kinds of anguish and tormentations, they lack the voice to say the great ‘No’, they submit and yield to the Patriarchal hegemony: Day and night, women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family:
in childhood to the father in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons... Even though her husband becomes destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshiped as God” (Hunter College Women’s Studies: 68). Gradually her silent female voice is taught to argue and fight back and later, she empowers her voice to speech after getting married to Prakash, the city man. However with Prakash’s brutal death, Jasmine intends to fight and escape her fate but she plunges into self-exile. Then she undertakes illegal entry into the Florida backwater. It was the tale of a universe “pitted, pocked, and broken up” (epigraph) -- a tale of struggle, violence, wonder, despair, survival and transformation.

During this phase, Jasmine recasts her role as the observant traveller, the restless sojourner, as well as the intrepid adventurer. Hurtling from the confines of an Indian widow’s bleak imprisonment, she runs into the harsh brutality of illegal entry, rape and murder in America. The horror of silence is literalized in Jasmine’s cutting of her tongue like Goddess Kali; she pours blood from her mouth on Half-Face, the modern avatar of evil. She commits murder of Half-face after he rapes her. Jasmine’s murder of Half-Face has a purpose unlike Dimple the protagonist of the novel Wife. Dimple loses sight of reality and escapes into the world of television. She killed her husband neurotically in a state of madness. But Jasmine had a goal in sight. She quickly removes all thoughts of self-destruction and murders Half-Face, in the spotless bathroom of the hotel, where he had raped her. Again she prepares herself for another mission of burning her husband’s suit under the palm tree of the college campus in Thampa. It is a bizarre goal, but one born out of despair, anger and frustration, . The voiceless Jyoti and tongueless Kali are both silent woman,-- “Postcolonial products as well as critics of those aspects of both traditional and ironically, even modern cultures, “specifically located in the arena of female sexuality,” that are “most oppressive for women”.(Katracek,168). Neither passive submission nor active violence is the norm by which Jasmine seeks to define her
identity. It is in Lillian Gordon's home, a place of refuge for outcasts and illegal aliens. Jasmine recovers, in successive stages, her voice and her self. Her passage, as she journeys, both literally and symbolically across the landscape of America was no longer any woman's passage. It is the passage of an immigrant woman, specifically an illegal postcolonial immigrant woman. Initially she must by choice become voiceless, invisible and indistinguishable adapting an American way of talking and walking while she kept the remnant of her past self, hidden within her. Straddling two cultures, Jasmine undertakes a journey that involves physical, emotional and a strongly intellectual awakening.

From the illegal entry to the 'day-mummy' stage of life, the voice of Jasmine was fraught with questions, doubts and laconic rejection. She is reduced to deep depression and total silence during her stay at the Vadhera household. The Vadheras create an artificial India, sticking to regimental superficial cultural mores, watching only Hindi movies; a pathetic clinging to commercialized form of Hindu culture. Jasmine is treated like a widow and she tries to release herself from this constricted and suffocating atmosphere. Her next hub is with Hayes household as a day mummy to Duff. This period is the most restful -- emotionally, intellectually and psychologically. But it is also a phase of minute observation of complex deliberations of American life. Wylie and Taylor treat her as an individual giving her freedom. Unlike the fake Professor Vadhera, she discovers Taylor to be a true Professor and at once feels impressed by his ways of serving biscuits to a servant: "I fell in love with what he represented to me, a professor who served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her, and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking" (167). Such an affiliation was soon followed by a sense of self - identification: "I wanted to know the way such a man lives in this country. I wanted to watch, be a part of it" (Ibid).
As she educates herself about American family life, she finds there is no male dominance, and fate and destiny do not influence the life of American couple. In fact, to her shock, she witnesseeed an American woman Wylie, choosing to leave Taylor for another man Stuart in search of happiness. This is the first time she confronts the reality of American society. She discover that nothing lasts in America and reflects:

We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won’t disintegrate (181).

Jasmine’s inner monologues and silent reflections capture her deliberations on cultural differences. She dwindles between an immigrant women’s adherence to her traditional beliefs, while exploring new avenues opened to her by American value system. She systematically appraises the two cultures, Indian and American and rejects the possibility of adopting either in isolation of the other. Jasmine, like Mukherjee and other immigrants, contemplates on the ironies of exclusive assimilation or preservation. She compares Vadhera’s total preservation of Indian life stage, as the fear of losing everything, a clutching to the old culture. On the other hand, the Hayes family confirms for Jasmine that in America, nothing really lasts forever.

However, the ironies of life pursued Jasmine in the reappearance of the Sikh assassin Sukwinder who had murdered her husband in India. Jasmine is reminded of her illegal status, and cannot call the police or seek justice. In an earlier instance she could not take help when Half-Face had raped her. She again becomes silent and seeks sanctuary away from New York in Iowa. Her journey to Iowa and her change of name to Jane is indicative of a slow but steady immersion into the mainstream of American culture. It seems a psychological mode of survival for Jane, drawing tentative parallel between Iowa and Punjab. From Jyoti to Jasmine from adventurous Jase to plain Jane had been an uneven and eventful, odyssey. The protagonist’s name changes
with her places of residence which becomes metaphors for an immigrant woman’s process of uprooting and re-rooting.

In order to express this complex process, Bharati Mukherjee uses philosophical underpinnings. On the level of narrative, it is to re-encode American cultural process in terms of Indian cultural motifs. This cultural assimilation, Mukherjee suggests, can be shown through literary discourses like Diaspora. And this process of cultural socialization involves a fusion of cultural myths which has been mutually paradigmatic. In this perspective, Jasmine’s transformation of self and names is centrally based upon the Hindu belief of reincarnation. Further, this Hindu belief is viewed as an adios of American dream of reinventing identities as projected through such icons as the ‘New World’, the ‘New Frontier’, the ‘New Generation’ and the ‘New Women’. In an interview with Michael Connel, Gierson and Grimes, Bharati Mukherjee reaffirmed her belief in reincarnation:

I always found it hard to cope with what are the basic tenets of Hinduism. But yes, if you ask me casually as a believing Hindu, my way of dealing with it, has been, to say, life in my novel Jasmine, we are reinventing ourselves a million times.... I have been murdered and reborn three times. (Iowa Review, 1990: 18).

For the perception of violently changing identities, the explanation Mukherjee offers is the Hindu religious belief of reincarnation. It is an interesting, though marginalized way of linking ethnicity with new womanhood, which she celebrates in her work. In an interview with Alison B.Carb, she says:

I believe that our souls can be reborn in another body, so the perspective I have about a single character’s life is different from that of an American writer, who has only one life. As a Hindu, I believe in the existence of alternate realities and this belief makes itself evident in my fiction. (Massachusetts Review, Winter, 1988: 651).

Similar kind of symbolic use has been made of other religious and cultural motifs. Like Jasmine, most of Mukherjee’s protagonists are women and gender is the preferred site for exploration, transformation, and transfiguration
of migrant consciousness. Her trenchant criticism of oppressive patriarchal practices and celebration of redemptive liberationist postures are subsequently adopted by these women, when they immigrate to the United States. In the telling of these stories, codes and myths from the old and the new environment are collapsed into each other. For instance, 'Sati' the now illegal practice of immolating widows on the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands, becomes a metaphor for the immolation of the old self and the passage into the new dimension of selfhood. Jasmine practises sati by burning the dishonoured clothes of her dead husband after murdering Half-Face who had raped her. Significantly, this is also the point in the story which marks her illegal entry into United States. The heroine stabs the sleeping (prostrate) Half Face: “When he saw me above him, as he had last seen me naked, but now with my mouth open, pouring blood, my tongue out” (118). Following the murder of Half-Face, Jasmine justifies herself by affixing her old Hindu attitudes to the service of American libido- with no moral struggle: “My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for” (121).

We find Jasmine growing very confident in her powers to shape a new identity. Her decision to leave crippled Bud and join her lover Taylor, proved her attempts in asserting herself as an individual. It is not merely choosing between Bud and Taylor, instead she is trying to reposition her stars and design her own destiny. In America, she knew nothing lasts forever. There is no role model for Jasmine or Dimple. They have to invent roles, survive and revise as best as they can. The New World holds promise of a new selfhood as well as new battles against marginalization. The very essence of Jasmine resides in the concept of endless possibilities. In the short span of her life, experiences are jumbled in an amazing way such as; her confrontation with death, loss of her husband, her widowhood, murder of Half-Face assault and crippling of Bud, the suicide of her neighbour Darrel, the mothering of a young Vietnam immigrant Du and the expecting of the child of a crippled man and finally
leaving him for Taylor, on her onward journey to California. Alison B. Carb says in an interview:

The picaresque, surrealistic, no hold bar ethos obviously has a message beneath the action, that change and adaptability are the key to survival and the successful immigrant has the instinct (Massachusetts review, 1988: 651).

Jasmine, the village girl from Hasnapur, quickly blossom into the adventurous Jase in Jeans, T-shirts and sneakers. She has the spirit of the immigrant. Like her author, the heroine appears to be saying:

I left India by choice in United States. I have adopted the country as my home, I view myself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island" (Massachusetts Review, 1988, 651).

The novel is also inscribed in the old American pattern of the frontier novel -- the escape from the old identity, the old debts, and the old life to a new name, a new life. From the farm land of Punjab (India) emerges new births of identities (Jyoti-Jasmine-Jazzy-Jase-Jane), on her way to the frontier of California. The reader is led from one consciousness to another, as the illegal immigrant woman. For Jasmine there are two options, either the Ghetto, with minimum interaction with the alien world or the other option is assimilation into dominant culture. This required nothing but the relinquishment of the past, that is the extinction of the Third World self.

The problem of Jasmine, that became contentious, is whether the disposition wrought by one class, culture and education, can be discarded like old clothes. And whether a new set of disposition borrowed from another class, culture and education could be put on in the manner of a new dress? In this perspective, the motto of the novel becomes clear: “There are no harmless, compassionate ways to make one, we murder who we were, so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams (29). The process of remaking oneself is a psycho-social one. The image of dream requires imagination and an image. Mukherjee’s project involves, representing immigration, through the logic of
transformation, as David Mura puts it: “A discovery and a creation, as well as retrieval, of a new set of myths, heroes and Gods and a history that has been included or ignores” (ed-Karin Agnilar, 1994, 183). Moreover, in the similar approach, Mukherjee’s appropriation of American myth and transnational American dream -- is a project similar to Arjun Appadurai’s view: “the world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life” (ed. William and Chrisman, 1994: 327).

The imagination is now central to all forms of agency -- to graph the new geometry of the “pitted and pocked Universe” (epigraph). It is the key component of the new global order to analyse the global cultural phenomena of immigration. How else, can we explain the chaos, the epochal violence and instantaneous change of the people living in complex collective histories? Jasmine passionately argues:

I do believe that extraordinary events can jar the needle arm, jump tracks, and rip across incarnations, and deposit a life into a groove that was not prepared to receive it.

I should never have been Jane Ripplemayor of Baden, Iowa. I should have lived and died in the feudal village- perhaps making a monumental leap to modern Jullundhar (127).

David Mura’s calls for a new set of myths, heroes and Gods and histories, that has been included or ignored, which manifest itself in Mukherjee’s stories of immigrants -- as active agents of change. These mythical stories join, rather that replace the histories of economics and physical violence that fuel imagination and that the immigrants face upon reaching the New World.

To bring these stories and histories together, Mukherjee marries the literal and the metaphysical. For example in Jasmine she describes her as a “Goddess, both, destroyer and preserver, powerful with want and wanting, feeling and making violent changes, moving through lives with tornado force, in love with the country, revitalizing it, if it allows to be revitalized”(Interview, Connell et al, 26). Like Vishnu, the preserver, who contains, “our world inside his pot
bellied stomach, Jasmine cocoons a cosmos" (*Jasmine* 240). Like creatures in fairy tales, we’ve shrunk and we’ve swollen and we’ve swallowed the cosmos whole" (Loc.cit). Like Kali the destroyer, Jasmine kills to feed the cycles of rebirth. Hence Jennifer Drake is of the opinion that;

…reading Jasmine too literally, reading her only as an individual ignores the metaphors used. On the other hand, to read Jasmine through the lens of assimilation ignores, that when a Goddess transforms she doesn’t lose herself; she is no singular self she contains the cosmos. When a Goddess transforms, she takes action, exerts great powers…” (*Contemporary Lit., Vol 40*: 64).

Thus it can be concluded that immigration is transformation, and immigration demands myth, imagination and metaphor. Mukherjee the writer had given up the India where she was born, in order to anchor her New World anxiety. She has also recreated India with myriad imagination. In *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, she perceives that, she is determined to invent a more exciting, perhaps a more psychologically accurate, a more precisely metaphoric India, many more Indias (*Mukherjee and Blaise*: 297). As part of this process, she also invents a more precisely metaphoric America, many more Americas, violent, free possible. She filters her instantly American stories, through “Hindu imagination” in which everything is “causeless, endless, middle” (*Mukherjee and Blaise*: 175).

The violence and hope interweaved in Mukherjee’s writing must be understood in terms of this imaginative Indianess, “where Indianess was a metaphor, a particular way of comprehending the world” (*Mukherjee and Blaise*: 296). This metaphoric imaginative Indianess fuels her desire and her struggles for an equally metaphoric America. In Mukherjee’s imagination, America is a place in flux, a metaphor that represents freedom from Indian history as fate. She knows she should have ended up, “a Brahmin wife, privileged, angry, innocent, bored, dutiful, rebellious in Calcutta” (*Mukherjee and Blaise*: 219). As Jasmine comprehends, the process of self making is the harmless compassionate process of remaking oneself, to be reborn, in the image
of dreams. This ‘dream’ and ‘image’ is of a female protagonist. It is feminine imagination at work, in remaking a Self. Jasmine imagines the societal cultural forces of the old and new culture and builds a new self. The feminine psyche undergoes the silent monologues and speech, deliberations in each stage of transformation. Thus Jasmine rids herself of the inhibitions and cultural orthodoxies, fatalism of traditional Indian society. In the novel *Wife*, Ina says to Dimple:

> For God sake, try to be spontaneous, will you". Ina commands the hesitant voice. Dimple during the latter’s first week in New York and Dimple nurses: “Express yourself in your surroundings. Discover your own grand passion and indulge it to excess. Then simplify the rest, throw out, be ruthless. That’s the secret to happiness (87).

Dimple comprehends America with depression. A neurotic and splintered self, she ends up in murder. But Jasmine emerges as a source of strength -- a female power Goddess. She discovers her key to happiness in the process of psychic transformation, in the rejuvenation of anima. She understands American society as an ever-expanding horizon, where everything was in flux, everything evanescent. So, constant change and adaptability of self, was the standpoint of the conformist. To Jasmine, escaping from the fatalistic mores of rural India, was the new ‘Nirvana’ which involves the Hindu ideal of pitting of the self against the infinite and of merging the self in the infinite. She chooses the life of:

> Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors, through un-caulked windows. Watch me re-position the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove (240).

This is certainly an emerging rebellious self, casting away the silence and passivity of third world female subject to become a loud and bold American women. In Mukherjee, reincarnation, assimilation, suggests in some fundamental way, an acculturation of myths. Myths and fictionizations of myths are two different things as exemplified in the pluralistic role of Jasmine: “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor

This changing of shape may also be considered as a symptom of the liminality of the third world subject. The quick changes and transformation mirrors the self-imposed mandate expressed early in the novel. The significance of rebirth in the form of dream is a conscious hope, an aspiration or goal, an object of rational desire, an anticipatory attitude.

Jasmine’s agenda could offer a counter discourse, mode, and a model of female resistance to those who would name and thus control her: “She is a tornado, a rubble maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud” (214). Having thus lived through hideous times, Jasmine in her arduous journey for survival has accomplished the rare mission of transcending the boundaries of a unitary self and identifying with all the nameless victims of gender, culture, class and imperialism. The narrative ends on a note of optimism where Jasmine, “cocooning a cosmos” (224), in her pregnant belly and about to “re-position the stars” (240), is ready to plunge into another life and another journey of transformation of self.
WORKS CITED


(All Textual citations are from these edition of the novel).


