Chapter 1
Conceptual Framework

Introduction

Migration is a universal phenomenon. All living beings whether plants, animals, or humans migrate at some time in their lives. The *Webster's Third International Dictionary* defines human migration as the phenomenon of movement or shift from one country, region, or place to settle in another. One needs to differentiate the terms migration, emigration, and immigration to avoid the popular notion of using them interchangeably.

Migration refers to the movement of people out of or into a geographical area. Emigration refers to the act of leaving one's birth country to live permanently in another country. Immigration refers to international migration that centres on the migrant’s country of destination. The *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* (OERD) defines immigration as the act of coming as permanent resident to a country other than one’s native land. An immigrant is a person whose migration is motivated by economic prospects in the host country. According to Oliva Espín in *Women Crossing Boundaries* (16), the immigrant, however, is considered an exile or refugee if the migration is impelled by persecution or danger in the birth country. In this study, immigrants are defined as individuals who have moved away from their birth country to reside permanently in the new (host) country that acquires the status of an adopted country.
The term “disapora” encapsulates the complexities and dynamics of human immigration. The etymological root of the term diaspora can be traced to Greek origin: διά (through) and σπερίω (to scatter). Historically, Diaspora refers to the scattering of Jews beyond Israel. After the Babylonian conquest of the Judean Kingdom in the 6th BC and again following the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70, the Jews fanned out from Palestine. The Diaspora also refers to Jews living outside Israel; either the present day state of Israel or the ancient biblical kingdom of Israel. The OERD, however, defines a non-capitalised diaspora as any group of people similarly dispersed. A non-capitalised diaspora also refers to a scattering of languages, culture, or people—a dispersion of people, language, or culture formerly concentrated in one place.

Thus two definitions of diaspora emerge. At one end is the historical definition, restrictive in scope and meaning. At the other, is the inclusive and generic use of the term. In its generic sense, diaspora thus refers to communities of immigrants, who live abroad in host countries, but maintain close economic, political, and social ties with their land of origin. In the context of post-colonialism, diaspora refers to political and cultural fall-outs of Western colonialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Diasporic movements invariably are displacements from former Third World colonies to metropolises of the former colonialist West.

The origin of diasporic communities can be attributed to any or a combination of the following factors: involuntary or forced migration (due to political upheavals or wars), environmental migration (due to natural disasters in
their host country), voluntary or free migration (largely a matter of personal choice often in search of better economic opportunities and a higher standard of life elsewhere), and mass migration (the movement of an entire religious or ethnic group from one region to another).

Human migration is unique because of its complexity. It involves more than mere physical relocation or exodus. N. Jayaram in The Indian Diaspora comments thus on the complex dynamics of human migration: “Humans carry with them a socio-cultural baggage consisting of predefined social identity and a set of religious beliefs and practices, a framework of norms and values governing family and kinship organisation, and food habits, language, music, arts, dress and cuisine” (16). People’s connectedness with their birth country imparts a sense of temporal continuity and rootedness. According to Lissa Malki, the arboreal metaphor, through the analogy of a genealogical tree rooted in the soil that nourishes it, conveys the interconnectedness of people and environment. Immigration, however, is a process of deterritorialisation and displacement that is hardly a smooth process as implied in botanical transplant.

The twenty-first century is a world of global cultural exchanges. For several decades, the paradigm for immigrant integration with the dominant culture was the melting pot model. According to this simplistic assumption, ethnic and racial differences would dissolve in the interface between the dominant and the incoming culture. The values and ideals of the dominant culture was the norm or the “centre” and the incoming culture was peripheral and had to accommodate to the “centre”. However, in recent years, the cultural pluralism model has emerged as a more mature and wider perspective of
immigration. Hess, Markson, and Stein in Sociology vividly describe the differences between the meting pot and cultural pluralism thus: “If the melting pot can be likened to a plate of hash, where the ingredients are blended together, the pluralist meal is a stew, where each ingredient remains separate yet contributes to the dish as a whole” (251). Cultural pluralism recognises and celebrates diversity. It recognises the specific contributions of immigrant communities to mainstream values and ethos of the adopted country. The increasing awareness of multiculturalism and plurality that texture immigrant lives highlight the complexities of immigration.

Immigration is a cross-cultural crisis resulting from a clash between two polarised and conflicting cultures. Humans carry with them sociocultural baggage and other memorabilia in their efforts to adapt to their new homelands. Salman Rushdie in Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism traces the etymology of the word metaphor to the Greek root “bearing across.” Extrapolating the analogy, Rushdie describes migration as a metaphor. He says, “Migrants—borne-across-humans are metaphorical beings in their very essence” (278). Rushdie characterises immigration as disruptive. He says, “A migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, and he enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behaviour and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to his own” (277-278). Hence the immigrant is confronted with the loss of the familiar and decoding patterns of behaviour.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of human migration is that humans rarely sever the Gordian knot that binds them to their country of origin. They
often vivify the mental or physical contact with their birth country, which is characterised by the “myth of return.” These have far-reaching implications in immigrant identity in a multicultural society.

Aparna Rayaprol in Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora comments on the need of contemporary immigrants to articulate their immigrant identity to reflect the reality of their immigrant experience. She writes, “Nations and cultures, long defined by geography and territory are undergoing a rapid transformation in the late twentieth century. The pace of border crossings has risen to a new crescendo, with migrants seeking to transfigure cultural boundaries and recreate new representations of themselves, their pasts, and their new milieu” (1-2). Thus the contemporary immigrant is engaged in a two-way interactive process with the country of adoption.

### Stages of Immigration

According to Hess, Markson, and Stein in Sociology, the process of immigration proceeds through five sequential stages along a continuum from near isolation (segregation), through accommodation, acculturation, assimilation, to amalgamation or complete blending with the dominant culture.

- **Segregation** refers to isolating a minority from contact with other members of society. It can be either *de jure* (created by law) or *de facto* (not necessarily supported by law but does in fact occur).

- **Accommodation** occurs when members of a minority are aware of the norms and values of the dominant culture but adapt just enough to deal with mainstream institutions while remaining culturally and
linguistically distinct. They do not replace traditional ways of life with new ones.

- **Acculturation or cultural assimilation** occurs when minority group members adopt the dominant culture as their own, replacing ancestral patterns, and participate fully in the economy, political system, schools, and community groups, but are still refused entry into more intimate social groupings. Acculturation without full assimilation creates a condition of marginality, in which a person is caught between two cultures without feeling completely at home in either.

- **Authentic assimilation or structural assimilation** takes place when minority group status is no longer recognised as a barrier to full integration into the social world of the dominant group. The rate of assimilation of a minority group varies by the degree to which members' physical and cultural traits depart from the dominant ideal.

- **Amalgamation**, which is the opposite of complete segregation, involves gradual loss of minority group traits through social acceptance and intermarriage—the melting pot ideal (251-252).

**Immigration as a Psychological Process**

The process of immigration has several psychological dimensions. According to Espin (201), acculturation or adaptation to the adopted country is a gradual process that passes through the immigrant paradigm—euphoria, disenchantment, and acceptance. Initially, immigrants are euphoric at their newfound freedom from the limitations of the birth country. In the next stage, they struggle with issues of
loss and grief over the familiar and predictable. Finally, they come to terms with
the immigrant reality in the host country. According to Espín, the process of
adaptation demands multiple levels of intrapsychic and behavioural adjustments
at the physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual levels (21).

Immigrants are subject to seismic shifts in psychological reorganisation.
The fault lines reverberate through the core of their persona—their identity.
Cultural dislocation thus demands a refashioning of identity in the host country.
The process is seldom linear and pain-free. Espín comments thus on the impact
of immigration on identity: “Identity is subject to change throughout life.
However, social forms of trauma, such as migration shake its foundations like
nothing else” (21). One therefore needs to understand the process of
acculturation to comprehend the psychological adaptation that is the core of
immigration.

Acculturation refers to cultural changes that result from the interface
between two distinct cultures. According to Emeka Nwadiora and Harriette
Mcadoo (477), acculturation is characterised by physical and psychological
changes due to adaptation required in diet, climate, housing, interactional styles,
 norms, and values to a new culture. Thus migrants experience acculturative stress
resulting from the demands of coping with new experiences. According to Berry
(384), acculturative stress is the phenomena experienced by individuals and
groups in the process of adjusting to a new culture. It is psychosocial in nature
and precipitated due to cultural differences between the host culture and
incoming culture. Acculturative stress is accompanied by significant reduction in
physical and mental health of individuals and groups subject to acculturation.
The extent of acculturative stress is influenced by the following factors: similarities and dissimilarities between the host culture and the new entrants, gender, gender roles, patriarchy, personality traits, education, skills, sex, age, race, language, psychological and spiritual strengths, and the host culture’s political and social attitudes towards immigrants. The psychological distress experienced by immigrants is a fall-out of acculturative stress and not the loss of the old and familiar per se.

**Immigration as a Gendered Experience**

Immigration is not a homogenous experience for women and men. Each of them experience immigration differently. The voices and experiences of women immigrants are distinctive; hence the experiences of women immigrants cannot be subsumed under those of men or ignored altogether. Until the 1970s, researchers excluded women from the study of migrant populations. As in most areas of social sciences, the experiences of women were subsumed under those of men. Women were treated as “migrant wives” rather than “female immigrants”. As passive followers, they just tagged along with their more adventurous visible male counterparts. Consequently, the term immigration used in a generic sense conveyed only the experiences of men.

According to Patricia Pessar (273), until recently, the term “migrant” loaded with gender stereotyping, had a masculine connotation. Such an androcentric perspective assumed that only males were on the centre stage of immigration. Early migrant histories therefore erroneously assumed that a dichotomy exists between men and women. Men were perceived as high achievers, with a propensity for risk taking behaviours; and women, custodians
of tradition and stability. Adopting a gender blind approach, early immigration research assumed that only men’s lives were worthy of study. The assumption, however, that the “true” migrant is male is a myopic vision that presents a skewed perspective of the complexities of immigration.

Margaret Eichler in *Nonsexist Research Methods: A Practical Guide* comments on the inherent bias of such an approach: “From an androcentric perspective, women are seen as passive objects rather than subjects in history, as acted upon rather than actors; androcentricity prevents us from understanding that both males and females are always acted upon as well as acting, although often in very different ways” (5). An extreme form of androcentricity, which one often notices in early studies of immigration, is female invisibility or *gynopia*. Playing what was considered a “non-role,” women immigrants, enabled their husbands’ progress towards self-fulfillment. In doing so, they frequently paid the price of self-effacement and self-denial.

From the 1970s onwards, however, immigration studies began to focus on the roles and contributions of women—the neglected half or The Other in immigration. New insights in immigrant research underscore the implications of gender and patriarchy in immigration. It also recognises the struggles of immigrants in their attempts to integrate themselves with the psychosocial milieu of their adopted homelands. Pessar comments thus on the importance of a gender perspective in immigration:

When gender is brought into the foreground in migration studies, a host of significant topics emerge. These include how and why women and men experience migration differently and how this contrast affects processes
such as settlement, return and transmigration. A gendered perspective demands a scholarly rearrangement with those institutions and ideologies that immigrants create and encounter in the “home” and “host” country in order to determine how patriarchy organises family life, work, community, assimilation, law, public policy and so on. It also encourages an exploration of the ways in which migration simultaneously characterizes and influences patriarchy in its various forms (273-274).

Thus a gendered perspective of immigration enables one to comprehend the disparate realities of the lived experience of immigration for women and men.

What does the experience of immigration entail for women? How do women experience and articulate the psychological and cultural displacement of immigration? Immigration, either forced or voluntary, is a major life transition. While men are disadvantaged, women are doubly disadvantaged because of their gender. Most women immigrants have little or no choice in the decision to migrate. They merely “accompany” their husbands whose immigration is often motivated by economic gains. This could be attributed to circumstances that motivated migration or to patriarchal power structures which do not accord women roles as decision makers. Women immigrants from strongly patriarchal societies lead circumscribed lives with strictures on their social and spatial mobility. “Scripted” by patriarchal values and ideology, their identities are entrapped in traditional gender roles and sexuality.

Oliva Espín (23) remarks that traditionally women are perceived as custodians of culture and preservers of tradition. Paradoxically, women are expected to retain fidelity to traditional gender roles amidst the cultural dislocation of immigration. N. Yuval-Davis reiterates this aspect in
"Fundamentalism, Multiculturalism and Women in Britain" thesis: "Women of all ages in immigrant families face restrictions on their behaviour. While men are allowed to encourage and develop new identities in the new country, girls and women are expected to continue living as if they were in the old country. They are often forced to embody cultural continuity amid cultural dislocation" (278-280). Thus the burden of a patriarchal heritage and the displacement of immigration cause a peculiar identity crisis for immigrant women.

Espin identifies the following three significant stages in the process of immigration, irrespective of gender and cultural background: the decision to relocate (first stage); the geographical shift (second stage); and adaptation to the host society (third stage). At each step, however, the experience of immigration is subjectively different for women and men. Most women have little or no role in deciding to immigrate. In most instances, they are neither consulted nor given options for independent decisions. Rather, they are expected to unconditionally accompany the husbands. In the second stage, women are increasingly vulnerable to physical and psychological traumas during relocation. It is the third stage, however, that is most stressful for women. Espín reiterates the importance of a gendered perspective in immigration because "gender is central to the lived experience of immigration" (20). Gender-based cultural prescriptions that conflict with those of the adopted country make them feel ambivalent, and trapped between worlds.

Olivia Espín reflects on her lived experience of migration and the burden of her diasporic dual legacy.
Although I have been a citizen of the United States for twenty years, my life has been marked by the experience of migration. I have lived my adult life removed from my country of birth. I possess the vague certainty that I could have been another person were it not for the particular circumstances that migration brought into my life. I do not know and will never know the person I could have been had I not left my birth country. The only me I know is the one that incorporates the consequences of migration. Even though my life has been very rich in experiences, and I have never felt particularly deprived, I know that whatever I have succeeded in creating and living has been developed at the expense of significant losses. Of these losses I'm only vaguely aware. Far more clear are the undeniable opportunities, achievements, successes, and fulfillments brought about by migration. Migration for me, as for most immigrants, has provided a dual and contradictory legacy. It has given me safety and success, yet it has also brought about losses and silence about them (1-2).

Espín's observations highlight the ambivalence of immigration—a mixed blessing of positive and negative outcomes.

Bharati Mukherjee as a Diaspora Writer

We live in times of global migration. The decision to migrate is due to compulsions such as professional, educational, or ideological. Members of the diaspora share a diasporic consciousness—a sensibility and world view due to a complex web of historical connections, spiritual affinity, and unifying cultural memories. Over the years, diasporic writing has emerged as an exciting development in contemporary literature. Its growth and development is a testimony to the symbiosis between literature and society.
Several immigrant writers such as V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amy Tan, Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran, and Meena Alexander have articulated the complexities and ambiguities of the diasporic predicament based on their lived experiences of immigration. Immigrants face the complex experience of balancing the conflicting influences of the counties of their birth and adoption. Multiple subjectivities, ambivalence, and the pain and loss of displacement texture immigrant lives with shades of grey. Cultural displacements such as immigration fragment and splinter the identity of immigrants. The leitmotif of immigrant writing thus is the restructuring of identity in response to the identity crisis in the wake of immigration.

Bharati Mukherjee (1940-), one of the most well-known diaspora writers, is an American of Indian origin. The India-born Mukherjee is one of the most articulate spokespersons of immigrant sensibility and cross-cultural concerns, particularly the Indian immigrant experience in the US. Mukherjee’s fiction celebrates the enriching of mainstream American culture by immigrants, particularly Indian immigrants. Through her autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical writings, she “constructs a personal mythology of immigration and assimilation” (SPAN, 34-35).

Bharati Mukherjee (66) is currently Distinguished Professor of Literature, University of California, Berkeley, USA. She is the author of seven novels, two collections of short stories, and two works of non-fiction. Her collection The Middleman and Other Stories won the prestigious National Book Critics Award. Bharati Mukherjee has had front page reviews in The New York Times Book Review. She has published in leading magazines such as The New York
Times Book Review and Harper’s Bazaar and invited to chair prestigious literary festivals in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. Mukherjee is married to Clark Blaise, Canadian writer-novelist. The couple has two sons: Bart Anand and Bernard Sudhir.

In several ways, Mukherjee’s life reads like fiction. In her case, it resembles the characters in her own fiction. Fakrul Alam in Bharati Mukherjee remarks that her personal history is a “series of displacements and expatriations” across Asia, Europe, and North America (8). Thus Mukherjee’s personal experience as an immigrant enables her to articulate diasporic realities with sensitivity. It also provides her an insider’s perspective of the predicament of individuals seeking a stable sense of personal and collective identity as immigrants.

The protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee’s novels are Indian immigrant women in the US. In an interview in The Iowa Review, Bharati Mukherjee said, “Most of my stories are about psychological transformation, especially about women from Asia” (15). She finds their fictional appeal greater than that of men. According to her, the immigrant experience is qualitatively different for women and men. Most immigrant men, she says, are preoccupied with economic transformation. For them, immigration is hardly a journey of personal growth and transformation. Their patriarchal mindset, however, expects and demands unquestioning compliance from their wives in supporting their individualization on the fast track of success and achievement.

For Mukherjee’s women, immigration is an identity crisis. It is a rite of passage that causes them to undertake a painful soul-searching in the process of
self-discovery and the quest for a new identity paradigms. Mukherjee indicts the burden of ossified cultural traditions and values as barriers to successful assimilation for the immigrant woman. Under such circumstances, the restructuring of identity demands that they examine their own internalised patriarchal belief systems and values. The journey towards personal transformation challenges the status quo. In doing so, Mukherjee’s women move beyond comfort zones of tradition and security. Thus one could say that Mukherjee’s women, even if unsuccessful by conventional yardsticks, emerge as “female heroes”—women who are heroic like the archetypal male hero.

This thesis views immigration, as portrayed in a creative mode in Mukherjee’s novels, through a gender perspective. An insight into the politics of gender and gender inequalities in the lives of women would help us to understand the institutionalisation of power structures that circumscribe their lives. Such a gender-sensitive lens would enable us to comprehend the impact of gendered concepts, practices and institutions on immigration—especially on the lives of Indian women immigrants. The aim of the dissertation is to analyse feminist themes and diasporic predicament as reflected in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels. The spotlight is on the search for an immigrant identity of the women immigrants. As an extension, it also serves as a medium to discern the writer’s search for identity through her personal experience as an immigrant.

Bharati Mukherjee: A Biographical Sketch

Bharati Mukherjee was born in Calcutta (now Kolkata), India, on July 27, 1940. She is the second of three daughters of Sudhir Lal Mukherjee and Bina Banerjee. In India’s caste hierarchy, the upper class Bengali Brahmin
Mukherjees occupy the highest echelons. Bharati Mukherjee’s father, Sudhir Lal Mukherjee, a distinguished chemist and holder of 64 patents, had studied and worked abroad. Her mother Bina Banerjee, like most Bengali women of her generation, was not particularly educated. But she ensured that her daughters received the best educational opportunities—even enduring physical abuse by her mother-in-law who frowned on education for girls.

Mukherjee grew up in an extended family of 40-50 uncles, aunts, and cousins. She found growing up in such a crowded family claustrophobic. In an interview with Runar Vignisson (SPAN, 34-35), Mukherjee remarked that the concept of privacy was alien in her traditional family—even the need for privacy was considered selfish!. Therefore to the young Mukherjee, reading offered an escape to an alternate reality that offered her more personal space and freedom. The “bookish child” read under beds, tables, and chairs to escape crowds and compensate for painful situations. Very soon her “accelerated literacy” enabled her to read Russian novelists such as Leo Tolstoy and Dostoevsky translated in Bengali.

In 1948, the Mukherjee family moved to England—a move necessitated by Sudhir Mukherjee’s professional choice. Bharati Mukherjee spent the next three years in England and Switzerland. This passage to England was eventful for Mukherjee. The new-found sense of personal space and independence was liberating. It enabled her to “discover” herself in new ways. The privacy also enabled Mukherjee to focus on what was important to her—passion for reading and writing. When she was nine, she wrote her first “novel” about a child detective.
The Mukherjees returned to India in 1951. Sudhir Mukherjee’s entrepreneurial success translated into exclusive privileges for the family. The Mukherjee girls attended the best school in Calcutta, the Loreto House, a school run by Irish missionaries. Here Bharati Mukherjee wrote short stories on fictionalised European History for the school magazine, *Palm Leaves*.

The senior Mukherjee departed from tradition when he moved out of the extended family and established an independent home with his immediate family. Bharati Mukherjee later described this transition as a release from a “terrifying communal bonding” (*Days and Nights in Calcutta* 180). The years abroad and the trappings of luxury also saw the Mukherjee sisters become increasingly alienated from the middle class Calcutta of their early childhood. The “extraordinarily close knit family” (*Days* 182) and a secluded upbringing made the Mukherjee girls feel “inviolable and inaccessible” (*Days* 183). In retrospect, Mukherjee writes that the “family refused to merge with the city” (*Days* 185). The move also anticipated the road less travelled that all three sisters would take later in life.

In 1959, Bharati Mukherjee graduated with honours from the University of Calcutta. She then acquired a Master’s Degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture from the University of Baroda. Mukherjee acknowledges the influence of an intimate knowledge of the land of her birth in offsetting the Anglophone education in school, and in reinforcing her religious beliefs shaped by her devout Hindu parents. These coalescing influences strengthened her resolve to devote herself to writing.
Sudhir Mukherjee endorsed and supported his daughter's decision to write. He explored avenues for his daughter's literary ambitions to blossom abroad. In 1961, Mukherjee enrolled for a creative writing programme at the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop. Shortly thereafter, Mukherjee acquired an MFA (Master's in Fine Arts) in 1963 and a PhD in English and Comparative literature in 1969 from the University of Iowa.

In retrospect, however, Mukherjee admits that her father's real purpose in sending her abroad was far from being truly empowering. His two commandments to her were to acquire a degree and return to India and marry the “perfect Bengali groom” from the same caste and class he had handpicked for his daughter. Sudhir Mukherjee expected his daughter to meekly acquiesce with the future he charted for her. According to Mukherjee, her father approved of writing as a hobby; never as a career choice.

The Iowa experience was a turning point in Bharati Mukherjee's life and career. She was bewildered at being unable to comprehend “a word of heartland American English” until the end of the first semester. In 1963, the 23-year-old Mukherjee married—not a Bengali bridegroom chosen by her father, but a Canadian-born Florida-raised classmate, Clark Blaise, in an “impulsive coffee shop wedding” just two weeks after they met. Mukherjee comments on the impact of her unconventional marriage: “That act cut me off from the rules and ways of upper-middle-class Bengal, and hurled me into a New World of scary improvisations and heady explorations. Until my lunch break wedding, I had seen myself as an Indian foreign student who intended to return to India to live. The five-minute ceremony in the lawyer’s office suddenly changed me into a
transient with loyalties to two very different cultures” (Runar Vignisson interview, 34-35). Thus Mukherjee’s transnational marriage is a turning point both personally and professionally.

The essential features of the immigrant experience and an immigrant sensibility are a commonality shared by Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee. According to Blaise, Mukherjee’s early work was influenced by the British novel with its short sentences and omniscient point of view. He, however, attributes the emergence of Mukherjee’s new authorial voice and vision to her transition to America. According to him, the finality of immigration forced her to confront immigrant concerns such as assimilation and identity loss.

Bharati Mukherjee and Clark Blaise moved to Canada in 1968 where they were faculty at Montreal’s McGill University. Mukherjee was one of the youngest tenured women in the faculty. In a swift rise to academic stardom, she became the chair of McGill’s writing programme and director of its post-graduate studies. She also received several grants for her work from McGill University (1968, 1970), the Canada Arts Council (1973-74), and the Guggenheim Foundation (1978-79). The period also coincided with the publication of her novels, The Tiger’s Daughter (1972), followed by Wife (1975), Days and Nights in Calcutta (1977)—a travel memoir co-authored with Clark Blaise, and several academic essays. Her creative outpouring was a sublimation of her painful experiences as a coloured immigrant in Canada. In her essay American Dreamer (1997), Mukherjee reflects on her immigrant concerns compulsions as a writer of the diaspora thus: “While changing citizenship has been easy, swapping culture is not. “I want to write about others, who for
economic, social, political, or psychological reasons have had to uproot themselves from a life that was predictable to one where you make up your own rules” (2).


Bharati Mukherjee combines excellence as a full-time committed academic and success as a creative writer. She, however, candidly admits that the demands of academic life have circumscribed her writing. “If I could afford to just live on my writing, I expect I’d be rather prolific,” she said in an interview with Alison Carb in The Massachusetts Review (33).

Review of Literature

Bharati Mukherjee’s evolution as a writer corresponds to the trajectory of her life as an immigrant. One discerns three well-defined stages in her personal and professional life: exile, expatriate, and immigrant. These phases colour the texture of her inner world and consciousness as a person and writer. One sees a
gradual move from alienation and a sense of being an outsider to an integrative outlook in the final stage. In *The Iowa Review* interview, Mukherjee comments on her shift from autobiographical concerns that were central in her early phase as a writer. She reflects, “My themes are larger, my strategies more complex … I have put together my aesthetic manifesto: Multiculturalism/diversity are the key words” (16). In her candid articulations of her journey as an immigrant, Mukherjee emerges as a model immigrant in this age of global migratory movements. Critical analyses of Bharati Mukherjee’s writings reveal Mukherjee’s sensitive and perceptive portrayal of several facets of diasporic predicament and realities. One also sees a gradual but discernible transformation in her trajectory from the aloof expatriate writer to American writer who voices the spirit of the exuberant immigrant.

Emmanuel Nelson in *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives* comments on the multiple dislocations reflected in Mukherjee’s novels. “Mukherjee’s complicated politics reflect her multiple dislocations: her works reveal the imprint of a complex perspective—a perspective that is simultaneously shaped by her ethnicity, postcoloniality, gender, and migrancy” (x). Her distinctiveness, however, lies in her enthusiastic affirmation of the assimilative ideal of immigration over nihilistic exilic concerns.

Mukherjee’s novels trace the movement from expatriation to immigration—as portrayed in Mukherjee’s fiction. Maya Manju Sharma, F.A. Inamdar in “Immigrant Lives: Protagonists in The Tiger’s Daughter and Wife” (40), Pramila Venkateswaran, and Christine Gomez explore the relationship between Mukherjee’s personal experiences of immigration and its creative transformation
in her fiction. Sharma in “The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant” remarks that in the early phase of her writing, Mukherjee is a “state-of-the-art” expatriate whose emotional and artistic allegiance lies with expatriate writers like V.S. Naipaul (3). According to Sharma, one sees a movement away from the “identity crisis of the bicultural Indian” to Mukherjee’s assertive proclamation that she is a mainstream American writer with an integrated immigrant sensibility. Mukherjee’s movement towards redefining herself as a robust immigrant in the tradition of immigrant writers like Bernard Malmud is significant in Mukherjee’s personal and professional transitions.

In The Tiger’s Daughter and Wife, one sees Bharati Mukherjee’s preoccupation with expatriate sensibility and concerns. The predominant emotion is a nostalgic idealising of the past, and ambivalence arising from the inability to expunge the past and embrace the present. According to Pramila Venkateswaran, Mukherjee’s memoir, Days and Nights in Calcutta, co-authored with Clarke Blaise, is a milestone in her personal and artistic growth. Venkateswaran in “Bharati Mukherjee as Autobiographer” remarks, “Mukherjee’s narrative shows how values separate Western and Indian cultures and merge them, lines dissipate and re-appear and definitions form and collapse. The work reveals the ever-changing relationship between the centre and the periphery” (23). One sees Mukherjee’s growing consciousness of the restrictiveness of expatriate sensibility and her willingness to repudiate Naipaulian exilic angst and embrace the liberating potential inherent in immigration.
As a natural progression, Mukherjee’s fictional concerns in her collection of short stories Darkness (1985) and The Middleman and Other Stories (1989), reveal a shift from the peripheral marginal position of expatriation to the central positioning of immigrants who are “middlemen” in more ways than one. Gomez in “The Ongoing Quest of Bharati Mukherjee from Expatriation to Immigration” traces Mukherjee’s personal odyssey from expatriate to immigrant as reflected in her writings. She says, “This ongoing journey becomes a metaphor for the universal quest from alienation to integration. Just as expatriation was a metaphor for existential alienation in the first two novels, immigration becomes a metaphor for the reintegration of alienated sensibility in the two collections of short stories” (37). Thus the impact of Mukherjee’s personal experience as an immigrant on her fiction corresponds to the trajectory of her evolution as a writer.

Brinda Bose in “A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race, and America Meet in Bharati Mukherjee” analyses the struggles of Bharati Mukherjee’s ethnic women immigrants as they attempt to refashion their identities as displaced immigrants. According to Bose, ethnic women in America are doubly marginalised due to ethnicity and gender—“coming as they are from (an) Other world, their very identities are in question in America, calling for a re-definition and re-defining from the start” (47). The process of reformulating their identity is a multipronged struggle with their self, tradition, and the new culture—all of which are antagonistic and a source of identity conflict and crisis.

Immigration entails psychological transformation. The key to adaptability lies in rejection of traditional role models and values because such
paradigms are counterproductive in the immigrant ethos. The Indian immigrant woman’s search for identity is complex. In the absence of precedents or role models, immigrants according to Bharati Mukherjee have to proactively evolve strategies to maximise adaptability.

Violence is a leit motif in Mukherjee’s fiction. It manifests itself in the psychosexual and psychosocial realms. According to Samir Dayal in “Creating, Preserving, Destroying: Violence in Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine”, the epistemic role of violence in Mukherjee’s fictional universe is not merely a reflection of contemporary reality or “the contradictions of postcolonial subject formation. Rather “the functionality of violence in Mukherjee’s fiction is complex and ambivalent” (65). The violence in Mukherjee’s fiction is metaphorical of the cataclysmic personal transformation in the wake of immigration.

Janet Powers in “Sociopolitical Critique as Indices and Narrative Codes in Bharati Mukherjee’s Wife” adopts a socio-political critique of American society and the Indian immigrant community in Mukherjee’s fiction. Powers identifies significant elements of sociopolitical critiques as functional units and examines them using Barthes’s system of structural narrative analysis. Thus Powers concludes, “The startling turns of plot in Wife and Jasmine, which might at first be taken as instance of inept writing, do not violate narrative logic … but join with sociopolitical observations at a higher level to create a new sort of postcolonial narrative logic” (90). Powers thus provides an insight into multiple cultural codes in Mukherjee’s fiction that accrue out of her postcoloniality and immigration.
Mukherjee reinvents the woman-centered oral narrative in the narrative structure and thematics of *Jasmine*. Pushpa Parekh in “Telling Her Tale: Narrative Voices and Gender Roles in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*” (110) draws an analogy between the triadic “silent woman-speaking person-teller of tales” in tracing the evolution of the “complex triad of the Jyoti-Jasmine-Jane” persona in *Jasmine*. The “silent woman” Jyoti of feudal Punjab morphs into the semi urban Jasmine, “the speaking person” of Jullandhar, and finally evolves into the articulate “teller of tales”—Jassy-Jane-Jasmine. According to Parekh, the narrative voice reiterates that immigration is a transformative journey from self-denial to self-realisation.

Gurleen Grewal in “Born Again American: The Immigrant Consciousness in *Jasmine*” lauds Jasmine’s assimilative resilience. She, however, is concerned that Jasmine’s immigrant identity is shaped “not through resolution by a complex synthesis; it simply dissolves the claims of the past” (183). According to Grewal, Mukherjee’s facile portrayal of Jasmine’s diasporic reinvention is a replication of the dominant white American male myth of the American Dream—that reinvention is possible for anyone irrespective of race, class or gender.

The lack of a stable sense of personal and cultural identity is a fatal flaw for immigrants. Jaiwanti Dimri in “From Marriage to Murder: A Comparative Study of *Wife* and *Jasmine*” (70), S.P. Swain in “Dimple in *Wife*: A Study of the Lacerated Self” (83), and M. Rajeshwar in “Sadomasochism as a Literary Device” (91) explore the tragic consequences of immigrants like Dimple “who lack a stable sense of personal and cultural identity” as portrayed in *Wife*. They indict Dimple’s ambivalence and the resulting inability to evolve paradigms
based on the sociocultural realities of her adopted country for her inability to assimilate.

In contrast, S. Indira in “Splintered Self: an Approach to Wife” (169), Indira Bhatt in “Jasmine: An Immigrant’s Attempt at Assimilation” (174), and T. Padma in “From Acculturation to Self-Actualisation: Diasporal Dream in Jasmine” (160) posit Jasmine in Mukherjee’s eponymous novel as an exemplar immigrant. Jasmine’s adaptability and resilience endows her with a cross cultural sensibility. She realizes that “genetic transformation” is a sine qua non for successful assimilation.

Mukherjee reiterates the need for global consciousness in an increasingly interconnected world through her quest novel, The Holder of the World. Laxmi Parasuram in “Holding the Colliding Walls: Cross Cultural Perception in The Holder of the World” (196) and Pradeep Trikhia in “The Holder of the World: Feminist and Cross Cultural Overview” (207) explore the assimilative quest of American Hannah Easton in The Holder of the World who journeys to Mogul India in the seventeenth century. They argue that immigration, for Hannah, is an interior psychological journey. Through her ability to forge connections across cultural barriers and boundaries, Hannah emerges as an exemplar immigrant. Such a cross-cultural sensibility is particularly relevant in the contemporary world of border crossings.

**The Immigrant Experience: Bharati Mukherjee’s Personal Odyssey**

The multiple displacements in Bharati Mukherjee’s life have transformed her as a person and a writer. The first of these relocations occurred when the
Mukherjee family moved to London in the early 1950s. The family relocated to India three years later. Even within the country, the family moved from Calcutta to Bombay in 1961. Thereafter Bharati Mukherjee has lived her life in North America. Her intimate knowledge of immigrant lives invests her writing with authenticity.

As an immigrant, Mukherjee admits that she had to surrender relics of her past and carve a new identity both for herself as a person and a writer. Mukherjee argues that the age of diasporas demands a paradigm shift. According to her, the central premise of biological identity as the sole determiner of a person’s identity needs to be reframed and repositioned. In the American Dreamer, Mukherjee comments thus on the transformative potential of Immigration: “Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration. The experience of cutting myself off from a biological homeland and settling in an adopted homeland that is not always welcoming to its dark-complexioned citizens has tested me as a person and made me the writer I’m today.”

Initially, as an expatriate in North America, Mukherjee identified with an expatriate sensibility—expatriates “knew all too well who and what they were, and what foul fate had befallen them” (Darkness 1-2). In addition she considered herself superior to immigrants whom she describes as “lost souls, put upon and pathetic” (Darkness 6). Today, however, a more mature Mukherjee sees herself as a joyous “immigrant living in a continent of immigrants.” Her exile concerns such as pain and homelessness, bicultural conflicts, and nostalgia are evocatively captured in her two works considered to be representative of the first phase of her

The second phase of Mukherjee’s writing career coincides with her arrival in the United States. She admits, “The transformation as a writer and as a resident of the new world occurred with the act of immigration to the United States.... For me it was a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of imagination.” (*Darkness* 2-3). Her literary oeuvre during this period—*Wife, Darkness* (a collection of short stories), *The Invisible Woman* (essay), and *The Sorrow and the Terror* are representative of her expatriate turmoil and express the anguish of her Canadian experience.

The third phase of Mukherjee’s writing career is distinctive. It coincides with her status as a naturalised citizen of the United States, eight years after she lived in the country. Her exuberant essay *Immigrant Writing: Give us Your Maximalists*, was written on the occasion of her citizenship ceremony. “I’m one of you,” (1) declares Mukherjee as an opener. Although Bharati Mukherjee’s themes continue to centre on migrant lives, one discerns shifts in her perspective. In contrast to the omniscient or ethnocentric perspective of her early works, she now veers towards an immigrant-centric approach. Such an approach focuses on the immigrant’s sense of belonging to the home country and jettisons the nostalgia for the past that belonged to the country of birth. Mukherjee, however, reiterates that such a letting go is not denial or repudiation of the past, but a vision of the past and present as interconnected and on a continuum.
In her later works of fiction, one finds that Mukherjee has repudiated the nostalgia and expatriate anguish of her former self. Instead her exuberant imagination casts immigrant lives in a fictional mould. She sees herself as the voice of "the new immigrants from non-traditional immigrant countries" (Maximalists 1). Their lives offered a canvas for her work—"such energy, such comedy, such sophistication and struggle and hunger to belong." (Maximalists 28). Her professional and personal background and her "history-mandated training as seeing myself as the ‘other’" (Maximalists 29) enabled her to write/express herself as a raconteur of the lives of the new immigrants. According to Mukherjee, immigrants are vibrant and resilient people. They are not only transformed in the adopted country, but also exert a reciprocal influence on the country of adoption. Bharati Mukherjee’s The Middleman and Other Stories (1988), Jasmine (1989), The Holder of the World (1993), Leave it to Me (1998), Desirable Daughters (2003), and The Tree Bride (2004) are representative of Mukherjee as an exuberant immigrant.

Bharati Mukherjee is a naturalised US citizen. Her immigration was voluntary and motivated by her educational aspirations. Mukherjee articulates the politics of immigration that forms the core of her fiction as well as several newspaper and journal articles.

Bharati Mukherjee espouses an expansive view of immigration. "Immigration is a two-way process and both the whites and immigrants were growing into a third thing by this interchange and experience," said Mukherjee in an interview with The Hindustan Times (3). According to her, immigrants transform the culture of their adopted country. They break out of their expatriate
cocoon and assert their rights to be identified as belonging to their adopted country. In American Dreamer, Mukherjee declares, “I’m an American, not an Asian-American. My rejection of hyphenation has been called race treachery, but it is really a demand that America deliver the promises of its dream to all its citizens equally” (1). Mukherjee thus reacts sharply to the prevalent tendency to impose a hyphenated identity only on non-white Americans.

Bharati Mukherjee’s immigrant background thus braids social and political concerns in her writing. One finds it impossible to tease sociopolitical concerns from Mukherjee’s writing. “Others who write stories of migration often talk of arrival at a new place as a loss, the loss of communal memory and the erosion of an original culture. I want to talk of arrival as a gain,” says Mukherjee in American Dreamer (1). Thus the core of Mukherjee’s immigrant vision is her perception of immigration as affirmative. It is a partnership between equals—the immigrants and the host country.

Identity and the Indian Woman

Most of Mukherjee’s novels centre on the experiences of Indian women immigrants and the impact of immigration on their identity. Hence an overview of the factors that construct and shape their identity in the country of birth would be a pointer to their subsequent identity crisis they experience as immigrants.

One’s Identity is encapsulated in the response to the question: “Who am I?” Identity is a trademark that defines a person. Social interaction confers, sustains and alters our identities. Through such a process our identities—who we are and what we are—emerge. The historical concept of identity can be traced to
William James in the nineteenth century. The concept of identity, however, became popular in the 1960s through the works of Erik Erikson. Erikson explored identity in his seminal work on adolescence. In Identity: Youth and Crisis, Erikson defines identity thus: “Identity, includes, but is more than, the sum of all the successive identifications of those earlier years when the child wanted to be, and often was forced to become like the people he depended on” (87). According to Erikson, “an optimal sense of identity” (165) is essential for psycho-social well-being.

Erikson coined the term identity crisis. Identity crisis is the most important conflict people encounter as they negotiate the eight psychosocial or developmental stages in life. In Erikson’s epigenetic stages of human development, adolescence constitutes the fifth stage—the stage of identity versus identity confusion. Each development stage, however, poses concomitant challenges or “psychological crisis” that must be addressed before moving on to the next stage. Failure to do so results in maladaptive coping strategies that become internalised and evoke suboptimal responses in dealing later when the same or similar issue surfaces. Besides identity crisis is often a recurrent phenomenon in response to life changes and the need to reinvent ourselves to adapt to change.

According to Erikson, the period of onset of identity crisis is usually adolescence. An identity crisis is a time in a person’s life when the individual lacks direction, feels unproductive, and does not feel a strong sense of identity. He believed that all individuals have identity crises at some time in their lives. These crises, however, do not necessarily represent a negative but can be a
driving force toward positive resolution. It is mandatory for the crisis to be successfully resolved to face challenges of adulthood. Erikson thus uses the term crisis in a developmental sense to "connote not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential" (96). Such a concept of identity crisis is considered normative and its absence construed as a deviation!

In spite of popular appeal and widespread acceptance, the Eriksonian model of identity formation has been criticised for being andocentric and gynopic. According to Erikson, "Much of a young woman's identity is already defined in her kind of attractiveness and in the selective nature of the search for the man (or men) by whom she wishes to be sought" (283). Erikson thus viewed a woman's identity as dependent on the presence of men in her life and their attitudes towards her.

In contrast to the West, the concept of personhood does not exist for women in India. Individualism is anathema; hardly encouraged or tolerated as a value. Thus identity achievement is not an issue that the Indian girl contends with in her growing up years. Girlhood in India consists of the beginnings of a long internship in activities in the private feminine space—cooking, cleaning, and caring. She is consciously and systematically initiated into the feminine ideal of the 'virtues' of womanhood. Sudhir Kakar in *The Inner World* remarks, "The irony of an Indian girl's coming of age is that to be a good woman and felicitous bride she must be more than ever the perfect daughter" (63). The Indian woman's identity thus evolves through the following reinforcing factors: her life cycle and
childhood, her relationship with her natal and marital family, and the traditional ideas of womanhood that she osmotically absorbs from childhood onwards.

The India girl’s transition to adulthood and maturity is complicated by the following factors: her feminine socialisation, emulation of impossible standards of valorised femininity, her growing sexuality and the associated taboo in a sexually repressive society. Amidst such turmoil and inner confusion, she is transplanted at the time of marriage from her natal home into the alien world of her husband’s home. Thereafter, she is expected to sever emotional loyalties and attachments to parents and other figures of her past life and transfer them to the people in her new life. Thus unconditional adjustment is a moral value that is part of the heritage of Indian girls. Unlike her Western counterpart who is faced with many choices in marriage, it is quite common for the girl in India to have her marriage ‘arranged’ by relatives or friends. Hence for the average girl in India, marriage per se does not precipitate an identity crisis due to conflicts when confronted with multiple choices.

On the other hand, in India, marriage itself is a traumatic transition that the girl in India has to negotiate. It is an interfamilial transplant where she is uprooted from her natal family and expected to reroot effortlessly in the marital family. According to Kakar, “The identity struggle of the adolescent Indian girl is confounded by the coincidence of marriage, the abrupt and total severance of the attachments of childhood and her removal from all that is familiar to a state of lonely dependency on a household of strangers” (76). Thus the identity crisis of the Indian girl stems from the unrealistic demands of such a traumatic transition.
A patriarchal society typically overvalues and privileges men over women. Women are thus subsumed under oppressive social and cultural inferiority imposed on them by the patriarchal ideology. In a traditional society such as India, the Indian woman’s identity is wholly circumscribed by her relationship to significant “others” in her life. According to Vrinda Nabar in Caste as Woman, “More than half of India’s population remains faceless and undefined except in traditional androcentric terms. While women face double discrimination in any society, in India they face triple discrimination: sex-based (stri jati), caste-based (jati), and class-based … To be caste as woman in this context is to live out this triple layered existence” (850). Thus the Indian woman’s derivative identity stems from her relationship to her immediate family. She is defined as her father’s daughter, her brother’s sister, her husband’s wife, and her son/daughter’s mother.

In India, women’s subordination is effected through control over female sexuality through powerful patriarchal ideology that sanctions and legitmises such control. One such ideology is pativratadhrama or the ideology of wifely devotion and chastity. The Indian sensibility has been largely shaped through the stranglehold of tradition and mythology. In the case of Indian woman, they are deeply rooted in her subconscious as ideals of female perfection or purity. The normative models for Hindu women down the ages have been the mythological women Sita and Savithri—exemplars of sacrifice and self-effacement. Such expectations are an ideological corset that circumscribe the inner life of women in India. This has far-reaching implications in immigration.
Thus the psyche of Indian woman is colonised by various ingeniously built cultural models of womanhood in mythology and religion implemented by the agents of patriarchy under the guise of “benevolent paternalism.” This is the socio-cultural and psychic legacy of the birth country that the Indian immigrant woman carries as baggage when she parachutes as an immigrant into the country of adoption.

The Novels of Bharati Mukherjee

Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction reflects the experience of women immigrants in the US, notably Indians. Her works capture women in transition—in a clash between conflicting cultures. She works on the process by which they adapt to their socio-cultural environment and the transformations in their psychological landscape. A synopsis of Bharati Mukherjee’s seven novels is given below.

The Tiger’s Daughter (1972): Mukherjee’s debut novel is a poignant account of an expatriate’s journey to her country of birth to discover her self and her sense of belonging. The protagonist, 22-year-old Tara Banerjee Cartwright, visits Calcutta after a seven-year stay in an American college campus. Tara straddles two diverse cultures—her country of birth and her adopted country. Simultaneously, her long stay in her adopted country causes her to question conflicting values of the two worlds. In addition, her marriage to an American classmate, David Cartwright, intensifies her bicultural conflicts. As the novel unfolds, Tara realises the distancing between the Calcutta of her growing up nourished in her exilic imagination and the Calcutta of the present. Her personal growth and transformation as an exile had irrevocably distanced her from her people and her birth country. At the end of her journey, Tara realises albeit
painsfly, that life in the adopted country is a better alternative to the lost glory of a home.

**Wife** (1975): Mukherjee’s surrealistic second novel, *Wife*, deals with the predicament of Dimple Basu, an Indian immigrant wife. The first part of the novel centers on Dimple’s claustrophobic early days in India and her marriage. The second part deals with Dimple’s life as a married woman in India and her subsequent immigration to the US. The last part is an account of Dimple’s struggle to cope with diasporic burdens following the displacement of immigration. In the climax of the novel, Dimple, unable to cope with acculturative stress engendered by immigration, murders her husband in a fit of psychotic rage.

**Jasmine** (1989): This eponymous novel traces the odyssey of Jyoti Vijh, a girl from rural India. She emigrates as an illegal immigrant to the US to fulfill her late husband’s immigrant dream. Jyoti assumes different names and identities—Jasmine, Jase, and Jane, and her encounters with people and situations enable her to assimilate into mainstream American society.

**The Holder of the World** (1993): The quest narrative straddles North America and South Asia. The main plot centres on the enterprising immigrant Hannah Easton, a White Puritan who emigrates to India in the seventeenth century. Hannah later emerges as “Salem Bibi” and her successful assimilation with her adopted country is central to the story. Mukherjee threads the main and subsidiary plots through the narrator Beigh Master’s serendipitous sighting of the “Salem Bibi” in a series of miniature Moghal paintings in the Massachusetts Maritime Museum. Through her intuitive identification with Hannah Easton,
Beigh Masters undertakes a quest to assemble the jigsaw pieces of her remote ancestor’s life.

*Leave it to Me* (1998): Mukherjee explores the changing identities of an individual through the protagonist, the self-christened Devi Dee. Abandoned in an Indian orphanage in the late 1960s by her American mother and Eurasian father, Devi Dee grows up in New York as Debby DiMartino, brought up by adoptive parents. Devi’s quest for identity through her search for her biological parents leads to a sense of closure.

*Desirable Daughters* (2003): The novel traces the lives of the Bhattacharjee sisters—Padma, Parvati, and Tara as they struggle to resolve identity issues in a fast changing world. Set in India and America, it weaves together a portrayal of a traditional Bengali family and a contemporary story of an Indian immigrant woman Tara. The youngest of three daughters of an industrial tycoon, Tara is the only daughter who concedes to an arranged marriage to Bish Chatterjee, the Silicon Valley “poster boy.” Tara exemplifies a distinct break from tradition. She is a divorcee and a single parent who has a live-in relationship with Andy, a Hungarian. When unforeseen events unfold in her life and those of her sisters, she undertakes a journey of self-discovery to discover her roots and her family history. Although the three sisters are far removed from home, each of them in their own way, rethinks and rediscovers for themselves the true meaning of home—a place where they truly belong.

*The Tree Bride* (2004): Tara Chatterjee of *Desirable Daughters* is the protagonist-narrator who tells her tale in a confessional mode. Following a
planned attack on their home and lives, Tara Chatterjee is reunited with her
husband Bish who is seriously injured. When the story opens, a mellow Tara is
pregnant with his child. Tara, 36, is researching the life and times of her great-
great aunt TaraLata the “tree bride” whom she hopes to immortalise in her novel.
Tara’s search for her roots that began in Desirable Daughters receives a further
impetus following the attack on her family in San Francisco. Tara intuitively
suspects that there is an inexplicable connection between the attacker and her
family that spans generations. Her journey to India to research the life of her
great-great aunt also enables Tara to come to terms with the interconnectedness
and interpenetration of life in subtle and obvious ways.

Chapterisation: An Overview

The thesis views immigration through a gender framework. The seven
novels of Bharati Mukherjee are analysed within the framework of immigration
as a source of identity conflict and the immigrant woman’s search for identity.
Most of the protagonists in Mukherjee’s narratives are Indian women immigrants
to the US. Only one woman is a seventeenth century White immigrant to India.
Contrary to being regarded as “invisible,” and as secondary to the main story,
Bharati Mukherjee accords women a central role as “subjects” of her fiction.
Bharati Mukherjee explores the identity crisis and the search for identity of
immigrant women through her narratives. They reflect the psychological crisis
and unique personal and cultural contexts of displacement characteristic of
immigration. In Mukherjee’s narratives, the geography of immigration does not
serve as a mere backdrop. On the contrary, it is organic and central to the process
of psychological conflicts and identity crisis experienced by the women immigrants in the process of discovering their identity. Thus Mukherjee challenges common stereotypes of immigrant women as passive and dependant; as supportive/secondary actors in the immigrant story.

There are several feminist themes and concerns in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels. Hence they readily lend themselves to feminist analysis through a gender framework. Mukherjee, however, disapproves being branded as a feminist writer as she finds it restrictive. She says, “I don’t call myself any ‘ist’ and I don’t follow any ‘isms.’ My women characters are strong, durable ... are doers and they shy away from too much self- analysis, too much verbalising about the state of being. They dislike rhetoric, indulging in feminist rhetoric, but end up really changing their lives” (BBC interview, 4). Thus Mukherjee articulates her feminist stance as different from mainstream White feminism.

The thesis analyses immigration from a psycho-social perspective with emphasis on immigration as a gendered experience. It analyses the role of gender as a socio-political construct and the ideology of patriarchy, patriarchal institutions, values, and mindsets in constructing the identity of women in India. Such an analysis would enable one to comprehend their subsequent identity crisis and their attempts towards resolution as immigrants. For Mukherjee’s Indian immigrant women, oppression is systemic in the institutional structures of their birth country. Besides they insidiously internalise such prescriptive gender stereotypes and thereby participate in their own subordination.
The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter **Conceptual Framework** provides an introduction to immigration and related concepts such as acculturation, assimilation, and the need for a gendered perspective of immigration. It analyses immigration from a psycho-social perspective with an emphasis on immigration as a gendered experience. Other salient features include a biographical sketch of Bharati Mukherjee, review of literature, Mukherjee's views on immigration, and the use of gender concepts as an analytical tool.

The second chapter **Identity Formation of Mukherjee's Immigrant Women** attempts to provide an insight into the psychological and socio-cultural factors that have constructed their identity in the country of their birth. An insight into these factors and patriarchal values on identity formation enables a better understanding of the peculiar cultural conflicts and identity crisis experienced by immigrant women.

The third chapter **Displacement and Identity Crisis** views immigration as a crisis of displacement. It explores the psychological experiences of immigrants and the impact on their identity. The identity of immigrant women is rooted in the traditions and culture of their birth country. Using immigration and displacement as leit motif, the chapter specifically analyses factors that generate psychological stress due to psychological crisis of immigration. It analyses the impact of immigration into an individualistic society in refashioning the identity of women structured in a traditional (Indian) society.
The fourth chapter **The Immigrant Journey as a Search for Identity** views immigration as a psychological journey. As immigrants cross geographical boundaries, it necessitates concomitant psychological transformations. Using the journey metaphor, the chapter explores immigration as a quest for self-discovery and traces the psychological growth and transformation of Bharati Mukherjee's immigrant women.

The fifth chapter concludes the process of restructuring of identity of Mukherjee’s immigrant women and sums up their unique personal journeys.