CHAPTER - 1

INTRODUCTION
Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940, to an upper-middle class Hindu Brahmin family in Calcutta. The second of three daughters of Sudhir Lal and Bina Mukherjee, she lived with above 50 relatives until the age of eight. Born into an intelligent family, Mukherjee and her sisters were always given ample academic opportunities. In 1947, her father was given a job in England and he brought his family to live there until 1951, which gave her an opportunity to develop and perfect her English language skills.

She earned a B.A. with honors from the University of Calcutta in 1959. She and her family then moved to Baroda, where she studied for her Master’s Degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture. Having decided to be a writer since childhood, Mukherjee went to the University of Iowa in to attend the prestigious Writer’s Workshop. She planned to study there to earn her Master’s of Fine Arts, then return to India to marry a bridegroom of her father’s choice.

However, a lunch break on September 19, 1963, changed that plan. She married Clark Blaise, a Canadian writer, in a lawyer’s office. She received her M.F.A. that same year, then went on to earn her Ph.D. in English and comparative literature from the University of Iowa in 1969.

1968, She immigrated to Canada with her husband and became a naturalized citizen in 1972. Her 14 years in Canada were some of the hardest of her life, as she found herself discriminated against and treated as a member of the minority. She has spoken in many interviews of her difficult life in Canada, a country that she sees as hostile to its immigrants and one that opposes the concept of cultural assimilation. Although those years were challenging, she was able to write her first two novels, *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1971) and *Wife* (1975), while working up to professorial status at McGill University in Montreal. During those years she also collected many of the
sentiments found in her first collection of short stories, *Darkness* (1985), a collection that in many sections reflects her mood of cultural separation while living in Canada.

Finally fed up with Canada, she and her family moved to the United States in 1980, where she was sworn in as a permanent U.S. resident. Continuing to write, in 1986 she was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant. After holding several posts at various colleges and universities, she ultimately settled in 1989 at the University of California Berkeley.

Known for her playful and developed language, she rejects the concept of minimalism, she considers her work a celebration of her emotions, and herself a writer of the Indian Diaspora. Her main theme throughout her writing discusses the condition of Asian immigrants in North America. While the characters in all her works are aware of the brutalities and violence that surround them, she generally draws them as survivors. She has often been praised for her understated prose style and her ironic plot developments. As a writer, she has an eye to view the world, and her characters share that quality. She prefers to refer to herself as an American of Bengali-Indian origin.

*The Tiger’s Daughter* is a fictionalized story drawing from her own first years of marriage. The protagonist, Tara Banerjee, returns to India after marrying an American and faces a different Indian. This first novel addresses her personal difficulties of being caught between two worlds, homes and cultures and is an examination of who she is and where she belongs. Similarly, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* co-authored with her husband, is a shared account of the first trip the couple took to India together after being married. Each offer a different India through their separate journals, the two tell the tale of a relationship that faces the daily difficulties of cultural barriers.
Her second novel, *Wife*, is a more distant story that sees Dimple, a young, naive Indian woman, trying to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect, passive wife with the demands of her new American life. As a young woman who was raised to be passive, Dimple lacks the inner strength and resources it takes to cope in New York city as the young wife in an arranged marriage. Again in this novel, she deals with the complications that come from being thrown between two worlds and the strength and courage it takes to survive and, ultimately, live. *Wife* was often dismissed because its heroine fails to make the transition from one world to another, and was often judged to be “weak”. Although both of her first books weave complex tales, they lack the strength of storytelling that her later works are more successful at capturing.

*Jasmine*, her most popularly read novel, was generally received enthusiastically, but there was some criticism that it was too short and its plot too contrived to be a really successful work of fiction. It is a novel that stems from an earlier short story from *The Middleman and Other Stories* and was expanded to a story of a young widow who uproots herself from her life in India and re-roots herself in search of a new life and the image of America. It is a story of dislocation and relocation as the title character continually sheds lives to move into other roles. In it, the novelist rejoices in the idea of assimilation and makes it clear that Jasmine needs to travel to America to make something significant of her life. What the novelist hoped that people would read in the story is not only Jasmine’s story and change, but also the story of a changing America.

Mukherjee has established herself as a powerful member of the American literary scene. As she said in an interview in the Massachusetts Review, “the immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformations in America and at the same time they alter the country’s appearance and psychological make-up.” And so
we are given a writer whose voice tells the tales of her own experiences to demonstrate the changing shape of American society.


Like the narrator of her novel *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee has changed citizenships and lived in various cultural milieus. As a writer for almost three decades her creative sensibility has undergone many changes. There has been an ‘on-going quest’ from ‘expatriation to immigration’ in her writings. Her major concern as a writer has been the life of South-Asian expatriates/ immigrants in U.S.A. and Canada. An examination of her works reveals a movement from expatriation to immigration. This movement coincides with her immigration from Canada to U.S.A. Her interpretation of and reaction to her experience in Canada led her to see herself as an
expatriate. In the U.S.A. there is a growing recognition of herself as an immigrant with strong attachment to America.

Uma Parameswaran considers the phrase “the expatriate sensibility” as a legitimate literary term in the context of today’s Commonwealth Literature. Christine Gomez gives a still more perceptive definition of the term ‘expatriation’:

Expatriation is actually a complex state of mind and emotion which includes a wistful longing for the past, often symbolized by the ancestral home, the pain of exile and homelessness, the struggle to maintain the difference between oneself and the new, unfriendly surroundings, an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the host country and a refusal to accept the identity forced on one by the environment. The expatriate builds a cocoon around herself/himself as a refuse from cultural dilemmas and from the experienced hostility or unfriendliness in the new country.

Faced with rejection, the new comer clings to his ethnic identity. As Viney Kirpal observes, “Revival of ethnicity makes bearable to some extent the marginal shadowy existence of these migrants in the new land.”

Bharati Mukherjee admits of being subjected to racial discrimination in Canada. While her husband’s creative acumen was recognized, her potentialities went ignored and unresponded to Canada’s hostility to Indians. She experienced herself as ‘a psychological expatriate’ in Canada and clung to her ethnic identity “I remember how bracing it was to cloak myself in my own Brahminical elegance.” She became a Civil Rights activist in Canada and wrote about the effect of racism on individuals. Not only in the personal and political writings of Mukherjee but also in her Canadian fiction, had the experience of expatriation manifested. Life in Canada - fourteen years
of it - tested her spirit to the breaking point. Her essay “Invisible Woman” is a blistering reflection on those years. She writes “Many including myself left (Canada) unable to keep our twin halves together.” Viewing herself as a writer with two novels to her credit, Bharati Mukherjee identified V. S. Naipaul as her model in 1977. In *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, she says

In myself I detect a pale and immature reflection of Naipaul; it is he who has written most movingly about the pain and absurdity of art and exile, of ‘third world art’ and exile among the former colonizers; the tolerant incomprehension of hosts, the absolute impossibility of ever having a home, a ‘desh’.  

Identification with Naipaul at this stage evidences that Mukherjee treated herself as an expatriate writer on the basis of her first two novels.

The process of change from expatriation to immigration got off during Mukherjee’s stay in India in 1973-74. She recalls, “The year in India had forced me to view myself more as an immigrant than an exile.” The realization of fluid identities and alternate realities too could be traced to this sojourn in India as she further observes:

In India, different perceptions of reality converge without embarrassing anyone. My fear in India had shown me that I did the need that I did not need to discard my western education in order to retrieve the dim shape of my Indian one.

The years between *The Tiger’s Daughter* and *Darkness* mark a change in the inner world of Bharati Mukherjee. In 1985, distancing herself from the earlier stance of an expatriate, she voices the futility of such a stance. In the Introduction to darkness, she says that until the spring of 1984, “I had thought of myself, inspite of a
white husband and two assimilated sons as an expatriate.” She defines expatriates as conscious knower’s of their fate and immigrants - in particular to Canada - as “lost souls bet upon and pathetic.” In respect of the stylistic devices of an expatriate writer, she referred to irony, so tellingly employed by Naipaul:

Like V. s. Naipaul, in whom I imagined a model, I tried to explore state-of-the-art expatriation. Like Naipaul, I used a mordant and self-protective irony in describing my character’s pain. Irony promised both detachment from and superiority over, those well-bred post-colonials much like myself, adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong. 15

Thus, 1984 is a turning point in Mukherjee’s sensibility and style. She says “The Book I dream of updating is no longer A Passage to India, it is Call It Sleep.” The stories collected in Darkness mark a distinct departure in that Mukherjee is no longer an aloof expatriate writer. The expatriate writer nurses his grievances, parades his pain of exile and become a “permanent scold”. This adversely affects his sensibility and his writing.

In the U.S.A. Bharati Mukherjee sees herself as an immigrant writer. In her works which were either completed or fully written here she explores the immigrant sensibility. In the Introduction to Darkness she lays bare her position and creative priorities:

The transformation as writer and as resident of the new world, occurred with the act of immigration to the U.S.A.....For me it is a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation, to the exuberance of immigration 16
The movement from expatriation to immigration is also reflected in the choice of the writers who shaped her conscience. After outgrowing and discarding the posture of an expatriate she rejected Naipaul as a model and chose Bernard Malamud whose central concern was the life of minorities and its agonies. Though partially influenced by Isaac Babel, Conrad and Chekhov, she followed Malamud as his writings instilled unusual confidence in her:

Like Malamud, I write about a minority community which escapes the ghetto and adapts itself to the patterns of the dominant American culture. Like Malamud’s my work seems to find quite naturally a moral center. Isaac Babel is another author who is a literary ancestor for me. I also feel a kinship with Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov. But Malamud most of all speaks to me as a writer and I admire his work a great deal. Immersing myself in his work gave me the self-confidence to write about my own community. 17

Malamud taught her how to overcome being viewed as the other in a different cultural milieu. While Malamud’s characters are from poor classes, humble shoemakers, tailors and bakers, Mukherjee’s immigrants are doctors, university professors, businessmen and women married to upwardly mobile professionals. Both address themselves to the diasporic experience of cultural alienation. Entering Malamud’s literary space enabled Mukherjee to move her fiction from the constantly shifting margin to the unstable and shifting centre which has no fixed place. Both employ humour as a means of transcending one’s fate in the face of chaos, displacement and alienation. While Malamud’s characters retain their Yiddish accents and become only partly Americanized, many of Mukherjee’s immigrants speak and act American. One of the reasons for her adoption of Malamud as a literary mentor can be seen as a
strategy to place herself in the working class Jewish tradition and thus to lend authenticity to her delineation of her socially, if not always economically, marginal characters. The immigrant characters of both the authors dream westward, specially to California, the furthest geographical distance from their Eastern roots, where possibly they can re-shape their lives. It was this indebtedness to Malamud that prompted her to dedicate her first collection of stories *Darkness* to the great Jewish writer. It should, however, not be construed that her fiction is slavishly imitative of Malamud in character. In the same interview she explains her fundamental dissimilarities with Malamud’s vision:

> I was born into a Hindu Bengali Brahmin family which means I have a different sense of self, of existence, and of mortality, than do writers like Malamud. I believe that our souls can be reborn in another body, so the perspective I have about a single characters life is different from that of an American writer who believes that he has only one life.  

Thus, her approach to life and its problems is deeply moored in her Indian upbringing.

Maya Manju Sharma refers to this aspect of her creative personality:

> In her fiction Mukherjee handles Western themes and settings as well as characters who are westernized or bicultural. Yet she is forced to admit that the very structure of her imagination is essentially Hindu, and essentially moral.

In Alison interview she draws the demarcating line also between Naipaul and herself as writers of the third world countries:

> V. S. Naipaul.....writes about living in perpetual exile and the impossibility of ever having a home. Like Naipaul, I am a writer from the third world but unlike him I felt India by choice to settle in the US. I have adopted this country as my home. I
view myself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island.  

Having ascertained her affinity with American authors, Mukherjee spells her aim, “My task as an author is to make my intricate and unknown world comprehensible to mainstream American readers.” She considers herself as the repository and exponent of the experiences rendered by immigration. Through a review of her own several transitions, she has evolved a credo for the new immigrant voices, which she calls “Maximalism”. This she claims is the key to introducing diversity to America’s fairly stagnant “Minimalist fiction” of “mainstream”, “collective dread” and common cause. Her attack is leveled at writers such as Updike and Cheever. According to her, Earnest Hemingway and William Faulkner gained some kind of international readership. The later writers promoted by market place hype were those who pretended to speak for America but used only limited categories of subjects like Vietnam, “dead end jobs and midlife crises.” Their tepid fiction and timid refusal to take position against other currents within America caused a dullness to set into the literature of the seventies “Minimalism” according to her was a deft short hand for experience which was supposed typical but, in actuality, ignored major change America was passing through.

“An epic was washing up on its shores,” says she. The immigration offices provide the stage for the new drama. She sees immigrants who are confident, sophisticated, and poised, as ones who will not melt into an American mainstream but visibly expand the margins of what one may call “the American experience.” These new Americans are neither nostalgic for their personal past nor afraid of the unfamiliar present. Their main strategy is adaptation without surrender. To honour their potential and vitality, she formulates her “Maximalist” credo:
I can imagine a poster over the United States Court House WELCOME MAXIMALISTS, HELLO EXPANSIONISTS. The New America I know and have been living in for the last seven years is a world, by definition of doubles.....They have all shed past lives and languages, and have travelled half the world in every direction to come here and begin again. They are bursting with stories, too many to begin telling. They have lived through centuries of history in a single lifetime...Village born, colonized, traditionally raised, educated. What they have assimilated in 30 years has taken the West 10 times that number of years to create. Time travel is a reality... I have seen it in my own life. Bionic men and women are living among us. 21

She is her own theorist and exemplar since her novels illustrate the credo of immigrant writing as a “Maximalist” act. During her 1989 tour of India, she refused to answer questions about her “Indianness” several times. Yet the audience saw her sari-clad, dark-eyed, dark-haired, retaining an obvious Bengali-Brahmin name, and heard her use Indian material in the extracts she read from her fiction. Malashri Lal aptly comments:

Mukherjee has deliberately problematized her identity, perhaps over-reacting to the likelihood of being enclosed in a coterie culture geographically and ideologically separate from her chosen home and citizenship. One must allege here that her sense of Indianness is narrow, restrictive, somewhat bigoted, for no writer is characterized by his or her passport details. What matters is the literary material to which imagination is super imposed. 22
There are marked stages in the evolving creative vision of Bharati Mukherjee. With each passing year we encounter a more confident author, a more daring woman. Nothing happens automatically, nothing happens suddenly. There is always a deliberate and conscious effort on the part of the author contrived by the favourable circumstances. No doubt, that we encounter an entirely changed writer in *Darkness* but this dynamics of growth is present in *The Tiger’s Daughter* and *Wife* also. In both these novels the author’s voice is omniscient and irony her strategy. However, they are not written to imply, as Jasbir Jain says, “total rejection or a ruthless questioning of tradition or a love-hate relationship with the native heritage.”23

Given her moral and metaphysical inclinations, it is all the more surprising that she should, see herself as an immigrant American rather than an expatriate Indian. “Language gives me my identity,” tells she, “I am the writer I am because I write in North American English about immigrant in the New World.” Her immigration is not so much her move from the Calcutta of the East to the Calcutta of the West by way of Canada, as it is her move from the English of Jane Austen to the American of Walt Whitman. She expresses her purpose in precise terms telling about the content of *The Holder of the World:* 24

I did not want *The Holder of the world* to be a traditional historical novel, a period piece. I love history and I am fascinated by the handling of data, what is called information management. As the novel grew draft by draft, I saw a way to bring these together....To me this was an experiment in virtual reality, a way of revising reliving history instead of rewriting it. I wanted to set up for American and Indian audiences how much Asia contributed to the notion of an American or European identity. 25
Leave it to me 26 the fifth work of fiction by Bharati Mukherjee sees the author following the conventional strategy of her works: the phenomenon of migration, the feeling of alienation, the status of new immigrants and lastly, the struggle of Indian women. Leave it to me tells the story of a Californian hippie bearing a child, a result of their peace trip to India. “Guru”, a character in the novel has the dubious characteristic of leaving signs of used and abused women, murders, rapes and crime committed in India and illegitimate children. In the past, one such child is given away to an orphanage, which names her “Faustine”. The child is seen to be later adopted by an Italian family called Di Martino. In spite of receiving all love and affection from her foster family, the girl, now rechristened as Debby, grows to be aware of her distinction. The novel is a comprehensive work of Debby’s pursuit of uncovering her past, her origin and the biological parents. There are significant shifts in the identities of the individuals and their natures.

In Desirable Daughters 27 Bharati Mukherjee compares the life of Tara to the lives of her two older sisters. One is settled in Bombay and another famous television personality in New Jersey. She also contrasts the Indian community in California to the one in Jakson Height, New Jersey. Tara’s life seems to be a reflection of the lives of people who are away from their homeland. It brings to light the joy and sorrow that immigrants face almost daily. To breakaway or to belong, to stay or to go. Tara’s impression of present day India is based on long calls she makes to her sister and from the fragments, she picks from visits to Bombay. Ironically Tara does want to belong somewhere, walking the fine line between old Indian traditions and the new liberated American lifestyle.

The story starts dramatically, describing an event involving Tara’s grandmother. Next Mukherjee introduces us to Tara who is the narrator of this book.
Tara is face to face with a young man who claims he was born out of wedlock to the eldest sister. Tara is portrayed as a brave, caring and considerate mother constantly trying to approach a problem in the best possible way. Tara is articulate and very loyal to her family. Mukherjee also beautifully captures the snobbery in the Indian community. In the last chapter of the novel, we get a view about Bengali lifestyle. Mukherjee traces the ancestors from the early part of the twentieth century. A subject of myth is the iron will of Tara’s grandmother, and then she goes on to describe Tara’s parents, their views on religion and philosophy. She also shows us the brave free thinking mindset of some Bengali leader’s. In the novel, Bharati Mukherjee demonstrates the positive energy of her women characters and while doing so she discovers a lot about her family, ancestors and British Raj.

The Tree Bride, sequel to Desirable Daughters continues to follow the life of Tara Chaterjee. She is trying to reconcile with her husband, raise her son and research her family history. Back in colonial India her great-great aunt, Tara Lata Gangooly, married a tree when she was five after her fiancé was killed. She then spent her life as a resistance fighter against the British Raj. Tara also finds a woman whose British grandfather had a direct connection to the tree bride. Henceforth, brings out Tara’s journey into her past with several old connections and coincidences. The novel moves back and forth across time and continents as Tara tries to find the connections and coincidences of her past and present.

According to Mukherjee, there are two kinds of writers - those who confirm what the public wants to know, and the other kind who disturb, interrogate the existing patterns. She clearly sees herself as belonging to the second variety. She tells Vrinda Nabar:
Such writers are often misread. I sometimes think I’ve been too smart for my own good. I see a writer as always being in a minority of one, stating what is unsettling and disturbing. Knowledge and empathy have nothing to do with inherited race. A writer’s identity is not exclusively biological: it is about the imagination claiming its territory and finding its own niche there.²⁹

That she is an autobiographical writer is the common place of critical literature on her. She pointed to her expanding vision to an interviewer:

I have been wise enough to move away from particular autobiographical concerns - that my themes are larger, my strategies more complex....Multiculturalism/diversity are key words for being American; they’ve also what I think are dramatizing, injecting, ‘quickening’ my fiction.³⁰

Indian critics have invariably viewed Mukherjee’s non-native concerns unfavourably. She explained her position to Jerry Pinto:

I think my position has been misunderstood largely in India. I insist on being considered an American writer because I want America to realise that in the late 20th Century there can be no American Centre and periphery ... I am fighting the American establishment to be regarded as central. I want to destroy the whole notion that Asians or people of a different colour are ‘sojourners’ whereas those who arrived in America from Germany or Sweden are ‘settlers’. It’s also a way of resisting exoticisation.³¹
Knowing full well that she would have been more popular by grappling with Indian subjects and by playing down native values, she chose a different theme to ensure authenticity of experience.

I could have been a greater success if I had stuck to Indian themes because that would have made it easy for the Establishment to slot me as an Indian Writer. But I don’t think one can live in America and work there and still write about an India that has changed while one has been away.  

Mukherjee’s latest novel *NEW MISS INDIA*, (May 2011) has not been taken up for analysis in the present Work.
Works Cited


16. Bharati Mukherjee, *Introduction to Darkness*. Print


19. Maya Manju Sharma, *Bharati Mukherjee Critical Perspective* Ed. Print


32. Ibid