Chapter 4
The Immigrant Journey as a Search for Identity

The earlier chapters explored the psychosocial construction of immigrant women’s identity in their country of birth and its implications in immigration. Women have been socialised to conform and internalise calendar images of traditional womanhood as structured by patriarchy. This mutes their identity and denies them their right to live as subjects. The fiction of Bharati Mukherjee, a non-European immigrant American, centres on the psychological transformation of immigrant women. How do immigrant women respond to the demands and challenges of integrating with their divided selves and ultimately with the assimilative ethos of their adopted country?

For Bharati Mukherjee’s women, immigration is an escape from the restrictions of the birth country to the promise of liberation in the country of adoption. They, however, find themselves in the throes of identity crisis. A significant factor is the conflict between socio-cultural values of their birth country with those of the adopted country. Paradoxically, immigrant women do not anticipate such repercussions of immigration. Hence they find themselves disempowered to address such diasporic realities. This causes them to critically examine themselves in the diasporic setting. To discover their true selves in these circumstances, they must explore alternatives to structure a meaningful identity.

The focus of this chapter is on immigration as a journey. Immigration, however, is not merely a physical or geographical journey; but a psychological journey. Using journey as metaphor, the present chapter attempts to analyse
immigration as a quest for identity and self-discovery. It maps the psychological growth and transformation of Bharati Mukherjee’s immigrant women. It attempts to explore the process by which they slough off traditional myths of femininity, patriarchal construction and masculinist definitions of their identity.

Immigration: A Rite of Passage

Transitions characterise human life. Immigration is a critical life transition. Women’s lives are characterised by changes such as marriage and parenthood that force them to relearn and reorient themselves. Immigration is another such transition that irrevocably transforms the lives of immigrant women. Arnold Van Gennep in Rites of Passage describes life as a series of crossing frontiers or transitions from one territorial passage to another:

The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another ... Transitions from group to group and one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man’s life is made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to higher class, occupational specialization, and death (2-3).

Likewise, immigration is a passage from the old world to the new; from the known to the unknown.

Immigration is a rite of passage. It involves stepping across a threshold into a new country and a way of life. According to Van Gennep (188-189), a transition consists of three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. He describes the rites of separation from a previous world as preliminal rites, those
executed during the transitional stage as liminal or threshold rites, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world as postliminal rites. Immigration, a life transition, involves frontier crossing or stepping across thresholds.

For Mukherjee’s women, the immigrant journey involves separation from the birth country (preliminal stage) as the first stage. It results in a fragmented identity that causes them to feel isolated and alienated. In the second stage, the liminal stage, they negotiate acute identity crisis, bereft of guideposts that would make the journey navigable. Under such circumstances, they are forced to respond to the challenge—with little or no capacity building to respond to a crisis of such leviathan proportions. How do they construct a meaningful life under such circumstances? In the final postliminal stage, the women struggle to reconcile their splintered identity and move towards self-integration and assimilation with the host country.

**Immigrant Women as Female Heroes**

Popular perceptions in literature and culture view heroism from an androcentric perspective. If the hero is male; then the male is hero. Seminal works on the hero such as Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Dorothy Norman’s *The Hero: Myth/Image/Symbol*, and Lord Raglan’s *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* view the hero as male. Women, rarely, if ever, are portrayed as independent journeyers or travellers. If they do travel, they accompany the male. In the Indian Hindu tradition, the concept of *Vanaprastham* (dwelling in the forest), refers to the third stage of a man’s life when he retires to the forest after fulfilling his worldly commitments. The
woman accompanies him in a supportive role. Do women therefore have the right to journey as individuals?

Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope in The Female Hero in American and British Literature (vii), aver that women are heroic. They, however, argue that culture, unable to recognise heroism in women, has rendered it as invisible. Hence they use the term hero rather than the diminutive “heroine” to refer to fictional characters. In Who am I This Time? Female Portraits in British and American Literature, Pearson and Pope argue that stereotypical thinking translates heroism in “macho” terms:

Patriarchal society views women essentially as supporting characters in the drama of life. Men change the world and women help them. This assumption has led to inaccurate literary terminology and criticism. For sometime, critics have called male protagonists “heroes” or “villains,” and female protagonists “heroines.” However, in classifying female protagonists we discovered a conceptual difficulty. It is misleading to speak of Antigone, Hester Prynne, and Alice as heroines, and of Creon, Dimmesdale, and the Cheshire Cat as heroes. Like the traditional hero, the three women venture out on the path of self-discovery, while the male characters function in supporting roles (4-5).

The widespread tendency to equate heroism exclusively with men arises due to asymmetrical power relations and patriarchal sex role assumptions. These assign primacy and greater value to the male as subject and the female as object.

In Bharati Mukherjee’s novels, women’s needs, expectations, and aspirations are not “heard” at the time of immigration. As seen in the earlier chapters, immigration is hardly a voluntary choice for Mukherjee’s women. With
the exception of Hannah Easton in *The Holder of the World*, their immigration is decided by the father or husband. Most of them thus immigrate as wives who accompany their husbands who emigrate for career reasons. Hence as wives or single women they begin their immigrant journey as secondary characters in a supportive role. In the centre stage of immigration, the spotlight is on the “His Story” of the diasporic male.

For Mukherjee’s women, however, immigration is a quest towards self-integration; a reconciliation of their divided and splintered selves. In their immigrant odyssey, they demonstrate varying degrees of self-will in achieving their objective. Tara Banerjee Cartwright and Tara Bhattacharjee undertake a search for their roots. Hence they travel back to their country of birth to discover their true selves. Jasmine and Hannah Easton emerge as exemplar immigrants for whom the journey is both a process and a destination. Dimple, an unsuccessful immigrant by conventional standards, demonstrates a passion for life and her valiant attempts at self-integration are courageous.

Arvindra Sant-Wade and Karen Radell in “Refashioning the Self: Immigrant Women in Bharati Mukherjee’s New World” comment on the immigrant woman’s painful struggle of reformulating identity:

> It is apparently a deeper wound for the women of the Third World, who are engaged in the struggle to fashion a new identity for themselves in an alien culture. Perhaps this struggle results from their sudden freedom from the bonds of superstition and chauvinism that held them fast in their old unfamiliar cultures, freedom that seems to leave them floating, unbalanced, in the complex, sometimes treacherous air of the new and familiar culture. The irony is that this refashioning of the self is both
painful and exhilarating; hence, the terrible ambivalence of the women towards their own freedom—the freedom to become—an ambivalence expressed by these women in the midst of arduous change, in the powerful act of rejecting the past and moving energetically toward an unknown future (11-12).

Thus immigrant women are confronted with the challenge of striking a balance between freedom and responsibility; between effete traditions and emerging new paradigms in the changed context.

In their journey, Mukherjee’s immigrant women step beyond their sheltered environments and cross several boundaries—physical and psychological. For them, immigration is an inward journey that restructures their self.

The Journey as a Search for a Lost Paradise

Tara Banerjee Cartwright and Tara Chatterjee commute between two polar worlds—their countries of their birth and adoption; East and the West; the old and the new; and the past and the future. Both women experience the diasporic predicament of ambivalence and rootlessness. Hence they undertake a journey to their country of birth to trace their roots and integrate their divided selves.

In The Tiger’s Daughter, Tara Banerjee Cartwright embarks on her odyssey after seven years in the US. Tara’s marriage to American David Cartwright is an act of defiance. Her volitional marriage is a departure from tradition. As an immigrant, it is an indicator of healthy acculturation to the
adopted country. Yet Tara finds herself suspended between the two worlds of her birth and adopted countries—neither of which she belongs to completely. Tara’s inner world is an oxymoronic fusion of India and America. The following lines capture Tara’s bicultural predicament:

New York … had been exotic… there were policemen with dogs prowling underground tunnels. Because girls like her … were being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings … Because people were agitating over pollution. The only pollution she had been warned against in Calcutta had been caste pollution. New York was certainly extraordinary. But it had driven her to despair. On days she had thought she could not possibly survive, she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make the apartment more “Indian.” She had curried hamburger desperately until David’s stomach protested (TD 33-34).

Thus Tara’s mind is a battleground for conflicting loyalties and emotions.

Expatriate nostalgia colours Tara’s vision and memories of India. Tara is a psychological expatriate. She is unable to expunge the anachronistic values of her birth country and evolve a new paradigm based on the socio-cultural realities of her adopted country. On the contrary, she idealises her birth country. Tara cherishes fossilised memories of India, much like a faded sepia-toned photograph. The following lines capture Tara’s tendency to vivify the India of her growing up years: “She longed for the Bengal of Satyajit Ray, children running through cool green spaces, aristocrats despairing in music rooms of empty spaces.” (TD 105). Hence Tara decides to travel to India to discover where she truly belongs.
As an immigrant, Tara’s journey to India is a metaphor to come to terms with her sense of loss. Maya Manju Sharma reiterates this aspect in “The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant,” “Tara goes home to assess herself—to see whether she can rediscover herself in her birth tradition—to understand how much she belongs and in what manner she is different” (8). Thus Tara’s quest is a mission to come to integrate her splintered self.

An immigrant’s visit to the country of birth is marked by multiple shocks: geographical, social, cultural, spiritual, and psychological. Tara’s first assault on her memories is the drastic change in the physical environment. The following lines convey Tara’s dismay at the changes in the Bombay landscape:

Seven years earlier on her way to Vassar, she had admired the houses on Marine Drive, had thought them fashionable, but now their shabbiness appalled her … The Bombay railway station was more like a hospital; there were so many sick and deformed men sitting listlessly on bundles and trunks” (TD 18-19).

In reality, however, little had changed. On the other hand, Tara’s immigrant experience had transformed her outlook.

Similarly, Tara is outraged at the changed Calcutta she encounters. In contrast to the old world charm of the Calcutta of her memories, she steps into a city transfigured by political unrest, endemic violence, and population explosion. She finds the poverty palpable. Tara is disgusted by “kids eating yoghurt off sidewalks … Calcutta outrages her. “There were too many people sprawled in alleys and storefronts and staircases” (TD 84, 105). Tara’s sense of loss and
feeling of not belonging is thus accentuated by the blurring and rapid disappearance of the familiar.

Bharati Mukherjee suggests a premonition of this sense of loss and decay in the first chapter of *The Tiger's Daughter*. The novel opens with the sombre imagery of the palatial Catelli Continental Hotel. Once the pride of the British Raj, the regal hotel is symbolic of decadence and decline in post-independent India. The “gray and imposing” Catelli Continental, “the navel of the universe” was synonymous with the political and commercial might of the British Raj. But when Tara returns, she finds the Catelli a pale shadow of its former glory. Old and rusting, it was in a dilapidated state. The following lines capture the decadence in the physical world that was once “home” to Tara:

The walls and woodwork are patterned with mold and rust around vertical drains. The sidewalks along the hotel front are painted with obscenities and political slogans that were partially erased. A “colony of beggars” populated the entrance. The front of the hotel was “littered with vendors’ trays, British mystery novels and old mystery novels laid out on burlap sacks, and fly-blackened banana slices sold by blackened women (TD 1).

The physical decadence is symbolic of the inevitability of change.

Immigrant nostalgia is often at variance with the altered reality. During Tara’s visit to Calcutta, the death of the old and the resurgence of the new were also evident in other aspects of the surroundings. The advent of new age features like *Kapoor’s Restaurant* “marked the end of tea shops like Arioli’s and Chandler’s where straw-hatted European ladies discussed the natives and beastly weather over tea and cakes and mutton patties in shaded rooms cooled by
punkhas” (TD 83). Thus even at the outset of her return to India, Tara is disappointed. The following lines capture Tara’s poignant sense of loss and bewilderment.

For years, she had dreamed of this return to India. She had believed that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased, quite magically if she could return home to Calcutta. But so far the return had brought only wounds. First, the corrosive hours on Marine Drive, then the deformed beggars in the railway station, and now the inexorable train ride steadily undid what strength she had in reserve. She was an embittered woman, she now thought, old and cynical at twenty-two, and quick to take offense (TD 25).

Thus Tara’s first impressions on her return convey the chasm that separates her from the country of her birth.

The physical or environmental alienation is a prelude to the phalanx of microassaults on Tara’s sensibilities. This is evident in her encounter with family and friends. When Tara lands in Bombay airport, she is besieged by a horde of relatives. Her homecoming was marked by garlands and sweetmeats, although the long journey made her feel “groggy and nervous about meeting them” (TD 26). Tara is bewildered when “little nephews whose names she did not catch were told to touch her feet in pronom when she was introduced to them as “America Auntie ... The Bombay relatives hugged her and spoke to her in Bengali, the first she had heard since a Durga Puja gathering in New York” (TD 1-17). Tara’s insistence that she travel alone on the train to Calcutta scandalises them. They attribute “Tara’s improprieties to her seven years in America” (TD
It took all of Tara’s persuasive abilities to convince them that she was capable of undertaking the journey unchaperoned.

Immigration distances the immigrant psychologically from her family in the birth country. This is evident in Tara’s encounters with her relatives and friends in Calcutta. They view her as an “outsider” with high curiosity value. Her relatives regard her condescendingly as an “Americawali” married to a “mleccha” (low caste) husband. Such derogatory labels intensify Tara’s marginalised status. Even Tara’s sensitive attempts to intercede for medical intervention for her disabled cousin prompt a fierce outburst from Aunt Jhama who resorts to prayers and fasts as healing intervention techniques. The following lines convey the deep resentment Tara evokes: “You think you are educated for this, don’t you? What gives you the right? Your American money or your mleccha husband? Why do you despise our ways? … That’s what comes of going to a school like St. Blaise’s” (TD 36-37). In Tara’s instance, however, immigration compounded with her non-normative marriage highlights the disparate frames of reference.

An immigrant thus experiences a growing distance in intimate familial relationships. In Tara’s instance, Aunt Jhama’s rejoinder that Tara’s alienation had begun even in India because of her schooling is a moment of awakening for Tara. It prompts her to reflect on the “foreignness of spirit” that makes a person feel like an outsider even while ostensibly being an insider. The following lines capture Tara’s acceptence of the incipient alienation within her:

How does foreignness of the spirit begin? Tara wondered. Does it begin right at the center of Calcutta, with forty ruddy Belgian women, fat
foreheads swelling under starched white headdresses, long black habits intensifying the hostility of the Indian sun? The nuns had taught her to inject the right degree of venom into words like “common” and “vulgar”.... Did the foreignness drift inward with the winter chill in Vassar, as she watched the New York snow settle over new architecture, blonde girls, Protestant matrons, and Johnny Mathis? Or was it not until Madison that she suspected the faltering of the heart? (TD 37).

The introspective Tara, through a process of soul searching, decodes the answer. She is honest enough to admit that the distancing had begun even as a teenager in Calcutta. As Tara admits, “there were no definite points in time that one could turn to and accuse or feel ashamed of as the start of this dull strangeness (TD 37). But the process had been initiated insidiously and Tara’s immigration only accentuated it.

An immigrant’s growing distance among familial intimate relationships also transfers to non-familial relationships. Tara realises the growing distance between herself and friends. To Tara, the friends with whom “seven years ago and she had played, done her homework with Nilima, briefly fancied herself in love with Pronob, and debated with Reena in the British Council”, symbolise stability and predictability (TD 43). They were a “peaceful island in the midst of Calcutta’s commotion” (TD 55). She was confident of unburdening herself to them so “she could share reminiscences with people who understood her attitudes and mistakes” (TD 55). But Tara’s cherished beliefs are poised for another disappointment. Tara finds that her friends too have changed over the years. Pronob, whom she remembered as “sensitive then, he had seemed almost a poet” (TD 57) was now a crass businessman preoccupied with maximising his
personal assets. Tara finds it difficult to come to terms with the transformation in Pronob's persona. The following lines capture Tara's sense of incomprehension and loss:

It was hard for Tara to think of Pronob as a businessman. She remembered his long monologues, delivered with some passion, on Tagore and Ravindra sangeet when he had been a student. But he had become fat and ill-tempered during the past seven years... She was afraid of these moods in Pronob. They were hard to match with the moods of a young man who had once written poetry and a one-act play for children (TD 57, 58).

Tara’s challenge is to reconcile her memories with the altered reality that confronts her.

An immigrant evokes curiosity when she returns to her country of birth. To Tara’s dismay, her immigration, and unconventional marriage piques her friends’ curiosity about her. She finds them critical and judgmental in their appraisal of her. They view her as a purveyor of the “American Dream” and spinner of exotic tales about life in the US. For instance, “they longed to listen to stories about America, about television and automobiles, and frozen foods and players. But when she mentioned ghettos or student demonstrations her friends protested. They knew America was lovely, New York was lovely” (TD 56). When Tara remonstrates about their misconceptions, they dismiss her as “argumentative.”

Immigration thus leads to divergent perspectives on social issues. When Tara tries to view social change in India through a Western perspective, it enrages her friends. They remark that she has changed—become “too self-
centered and European” (TD 105). Thus even with her friends, Tara feels “painfully misunderstood. Her education had ruined her for quarrels and showdowns” (TD 106). Tara realises the impossibility of bridging barriers to meaningful communication and interaction with her friends. The following lines convey the chasm that separates Tara from her friends:

Then after the first round of parties, the beliefs and omissions of her friends began to unsettle her. She was not an unpatriotic person but felt very distant from the passions that quickened or outraged her class in Calcutta. Her friends let slip their disapproval of her, they suggested her marriage had been imprudent, that seven years abroad had eroded all that was fine and sensitive in her Bengali nature (TD 55).

Such a palpable distance highlights Tara’s growing sense of disenchantment and disillusionment with her idealised memories of her birth country.

An immigrant’s family and friends in the home country tend to be more concerned about the superficialities of immigrant life. This is evident in Tara’s disappointment on her friends’ view of her as immigrant exotica. According to Tara, they were obsessed only with the superficialities of her life in America. This is conveyed in the following lines:

They studied Tara with obsessive attention as if she were not present. They seemed perfectly relaxed as they discussed her hair, the shade of lipstick, her sunglasses; Tara was startled at their tremendous capacity for surfaces.... Some instinct or intuition told her to stay away from these people who were her friends, only more, much more, for they were shavings of her personality. She feared their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness. They had asked her about the things she had brought
back, had admired her velour jumpsuit and electric lady-shaver, but not once had they asked her about her husband (TD 43).

The dissonance intensifies Tara’s feeling of being a misfit in her country of birth.

Paradoxically, Tara discovers that her friends valorise foreignness in fashions and way of life, but not foreign marriages. As the following lines convey, such ambivalence deepens her alienation:

They (her friends) were racial purists, thought Tara desperately. They liked foreigners in movie magazines—Nat Wood and Bob Wagner in faded Photoplays. They loved English like Worthington at the British Council. But they did not approve of foreign marriage patterns. So much for the glamor of her own marriage. She had expected admiration from these friends. She wanted them to consider her marriage as an emancipated gesture. But emancipation was suspicious—it presupposed bondage (TD 86).

Thus Tara’s predicament is a result of a collision due to such conflicting ideologies and values of her birth country and Tara’s partial acculturation as an immigrant.

Immigration and transnational marriage are dual burdens. Tara Banerjee Cartwright’s search for her roots in India is complicated by her transnational marriage. Her marriage to American David Cartwright compounded with the perception of her friends intensify Tara’s alienation. As the following lines convey, Tara’s outsider status reinforced by her marriage exasperates her. “In India, she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner, and this foreignness was a burden. It was hard for her to talk about marriage responsibilities in Camac Street; her friends were only curious about the
adjustments she had made" (TD 62). In fact her foreignness seems to hold only one tangible advantage for Tara. As an expatriate and wife of an American, she is expected to act as bridge when Washington McDowell, the African American visits Calcutta. In another instance, her foreignness makes her the obvious choice on the panel of judges to judge a beauty pageant. Thus marriage aggravates Tara’s outsider status as an immigrant. It makes her feel that she neither belongs completely to her birth country nor her adopted country.

Ironically, Tara’s shadow identity as an Indian immigrant leads her to impose Indian values and expectations from her husband. She feels suspended between India and America, neither of which she belongs to fully. The following lines poignantly express Tara’s conflict:

In New York, she had often praised herself, especially when it was time to clean the toilet or bathtub. She had confided to David that at home there was a woman to clean the bathrooms. There was no heroism for her in New York. It appeared there would be no romance, no admiration in Calcutta either. It had been foolish to expect admiration (TD 86). Thus one witnesses in Tara, the debilitating collision between rootlessness and nostalgia.

The cross-cultural implications of immigration demand that the immigrant reinvent herself. Such a reinvention is possible only by repudiating the anachronistic values of the birth country. Concomitantly, the immigrant needs to evolve a new paradigm based on the socio-cultural realities of the adopted country. Towards the end of her sojourn in Calcutta, Tara is overwhelmed by the
changes she witnesses. Her experiences with her relatives and friends convince her that they inhabit diverse worlds informed by divergent perspectives.

Tara Banerjee Cartwright’s immigration and cross-national marriage has cut the Gordian knot that bound her to the country of her birth. As Tara realises, “through some weakness or fault, Tara had slipped outside. And reentry was barred” (TD 110). Tara reflects on the impact of her visit thus: “For years, she had dreamed of this return to India. She had believed that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could just return home to Calcutta. But so far the return had brought only wounds” (TD 25). Thus Tara realises the futility of clinging to and cherishing effete memories that only cause her astringent pain. She acknowledges that “it seemed so vague, so pointless, so futile, this trip home to India” (TD 130). She then decides to relinquish her excess baggage of memorabilia at the altar of nostalgia. Therefore she decides to return to the US at the earliest.

In the apocalyptic finale of the novel, Tara is a victim of mob fury unleashed by political unrest. Significantly, the incident takes place outside the foreboding Catelli-Continental. The following lines capture Tara’s gory end as her car is mobbed by violent rioters: “And Tara, still locked in a car across the street from the Catelli-Continental, wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she didn’t, whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely” (TD 210). The incident is metaphorical of immigration as a death and resurrection experience. According to Bharati Mukherjee, immigration is a series of reincarnations; death of earlier existences followed by the promise of redemptive rebirths.
Tara Banerjee Cartwright’s journey highlights that inability to dissociate oneself from nostalgia is the Achilles heel for immigrants. Brinda Bose comments on the significance of memory in Tara’s immigrant trajectory:

Memory evolves into a political and ideological signifier in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee as her protagonists alternate between the desire for remembering and the need for forgetting, with its accompanying pain… this forgetting can hardly be accomplished without guilt and pain—and it is this rite of passage for Tara that *The Tiger’s Daughter* seeks to document (51).

Tara’s visit to India is a response to an immigrant’s need to dehyphenate her fragmented identity and move towards harmony and synthesis.

**The Journey as a Search for Roots**

One could classify *The Holder of the World*, *Desirable Daughters*, and *The Tree Bride* as quest novels that dwell on the theme of interconnectedness of people’s lives. Beigh Masters, the narrator of *The Holder*, and Tara Chatterjee, the protagonist of *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* are drawn to the pull of history to rediscover themselves in a contemporary context. “A series of convergences” lead Beigh Masters and Tara Chatterjee to missing clues about their atavistic ancestors. In Beigh’s instance, the search leads her to decipher the life of her ancestor, Hannah Easton who migrates to India in the seventeenth century and ends up in the Moghul emperor’s court. Beigh concludes philosophically that “there are no accidents … With sufficient passion and intelligence we can deconstruct the barriers of time and geography (HOW 5, 19).
Similarly Tara undertakes a journey to India to research the life and times of her
great-great-aunt, Tara Lata.

Like Tara Cartwright, Tara Chatterjee also struggles to come to terms with
her identity as an Indian immigrant in the US. Tara Chatterjee is also caught
between two cultures, and two worlds—tradition and modernity—both of which
exert opposing pulls on her consciousness.

The act of immigration distances the immigrant from her heritage. As an
immigrant, Tara is distanced psychologically from her country of birth. Tara
Chatterjee candidly confesses, “I’ve lost my Indian radar” (DD 71). She
struggles with cultural negotiations as she reformulates her identity as an Indian
immigrant. Paradoxically, the notion of identity and identity crisis is alien to Tara
in her formative years in India. She encounters these concepts only as an Indian
immigrant in the US. In India, Tara was unfamiliar with the concept of clearly
demarcated public and private selves. The following lines express Tara’s
predicament:

Bengali culture trains one to claim the father’s birthplace, sight unseen, as
his or her desh, his home. Although she has never seen it, my mother’s
desh is Dacca, by way of Mishtigunj, the village very few East Bengalis
have seen. When I speak of this to my American friends—the iron-clad
identifiers of region, language, caste and sub caste –they call me “over
determined” and of course they are right. When I tell them they should be
thankful for their identity crises and feelings of alienation, I of course am
right. When everyone knows your business and every name declares your
identity, where no landscape fails to contain a plethora of human figures,
even a damaged consciousness, even loneliness are privileged
commodities (DD 33-34).
Thus Tara’s transition as an immigrant in the US compels her to confront issues such as identity and identity crisis. The distinct notions of public and private selves that Tara discovers in the US exhilarate her with its potential for personal growth and transformation.

Bharati Mukherjee in American Dreamer comments on her lack of familiarity with the term identity crisis during her formative years thus:

In Calcutta in the 1950s, I heard no talk of “identity crisis”—communal or individual. The concept itself—of a person not knowing who he or she is—was unimaginable in our hierarchical, classification-obsessed society. One’s identity was fixed, derived from religion, caste, patrimony, and mother tongue. A Hindu’s last name announced his or her forefather’s caste and place of origin. A Mukherjee could only be a Brahmin from Bengal. Hindu tradition forbade intercaste, interlanguage, interethnic marriages. Bengali tradition even discouraged emigration. To remove oneself from Bengal was to dilute culture. Until the age of eight, I lived in a house crowded with 40 or 50 relatives. My identity was viscerally connected with the ancestral soil and genealogy. I was how I was because I was Dr Sudhir Lal Mukherjee’s daughter, because I was a Hindu Brahmin, because I was Bengali-speaking, and because my desh—the Bengali word for homeland—was an East Bengal village called Fardipur (2).

Thus in such circumstances, even confronting terms such as identity crisis is a paradigm shift for Indian immigrant women.

There is, however, a significant difference in the journeys undertaken by Tara Banerjee Cartwright and Tara Bhattacharjee Chatterjee. Tara Cartwright’s journey is motivated by her idealised memories of her birth country. The past,
symbolised by nostalgia, exerts a stranglehold on Tara's expatriate sensibility. At the end of her journey, Tara realises that she must repudiate the traditions and heritage of her birth country to achieve a sense of identity and wholeness. On the other hand, Tara Chatterjee delves into her family genealogy for clues that would help her reconstitute the missing jigsaw pieces in the construction of her identity.

Among Mukherjee's women immigrants, Tara Chatterjee, 36, is most distanced from her legacy and heritage of her birth country. She is a divorcee and a single parent. Tara confesses to transitions like immigration, divorce, and relationships that have reformulated her identity:

I have crossed the Black Waters and, by my tradition, at least, I have lost my caste. I have mingled with the casteless, I have grown fond of red and white meats. I've divorced, I've had lovers, and I've drunk on some occasions. I'd be a little reluctant to join any club where a rigid Brahmin like Jai Krishna Gangooly sets the standards. Otherwise, I have no complaints. Hinduism is very scientific, very mathematical. At the center of consciousness is a zero; at the extremities, infinity (TB 284).

Yet Tara’s past, symbolised by tradition and heritage of her birth country is ingrained in her psyche. For Tara, the pull is magnetic.

The central theme of both Desirable Daughters and The Tree Bride is the impact of cultural collisions on identity and personal history. In an interview with John Habich in the Star Tribune, Bharati Mukherjee remarked on this aspect: “Cultural clashes and coalescences have always been very important in who we are as peoples and as individuals. I’m interested in exploring the ways in which we who are exposed to many cultures because we live in the age of
globalization and information technology combine our many heritages into a new and singular whole" (www.startribune.com). Tara’s journey to India symbolises her quest to reconcile and achieve a symbiosis of her Indian heritage and her life as an assimilated American. Tara comments on the motives for her journey to search for her roots thus: “… I finally yielded to that most American of impulses, or compulsions, a roots search” (DD 16, 17). Hence Tara seeks to rediscover her tradition from a global perspective.

Bharati Mukherjee in an interview with Sonia Chopra comments on the significance of Tara’s search for her roots:

In Desirable Daughters, I was dramatizing the immediate cultural negotiations demanded of South Asians who have come as economic immigrants to America in the last 30 years. The immigrants immerse themselves in the present and look forward to the future. They take their heritage for granted. But as I was finishing the novel, I realized that I, as well as Tara my character, had to discover for ourselves the social, religious, historical, and political forces that had shaped us over a hundred or more years … I’m interested in the ways in which we, who are exposed to many cultures because we live in the age of globalization and information technology, combine our many heritages into a new and singular whole (www.bookreporter.com).

Thus Bharati Mukherjee highlights the need to appraise the past and comprehend its catalytic role in shaping people’s lives.

In Desirable Daughters, and The Tree Bride, Mukherjee uses myths to highlight the interconnectedness of the past and the present. Through the allegorical Bengali myth of the tree bride, Bharati Mukherjee reiterates “a vision
of the intractability of tradition, the futility of intervention, the stubborn potency of myth in the face of overwhelming change” (DD 19). In the Bhattacharjee family, the tree bride alias TaraLata Gangooly is a venerated ancestor. TaraLata was the third daughter of nationalist lawyer Jai Krishna Gangooly, Tara’s maternal great-great grandfather. Five-year-old TaraLata’s bridegroom dies of snakebite during the wedding procession. Tara is blamed for the fatidic death and regarded as a harbinger of misfortune and ill-luck. In despair, her father decided to get her “proxy-married to a proxy-husband—a straight tall sundari tree” (TB 28). For in nineteenth century Calcutta, “spinsterhood was second only to widowhood as a personal tragedy. Other girls facing similar fates were married to rocks or crocodiles” (TB 32). Yet except Tara’s proxy marriage and her subsequent avatar as an Indian nationalist and her death at the hands of the British in 1943, nothing else was known about the “Tree Bride of Mishtingunj.”

The retentive hold of the past on Tara’s imagination could perhaps be traced to her mother’s bed time tales of the tree-bride of Mishtingunj. “I dreamed of the past,” confesses Tara (TB 26). Tara comments on the pervasive presence of the tree-bride in her family thus: “All stories of Mishtingunj center eventually on TaraLata Gangooly. She is like the Ganges draining tributaries ... In our family she had always been a living presence” (TB 27, 28). Thus the ghost of Tara Lata, the tree-bride, whom Tara is named after, fascinates Tara. She remarks, “All my life, or at least ever since my mother told me the story of Tara Lata or the Tree Bride—and that had been named for her—I have felt for no discernible reason, a profound connection” (TB 16). Tara thus experiences an
atavistic connection with the tree-bride. It colours the texture of her life in her role as the chronicler of the tree-bride and in a larger sense of the family too.

The following lines express Tara’s magnificent obsession with the tree-bride.

The Tree-Bride had been little more than my grandmother’s and mother’s bedtime fable. When I realized that Tara Lata had been an actual little girl who grew up surrounded by other little girl servants and had taught herself to read Bengali, English, and Persian, it seemed to me a miracle of the order of Helen Keller. The fact that she then taught the languages to the girls and boys of the villages made her an Annie Sullivan, and then she had fought against the colonial authorities on the side of the Indian nationalists, a Joan of Arc. It became my dharma, my duty, to set her story down (IB 37).

Thus Tara’s fascination with the story of the tree-bride is inspirational enough for her to chronicle the life and times of her great-great-aunt.

It is intriguing to note the pull of tradition and culture and its impact on the identity of immigrants like Tara who are ostensibly rooted in the “America of internet connections and popular culture.” Tara comments on her need to tell the tree-bride’s story:

The Tree-Bride, aged virgin who did not leave her father’s house until the British dragged her off to the jail, the least known martyr to Indian freedom, is the quiet center of every story. Each generation of women in my family has discovered in her something new. Even in far-flung California, the Tree-Bride speaks again…. I’m like a pilgrim following the course of the Ganges all the way to its source” (DD 289).
Thus the purpose of Tara’s journey is her need to come to the source of her tradition to rediscover herself in a global context.

One can analyse Tara’s immigration as a journey to self-fulfillment. It is a psychological journey in which she extricates herself from the fetters of conditioning to retrieve her true self. At each stage, she encounters in her inner consciousness what Pearson and Pope term “dragons” (17) that are to be killed. This is imperative to discover her authentic self at the end of the journey.

Pearson and Katherine Pope highlight the potential of the hero’s journey towards liberation: “The heroic journey to self-fulfillment has three primary stages, which are called The Exit from the Garden, The Emperor’s New Clothes, and A Woman is Her Mother. In each stage, the protagonist is faced with a powerful figure to interpret, a dragon to slay, and a treasure to win” (68). It thus involves the courage, initiative, and willingness to step beyond comfort zones of safety and conformity. In all the three stages, the hero is driven by a need to synthesise her humanity in a world that positions men and women as incomplete halves and the missing other half.

The Exit from the Garden is an allegorical reference to the fall from innocence. According to Pope and Pearson (68), the archetypes include transgressions such as Eve’s fall from innocence in the Garden of Eden; Pandora’s opening of the box; and Psyche’s looking at Cupid. One could extend its meaning to immigrant women who deviate from patriarchally-prescribed role definitions. For immigrant women like Tara, the Exit from the Garden refers to stepping outside the repressive confines of a situation. In Tara’s instance, she steps out of her unfulfilling marriage. This is an act of self-affirmation. Tara
refuses to play the victim or the martyr. She intuitively realises that she must get out of the impasse and explore meaningful alternatives. The exit thus is not only physical but also psychological.

Tara’s exit is a moment of liberation. She is able to do so because of her sensitivity and perceptiveness in identifying authority figures who embody the voice of convention and conformity. They have indoctrinated her to deny and repress herself. Pearson and Pope refer to these ambassadors of convention as “captors.” According to them, “these representatives of status quo endeavor to pass on to her the conventional myths about women, which degrade her, limit her freedom, and cause her to distrust her own perceptions” (104). Thus as guardians of status quo, the captors straitjacket her. In Tara’s case, her “captors” include her parents and husband who reinforce powerlessness and negative self-worth.

To embark on the heroic journey, a woman must free herself from the socially imposed captivity. Tara decides to step beyond the garden of dependency on her captors who perpetuate status quo. Tara’s parents were larger-than-life figures who dominate her psychological landscape. The product of a traditional upbringing in a patriarchal society, Tara’s parents mirrored societal ideals of femininity, subservience, and chastity. At the risk of parental wrath and disapproval, Tara’s first act of defiance is to terminate her marriage. This reflects Tara’s individuation and her dissociation from the need to seek parental sanction and endorsement for every action.

In Tara’s life, her affluent marriage to Silicon Valley billionaire Bish Chatterjee is a “comforting hypnosis.” Yet Tara is dissatisfied. Tara’s decision to step outside the garden is preceded by painful introspection and soul-searching.
Tara comments on the missing elements in her marriage that seems successful by conventional standards thus:

By twenty-two I had satisfied all my ancestral duties. I was married; I had a son, material comfort, an admired husband-what else is there? Eight years later, feeling myself a privileged prisoner inside the gated community, I listened to all the voices yammering around me and all the stories on television and in the magazines and did the right California thing and stuck out on my own... Wife-of-Bish Chatterjee was my full identity ... I wondered if “wife” was the only role permitted to me, if there was a way of being in this country with my own identity (TB 16, 19).

Thus Tara is dissatisfied with status quo. This awareness qualifies her as heroic, although she does not see herself as such.

For the immigrant woman, awareness of the oppressive forces of tradition and convention that restrict her growth towards personhood is significant. Tara’s dissatisfaction and ennui with the paralysis of status quo motivate her to set off on a quest. Tara wryly remarks that her divorce marked her “defection from paradise …” (TB 16). A moment of crisis triggers Tara’s transcontinental intergenerational search for identity through the family genealogy. At this point, Tara is researching and writing the story of the tree-bride, “my great-great-aunt, a point of light from the remotest, darkest galaxy of my life” (DD 22) when the near-fatal bombing disrupts her life. In Tara’s life, her failing marriage threatens her with another form of entrapment no different from the parental entrapment of her growing up years. Thus Tara decides to escape the oppressive situation that reinforces the captive messages of society. She is heroic because she frees herself of the need for love or social approval.
Pearson and Pope comment on the role of men as stumbling blocks in a woman’s journey: “Because women are expected to find their primary fulfillment through love and marriage, the major seducers in a woman’s journey are often men. By promising to complete and protect her, they perpetuate the belief that she need not undertake a heroic journey” (143). Tara’s husband Bish is a captor; who ensnares her in ways that are counterproductive to personal growth and autonomy. For Tara, her glamorous marriage is captivity. She longs to escape from such bondage to discover her true self. Hence Tara’s decision to seek a divorce stems from her disillusionment that a woman’s primary fulfillment centres on marriage.

One sees Tara’s life trajectory on a path of conventional daughterhood to wife-and motherhood. Tara realises that she is cloistered and therefore needs to explore and express herself as a complete person. As a divorcée, even her decision to write the tree-bride’s story is a rebellion against parental injunctions that dissuade her from doing so. The following lines convey Tara’s family displeasure over her proposed visit to Mishtingunj, where the tree-bride lived.

My friends and even my sisters thought I had gone crazy, or very American. In particular, I wanted to see this place called Mishtigunj that everyone in the family had talked about, but no one had visited in sixty years. “Why go that side:” my mother asked. It was much better to talk nostalgically and bitterly of that place, “that side,” than actually to expose oneself to it (TB 20).

The defiant Tara, however, visits Mishtingunj not once but four times. Her assertiveness in the face of parental opposition and repudiation of parental authority is a hallmark of heroism.
Pope and Pearson comment on this significant point of departure in a person’s psychological growth thus: “The parental captors—whether actual parents, guardians, or symbols of a culture’s maternal and paternal ideals—have the power to arrest the hero’s development only to the degree she perceives herself to be, a dependent child in need of their protection and approval” (104). Thus Tara’s bold decision indicates that she is no longer dwarfed by the “Enormous Parent” on whom Tara was dependent for sustained validation.

There are several facilitators in the immigrant’s journey towards self-discovery. These include people who provide the hero with information and resources that help them to pursue their journey. When Tara embarks on her journey, she is expecting Bish’s child. She is also researching the life of her great-great-great aunt, the tree-bride of Mishtingunj for a work of fiction. Tara’s random search for an Indian gynaecologist leads her to Victoria Khanna, a European married to an Indian, Yash Khanna who taught Bish at Stanford.

For a journeyer, such serendipitous encounters trigger a series of “happy accidents” or synchronous events that open several doors. In Tara’s fictional and personal odyssey, Victoria Khanna hands over to Tara her grandfather Vertie Treadwill’s personal papers. Treadwill, a contemporary of the tree-bride, was a district commissioner in the Indian Civil Service who was posted in East Bengal. Until then, Tara’s chief sources of information about the tree-bride were oral family narratives, old books and ledgers. Treadwill’s papers, however, were a treasure trove that contained graphic accounts of the tumultuous life and times of the tree-bride situated against the political social and cultural complexities of British colonialism.
Tara’s first encounter with Mishtingunj brings her in touch with her provincial roots. From childhood Tara, despite living in Calcutta, had been indoctrinated to think of Mishtingunj as her “home”—where she was rooted—“we’ve been trained to think of Mishtingunj as home in ways that our adopted homes, Calcutta and California, must never be. Ancestors come and go, but one’s native village, one’s desh is immutable” (TB 29).

Thus Tara has an umbilical attachment to Mishtingunj.

The following lines reiterate Tara’s visceral connection with Mishtingunj:

Until I’d seen Mishtingunj, I thought I was a total Calcuttan. But when I walked through the alleys of the old town, I felt I knew the streets—nothing surprised me. It conformed to a mental image I’d been carrying since childhood, from the stories I had been raised on. Yes, I thought, this is where my grandmother as a young girl had brought sweets to the Tree-Bride.... I felt for the first time how recent my family’s Calcutta identity was, just two generations, how shallow those urban roots were, not much deeper than Rabi’s in California. I saw my life on a broad spectrum, with Calcutta not at the center, but just another station on the dial (TB 20).

The visit is sufficient to stir Tara’s atavistic needs to time travel into the “remotest darkest galaxy” of her life.

In the early stages of her journey, Tara dissociates herself from her mother. Later, paradoxically, Tara’s mother emerges as a facilitator in Tara’s quest. Disabled with Parkinsonism, Tara’s mother’s incoherent utterance to Tara about the “tree-bride” and the English writer is the clue that helps Tara decode the tree-bride’s story. Tara learns that the tree-bride was an ardent nationalist who used her considerable dowry buried at the foot of the sundari tree to help Indian nationals. Treadwill’s papers also reveal that the tree-bride was hanged by
the British for anti-national activities. Tara also learns that Abbas Sattar Hai, who bombed her Californian house, and maimed Tara and her husband Bish, is the great grandson of Gul Mohammed Chowdhary, who was the tree-bride's personal physician.

Bharati Mukherjee uses the unifying principle of the mythic motif to illustrate Tara's reunion with her past as symbolised by heritage and tradition and the contextual immigrant realities of her present. Thus the myth of the tree-bride forces Tara to confront her past. In a symbolic move, Tara's son Rabi performs the cremation by proxy for an effigy of the tree bride. The myth of the tree-bride and unraveling her story is epiphanic for Tara. It enables her to achieve closure and unity. In Tara's demythologised world, the myth has a transcendent and harmonising effect. It enables her to intuitively grasp a near-mystical apprehension of the world as a unified whole.

Joseph Campbell in The Power of Myth, comments on the redemptive power of myths:

Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and to understand our story. ... We need for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are ... So that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive (4).

Thus identification with the myth and its central archetypal element enables Tara to open inwards and to move towards synthesis. For the archetypal hero, the
quest for identity is through autonomy and independence. Female heroes, like Tara, discover their true selves through interconnectedness.

The *Tree Bride* is the most mature of Mukherjee’s novels. Its non-linear narrative style, and the intimate confessional tone reminiscent of Sylvia Plath make it a satisfying and challenging experience for the reader. When one analyses Bharati Mukherjee’s trajectory as a writer, one sees a gradual evolution of Mukherjee’s world view. Her early novels reflect the isolation and alienation; while her later ones portray the assimilative ethos of immigration. In *The Tree Bride*, however, one finds Mukherjee’s espousal of a holistic and interdependent paradigm of life and living. Tara Battacharjee’s declaration “I’m enough of a mystic to believe that there are no coincidences; only convergences,” (TB 27) could be described not only as Tara’s philosophy of life but also that of Bharati Mukherjee herself.

Interestingly, the observation also reflects Mukherjee’s growth and evolution as a writer and person. In contrast to a mechanistic paradigm of the universe, Mukherjee espouses a holistic paradigm. Such an ecological perspective, akin to the mystical traditions of the East, believes in the interconnectedness and interdependence of biological, sociological, psychological, and environmental phenomena. Her appraisal of the dynamism and flow and the interconnectedness and interdependence of the universe has profound implications in the globalised times we live in. Besides such an integrated world view also underscores Mukherjee’s synthesis of her Eastern heritage and her Western education; of Eastern spirituality; and the rational and the intuitive in dynamic equilibrium.
The Journey as Obliteration of Roots

Tara Banerjee Cartwright journeys to India to retrieve her roots. Tara Bhattacharjee returns to India to amalgamate her past with her present to achieve a sense of wholeness and integrated identity. Dimple Dasgupta in Wife, however, is preoccupied with obliterating her roots. As an immigrant, Dimple looks forward to scripting a new life in the US. Her “exit from the garden” is therefore dramatic and Dimple arrives in the US as a psychologically receptive immigrant eager to assimilate.

As exemplified rather tragically in Wife, successful assimilation does not demand a ruthless rejection of traditional values. On the contrary, it calls for the evolution of a new paradigm of frame of reference free from the oppressive hold of effete values. Such a perspective would also provide the immigrant woman with viable alternatives to meet the challenges and demands of a changing context. As an immigrant, Dimple’s sensitivity enables her to perceive that she is trapped in restrictive myths of female inferiority. She is engaged in a war of attrition with her inherited values of womanhood. These have indoctrinated her with messages that she is inadequate and inferior and that as a woman her true happiness lies in marriage and motherhood.

Pearson and Pope describe the restrictive and oppressive effects of the traditional female role in terms of the “mirror and the cage.”

The mirror and the cage are the symbols commonly used to express the limiting and oppressive effects of the traditional female role… Because a woman learns early that it is her destiny to gain the treasures of financial support, love and social acceptance by pleasing others rather than acting
and changing the world, she focuses not on what she sees, but on how she is seen. To the degree she does so, the cage is her mirror (22-23).

Dimple is thus entrapped in societal images and expectations of traditional Indian womanhood.

An immigrant woman's identity crisis stems from being perceptive enough to realise that such myths about the self-effacing wife and chastity are anachronistic in her new environment. Mukherjee captures this vividly in the following lines: "His (Amit’s) disapproval was torture; all her life she had been trained to please. He expected her, like Sita, to jump into fire if necessary" (Wife 18). Thus Dimple is psychologically dependant on her husband and her obsessive need for his endorsement and seal of approval. As an immigrant, however, she experiences pain and confusion on being forced to conform to such unnatural roles and expectations.

Immigrant women are expected to live up to traditional role expectations of their birth country. In the apartment of the Sens in New York, Dimple finds that "a batik painting of Sita hip-deep in orange flames" still exerts a stranglehold on her. Like Sita, the character in Indian mythology and the exemplar of Indian womanhood, Dimple is expected to be a paragon of virtue. This points to the ideology of wifely chastity that controls women with its forbidden access to intellectual, emotional, and sexual knowledge that Dimple has internalised. Such an inability to jettison the past does not synchronise with her rapid acculturation with regard to sexual mores. It thus heightens Dimple’s predicament and creates fissures and cracks in her psyche.
The immigrant woman tries to valiantly negotiate an ongoing battle between social expectations and her lived experience as an immigrant. For instance, Dimple experiences sexual awakening and heightened body awareness in the post-immigration phase. Her immigrant journey is marked by hedonistic sexual adventurousness. She enters into a physically exciting relationship with the American, Milt Glasser. To Dimple, the relationship is the antithesis of her vacuous relationship with her husband. Dimple, however, is unable to achieve a "guiltless amalgamation" of her sexual escapade and is filled with remorse and self-recrimination "not to do it again" (Wife 202). She agonises over the incident and is entrapped in guilt. She even seeks a readymade solution by reaching out to media Agony Aunt, Miss Problemwalla, who it turns out, offers only "beauty" advice. Dimple deals with the situation by rationalising her guilt. The following lines convey Dimple's attempts to resolve her guilt:

Because she had enjoyed it, Dimple thought, she would not do it again. She would not complicate her life. Clumsy people should not lead complicated lives. She would not confide in anyone because that would complicate the problem (Wife 202).

As an immigrant, Dimple needs to negotiate the impasse successfully. But caution and restraint are not pragmatic solutions. Instead she needs to relinquish obsolete values and replace them with positive alternatives based on a paradigm shift.

Dimple, however, deals with her predicament by murdering Amit, whom she perceives as an oppressor. To her, Amit is an epitome of oppressive and hostile forces that entrap her "in a high rise full of Americans who ate
hamburgers and pizzas” (Wife 119). In the finale of the novel, Dimple rejects the conventional option for Indian women—“sanctioned suicide.” She instead chooses homicide as an antidote to her misery. This is a pointer to her psychological growth. Dimple’s plot to murder is borrowed from the soap operas that are her staple diet. In a state of psychotic dissociation, Dimple decides to murder Amit. Unable to distinguish between fact and fantasy, she executes her moves with finesse and cold calculation. Dimple orchestrates every move to make it seem the ‘perfect murder’ without appearing to be so. It is a tragic instance of life imitating art in a most macabre manner.

Choosing a spot just beneath his hairline, Dimple let her fingers draw a circle around the delectable spot, and then she brought her right hand up and with a knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times, each time a little harder.... And then she saw the head fall off — but of course it was her imagination because she was not sure anymore what she had seen on TV and what she had seen in the private screen of three am (Wife 212).

In the Iowa Review, Bharati Mukherjee comments on the significance of Dimple’s choice of homicide over suicide thus: “... In a bizarre way, my stuff is meant to be optimistic. Dimple, if she had remained in Calcutta, would have gone into depression, and she would have found a very convenient way out for unhappy Bengali wives—suicide ...” (20). The significance of the number seven is symbolic of the seven steps around the sacred fore that seal and sanctify marriage ceremony in India. It is symbolic of Dimple’s desire to vaporise her oppressive marriage.

Bharati Mukherjee comments on Dimple’s murder as a move towards discarding the values of her birth country in favour of the self-assertion of the
country of adoption: “In the United States, she (Dimple) suddenly learns to ask herself self-oriented questions. Am I happy? Am I unhappy? And that, to me, is progress. So, instead of committing suicide, turning society-mandated violence inward, she, in a misguided act, kills the enemy ... [I]t’s meant to be a positive act” (Iowa Review, 20).

An awareness of the victim role is a prerequisite in the battle against restrictive myths of femininity that circumscribe the immigrant woman’s life. In the case of Dimple, her inability to ruthlessly expunge anachronistic values and evolve need-based alternatives in response to immigrant challenges is her nemesis. Tragically, Dimple remains entrapped and is on the path towards self-destruction rather than self-integration.

The Journey as Metamorphosis

In contrast to most of Mukherjee’s immigrant women, Jasmine’s unique strength of character is her ability to transmute misfortunes into opportunities. Jasmine’s journey, however, with the exception of Hannah Easton, is characterised by unusual cross-cultural sensibility that is eager to assimilate.

Unlike Tara Cartwright and Dimple, the past is a source of wisdom for Jasmine. A significant feature of Jasmine’s journey is her osmotic receptivity to experiences and willingness to learn. Jasmine remarks on the accidental discovery of the decomposed carcass of a small dog: “The moment I touched it, the body broke into two, as though the water had been its glue. A stench leaked out of the body, and then both pieces quickly sank” (Jas 5). The immigrant Jasmine admits in retrospect, “The stench still stays with me” serving as a
powerful reminder, an ‘intuitive rubric’ of “what I don’t want to become” (Jas 5). Jasmine’s subsequent successful assimilation underscores the importance of such a cross-cultural sensibility.

Ralph J Crane (1992) describes Jasmine as a “female Bildungsroman—a novel that specifically traces the development of a female protagonist through various experiences and crises, into maturity, and more importantly, her self-identity and place in the world.” Jasmine struggles to negotiate the transitional dilemmas and the complex cultural plurality of her adopted country. The odyssey of Jasmine, nee Jyoti Vijh, an illegal Indian immigrant to the US, is a journey of her “metamorphosis, self-invention and self-empowerment.” Jasmine’s journey as an immigrant leads her through a series of personal transformative phases as reflected through her serial name changes—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, Jane, and finally re-emerging as Jasmine. Thus for her, immigration is a metaphor to restructure a new immigrant identity.

Immigration is a catalyst that effects significant psychological, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth in the immigrant woman. For Jasmine, the quest that is marked by a move from self-denial to self-affirmation and self-realisation. As Jasmine insightfully remarks, “There are no harmless compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we are so that we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams” (Jas 29). According to Bharati Mukherjee, such protean personality changes are viscerally connected with the death of one’s former self.

Immigration is fraught with pain and incomprehension. For a girl from a socially circumscribed world, a lone traveller abroad for the first time,
Jasmine exhibits an extraordinary perception of immigration. The following lines convey Jasmine’s insightful assessment of immigration: “We are outcastes and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines ... we ask only of one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue” (Jas 101). At the same time, Jasmine is determined to circumvent obstacles in her journey as revealed in her religious faith in the Hindu God Ganapati, the remover of obstacles. “I keep my sandalwood Ganapati hidden in my purse, a god with an elephant trunk to uproot anything in my path.” (Jas 102). Thus Jasmine exhibits a rare courage to circumvent obstacles that confront her.

The immigrant woman’s refusal to play the role of a victim is a stepping stone towards her growth to psychological maturity and wholeness. One sees it vividly in Jasmine’s ritual killing of Half-Face, the captain of the ship, who rapes her. From self-negation and suicidal thoughts as rape victim, Jasmine emerges as the triumphant killer. Jasmine comments insightfully on the transformative effect of the homicide on her: “For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. It was not about being human... it was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of truth, the kind of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death” (Jas 116). Thus Jasmine refuses to play the traditional role of the nihilistic rape victim.

Pearson and Pope attribute the refusal to be branded as a victim as heroic. According to them, hubris causes the tragic fall of the male hero. In contrast, “the destruction of the oppressed more often occurs because they accept the role of victim. Women, educated to be inferior and agreeable, are more often destroyed
through insecurity than through pride” (10). Jasmine, however, redeems herself through her pro-life affirmative act.

A significant factor in the immigrant woman’s psychological transformation is her rejection of patriarchal myths that constrict her growth towards personhood. To Jasmine, the inequities of victimhood are a revolt against her feminist sensibility. This is evident in her appraisal of the asymmetrical marital relations between the Vadeheras: “He was following an ancient prescription for marital accord: silence, order, authority. So was she: submission, beauty, innocence” (Jas 151). Thus we find Jasmine’s unconditional willingness to identify with the new social universe.

Jasmine questions the patriarchal traditions that are alive in the ghettoised world of the Vadheras in Flushing. For instance, she perceives that the Vadheras are kind to her just because “she was the widow of Professor Vadhera’s favorite student” (Jas 142). Yet they reinforce Jasmine’s status as a ‘desexed widow’ through subtle statements of intention that she found impossible to ignore. When Nirmala Vadhera got her saris “the patterns were for much older women, widows … In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything India, everything Jyoti-like. To them I was a widow who should show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude. If not, it appeared I was competing with Nirmala” (Jas 145). Thus Jasmine perceives the Vadheras as “captors” who imprison her by reinforcing negative myths about female inferiority. Hence she chooses to escape from this captivity by moving out.
Another significant factor in the immigrant woman’s growth towards integration and wholeness is her realisation of the futility of using yardsticks of values and traditions in the adopted country. Jasmine rejects such anachronisms. She then proactively evolves alternate paradigms that she professes and practices. This is evident in Jasmine’s reaction to the break up of the Hayses marriage. Initially, Jasmine is shocked when Wylie decides to leave Taylor for the economist Stuart whom she believes holds forth “real happiness” for her. Jasmine’s strongly ingrained sense of Indian values and decorum revolts against such sexual independence. The following lines express Jasmine’s coming to terms with the transitory nature of human relationships in the US:

In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn’t shock me, but I think that was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. 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 (Jas 181).

Thus Jasmine’s ability to reconcile her Indian heritage and assimilate with American values indicates her maturity and acceptance of the impossibility of moral absolutes.

Pushpa N. Parekh in “Telling her Tale: Narrative Voices and Gender Roles in Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine” comments thus on the impact of the Taylor-Wylie episode on Jasmine’s psychological growth:

Wylie’s apparent “reasonless” abandoning of Taylor and Duff is a jolt back to the inexplicable and unexplainable nature of human action. Instead of fate or destiny or an unknown power being responsible for a family’s break up, Jasmine witnesses an American woman, Wylie, deliberately
choosing to leave. Jasmine’s inner monologues and silent reflections capture her deliberations on cultural differences and an immigrant woman’s emotional adherence to her traditional beliefs while intellectually exploring the new avenues opened to her by the modern value systems (113).

Thus it is Jasmine’s intellectual and sexual awakening that enables her to move towards an integrated identity.

Like most of Mukherjee’s protagonists, Jasmine’s immigrant journey is characterised by intellectual and sexual awakening. It manifests in her guilt-free relationships with Bud Ripplemayer and Taylor Hayes. Jasmine has a live-in relationship with Bud Ripplemayer, a banker and divorcee who lives with his adopted Vietnamese son Du. During the Bud Ripplemayer phase of her life, in her new avatar as Jane Ripplemayer, Jasmine experiences an unprecedented sexual awakening. Jasmine moves in to live with the already married Bud. She becomes pregnant through the assisted reproduction technique of artificial insemination after Bud becomes paraplegic following a shooting incident. Jasmine reflects on the unconventional mode of conception that made it imperative that she direct and control the process: “It wasn’t hard to become pregnant, but it wasn’t very natural. It shames Bud that for sex, I must now do all the work, all the moving, that I will always be on top” (Jas 35). In Jasmine’s psychological journey, the incident enables her to move towards an integration of masculine qualities such as assertiveness, autonomy, and control with her feminine side. This is significant for an integrated person and self-hood.

In contrast to most of Mukherjee’s protagonists, especially Dimple Basu, Jasmine is not ambivalent about moral complexities. She rationalises her
relationship with Bud who is awaiting his divorce. She is able to come to terms with the resentment she causes in Karin, Bud’s wife and thereby absolves herself of guilt. According to Jasmine, she is a “catalyst and not the cause of their marital break-up” (Jas 30). Such a shift in perception demonstrates that in contrast to her earlier incomprehensibility of the break up of the Hayeses marriage, she is able to accept this better because of the paradigm shift.

An invisible trap for immigrant women is the danger of slipping into traditional role expectations of the birth country. Ironically as Bud’s wife, Jane alias Jasmine finds herself perpetuating the traditional image of an Indian wife. She is “bound by old world dutifulness of self-sacrifice and self-effacement. To Jasmine, even memories of Hasnapur are symbolic of disloyalty and guilt because “my genuine foreignness frightens him” (Jas 26). Jasmine is perceptive to appraise that her life in Iowa, as Bud Ripplemayer’s wife replicates the conservative traditional mindset of her Hasnapur years. Hence Jasmine finally decides to leave Bud, her captor who restrains and imprisons her in restrictive feminine myths.

An intuitive ability to appraise immigrant realities and complexities is facilitative for immigrants. Jasmine’s decision to leave Bud for Taylor is based on her accurate appraisal of immigrant reality. This is highlighted in Jasmine’s apprehension of the contrast between Bud and Taylor as expressed in these lines: “Taylor didn’t want to change me. He didn’t want to scour or sanitise my foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate didn’t scare him” (Jas 185). Thus Jasmine remarks on her guilt-free choice to leave Bud for Taylor thus: “I’m not choosing between men. I’m caught between the promise of America and old
world dutifulness” (Jas 240). This observation reflects Jasmine’s ability to perceive nuances in relationships based on informed perspectives devoid of moral absolutes.

In order to move towards a synthesised identity, it is necessary for immigrant women to relinquish memories of the past. Jasmine sums this up when she remarks about the need to release the hold of the past: “Once we start letting go—let go just one thing, like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing a tikka (black or red dot) on the forehead—the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole” (Jas 116). Unlike Tara Banerjee Cartwright whose nostalgia is her nemesis; and ambivalence for Dimple; Jasmine rejects such maladaptive behavioural strategies in the immigrant setting.

Like Jasmine, Hannah Easton’s journey in The Holder of the World is a metaphor for the process of self-discovery and a search for an integrated identity as an immigrant. Among Mukherjee’s women protagonists, Jasmine and Hannah Easton are open to change and constantly reinvent themselves in response to the demands of a new, often changing context. Such an affirmative outlook enables them to cope successfully in the war of attrition against displacement and the consequent identity crisis.

Like Jasmine, her fictional counterpart many generations later, Hannah’s mindset eschews nostalgia. This makes her acculturation and subsequent assimilation as an immigrant seem almost effortless. Hannah experiences an intuitive sense of belonging even as she lands on the Coramandel Coast. She decides that she did not “wish to aspire to return to England upon the completion
of Gabriel’s tour” (HOW 104). Beigh Masters, narrator of HOW, says even 300 years back, Hannah delighted in travel.

The word did not yet exist (“traveler” was in common usage), but if it had, she might have used it. She was alert to novelty, but her voyage was mental, interior. Getting there was important, but savoring the comparison with London or Salem, and watching her life being transformed, that was the pleasure. She did not hold India up to inspection by the lamp of England, of Christianity, nor did she aspire to return to England on the completion of Gabriel’s tour (HOW 104).

Such a mindset enables Hannah to evolve cognitive and perceptual paradigm shifts. These make her voyage cross the sea of socio-cultural differences less tortuous and navigable.

An immigrant’s resilience in adapting to her new world is facilitated by her emotional and intellectual comprehension of ambivalences in her adopted country—a comprehension devoid of judgment and condemnation. Hannah is receptive to the lifestyle in her adopted country. She discovers to her delight that the reality she encounters corresponds to the imaginative possibilities she had once conjured. She finds it humbling to realise that the residents of White Town were myopic (HOW 218).

Against a backdrop of economic and political tumult, Hannah seeks to discover the true meaning in life by peeling away the veneer of superficiality and dross materialism. In another instance, her friend Martha Ruxton tells her of white women’s acceptance of the “bibis” or relationships that husbands have with Indian women. When Martha tells Hannah that such “accommodation is
synonymous with expatriate sensibility”, Hannah’s reaction is one of unconditional acceptance of an alternate reality (HOW 134). As with Jasmine, Hannah Easton acculturates faster because she emigrates unaccompanied by her family. Hannah herself admits that this works to her advantage as the following lines: “she was grateful for the absence of family, the absence of definition and expectation” (HOW 71). Thus immigrants who are unencumbered by gender based expectations acculturate faster.

An immigrant sensibility is accepting and accommodative. A similar nonjudgmental towards oneself is evident when Hannah enters into a relationship with Raja Jadhav Singh. In contrast to the pangs of guilt experienced by Dimple over what she perceives as moral transgressions, Hannah Easton experiences a guiltless amalgamation. According to Beigh Masters, Hannah does so based on the values of her adopted country. She does not indict herself harshly based on values of her puritanical upbringing. The following lines capture Beigh’s observation:

With Gabriel she had clung to Salem dos and don’ts....With Jadav Singh, she’d finally accepted how inappropriate it was in India—how fatal—to cling, as White Towns tenaciously did, to Europe’s rules. She was no longer the woman she had been in Salem or London. The qsbas and villages of Roopconda bore no resemblance to the fading, phantom landscapes where she’d lived in Old and New England. Everything was in flux on the Coramandel coastline. The survivor is the one who improvises, not follows the rules (HOW 234).

Thus Hannah’s relationship with the Raja is fulfilling and enriching to Hannah, osmotic in its capacity to enhance her growth as a human being.
Hannah, like Jasmine, and unlike Dimple, values a life of openness to experiences, and feelings and emotion over narrow morality and judgment. Beigh Masters sums up Hannah Easton Fitch’s immigrant sensibility thus: “If status had mattered to Hannah, she would have stayed on in Stepney. Her curiosity was robust. She wanted to earn, not inherit dignity. She moved on. Without regrets” (HOW 90). Both Hannah and Jasmine at the end of their journey achieve an integrated sense of personhood that is an amalgam of feminine and masculine qualities.

Isobel Armstrong in “Women Writers: Bharati Mukherjee” commends Mukherjee’s insightful understanding of diasporic demands and the growth and evolution of her characters thus:

You seem to feel when you come into a Mukherjee novel, a kind of flurry and complexity in the writing. It’s rapid, darting, intense and energetic. Mukherjee is fascinated by people who are on the move, who have to live life in transit, who have to destroy their former identities in other countries in order to live fully in the other. It’s an astonishing ruthless understanding of personality—that the personality has to travel light and move across countries and assimilate the other country’s culture, ideas, and practices—like putting on another skin (www.bbc.com/womenwriters).

Immigration is dynamic. Bharati Mukherjee captures this kinesis or physical intensity in her novels. Thus for Mukherjee’s immigrant women, immigration is a transformative journey necessitated by the complex cross-cultural realities.
Conclusion

Immigration is a rite of passage. For Bharati Mukherjee’s women, immigration is a metaphor for psychological growth and transformation. Mukherjee’s women are unfamiliar with the concept of identity crisis in their country of birth. Therefore, especially for Mukherjee’s Indian women, even confronting terms such as identity crisis is a paradigm shift. The Indian immigrant women carry a legacy of traditional notions of womanhood, internalised negative myths about female inferiority, and patriarchal construction of identity. These perpetuate paralysing status quo and acute identity crisis when the women immigrate. Paradoxically, Mukherjee’s immigrant women do not anticipate such repercussions of immigration. Hence they are disempowered to address such diasporic realities. This causes them to critically examine themselves in the diasporic setting. Thus they need to explore alternatives to reconstruct their identity and discover their true self in these circumstances. Their moment of awakening occurs when they realise it is a negative capability to be a co-passenger. As immigrants, they must pilot and chart the course of their lives.

In their immigrant journey, Mukherjee’s women adopt various strategies for identity and self-discovery. They demonstrate varying degrees of self-will in achieving their objective. For Tara Banerjee Cartwright and Tara Chatterjee, the immigrant journey is a search for a lost paradise. They undertake a journey to the country of their birth to trace their roots and integrate their divided selves. Tara
Banerjee Cartwright returns to India to retrieve her roots. As Tara Banerjee Cartwright’s journey reveals, the inability to dissociate oneself from nostalgia is the Achilles heel for immigrants. At the end of her journey, Tara Cartwright realises that she must repudiate the traditions and heritage of her birth country to find her identity and sense of wholeness as an Indian immigrant. On the other hand, Tara Chatterjee’s journey to India is search for her roots.

Unlike Tara Cartwright, Tara’s journey symbolises her quest to reconcile and achieve a symbiosis of her Indian heritage with her present and move towards wholeness and integration. For Dimple Basu, immigration is an obliteraton of her roots. As Dimple’s journey tragically exemplifies, successful assimilation does not imply ruthless rejection of anachronistic values. In the case of Dimple, her nemesis is her inability to evolve need-based alternatives in response to the challenges of immigration. Jasmine and Hannah Easton emerge as exemplar immigrants for whom immigration is metamorphosis. Their ability to be open to change, to constantly reinvent oneself in response to the demands of a new, often changing context is a predictor of adaptability to the new country. With their openness and receptivity to change, they successfully negotiate the displacement and identity crisis consequent to immigration.

In their journey, Mukherjee’s immigrant women’s journey dissociate from several “captors”. They reject patriarchal authority figures such as parents and husbands, and negative inferiorised myths about female inferiority. The result is an intellectual and sexual awakening crucial to their move towards synthesis.
Undoubtedly, the process is painful. One, however, is inclined to agree with Jasmine’s perceptive remark that the immigrant woman’s journey from self-denial towards self-affirmation is not possible in a “harmless or compassionate way.” For Mukherjee’s immigrant women, immigration is a metaphor for psychological growth and transformation.