CHAPTER - 2

PLOT, STRUCTURE AND THEMES OF HER NOVELS
In this chapter I intend to work out themes, plot and structure of Bharati Mukherjee’s novels. A tentative picture of her works is given to show how far she has succeeded in her attempt to present the issues undertaken in her fiction. In her novels *Jasmine* \(^1\) and *The Tiger’s Daughter* \(^2\), Bharati Mukherjee has shown a dual cultural shock. Jasmine and Tara leaves their respective countries in search of their dreams. This migration or cultural transplant leads to a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice. The novelist has avoided the immigrant writer’s temptation to fall in the trap of glorifying his native country. She has presented a fascinating study of the problem of a displaced person in America as well as India. Jasmine leaves India in search of the American Dream while Tara plans a trip to India in search of the Indian dream.

Jasmine’s fate had been predicted by an astrologer very early in her life. He had foretold widowhood and exile with the forewarning that nobody could escape from his or her fate. Her journey through life led Jasmine through many transformations-Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane through geographical locales like Punjab, Florida, New York, Iowa and finally towards California. At every stage of her life Jasmine revolted against her fate.

The narrative shifts between the past and present, between India of her earlier life and America of the present. The past is Jyoti’s childhood in the small village of Hasanpur, Punjab, her marriage to Prakash, the young ambitious city man.

The present was her life as Jane in Iowa, where she was a live-in companion to Bud Ripplemeyer, a small-town banker. Bud was fascinated by her foreignness, but he never asked her India. He courted her because she was alien. The American, experience shocked Jane and disgusted her many a time:
This country has so many ways of humiliating; of disappointing....There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams. (Jasmine 38)

In the process of her transformation, Jane was seized by a longing to belong. She closely identifies herself with Bud’s adopted son “Du” a Vietnamese because he was an immigrant like herself. Both had seen death closely.

Both Du and Jasmine were in a hurry to become American. They tried to forget the nightmares of their early lives. They had just to start letting go. “Let go just one thing like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing the tikka on the forehead-the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole.” (Jasmine 41)

America, the land of dreams had many disillusions in store for her. Lillian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady in Florida, offered her a home, and also to several illegal immigrants. In New York, Jasmine was shocked by the sight of beggars, one of whom cursed her as a “foreign bitch” when she refused him alms. The taxi driver in New York was a migrant doctor from Kabul, who lived like dogs, because they had taken everything from them. On the streets of New York Jasmine saw more greed and more people like herself, “New York was an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens.” (Jasmine 43)

The experience with the Professor’s family was even more frustrating. “I was spiraling into depression being the fortress of Punjabiness in their house.....In Flushing I felt immured. An imaginary brick wall popped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future. I was a prisoner doing unreal time.” (Jasmine 44)

The biggest shock to Jasmine was the truth of the Professorji’s means of earning a livelihood. He was not a Professor but an importer and sorter of human hair.
America had not robbed him of his self-respect. “He needed to work here, but he didn’t have to like it. He had sealed his heart when he’d left home....He was a ghost hanging on.” (Jasmine 45)

Bharati Mukherjee supplements Jasmine’s immigrant experiences with similar experience of Letita from Trinidad, and Jamaica from Barbados. Jane was shocked by the switching of relationships in America.

In America nothing really lasts. I can say that now, and it doesn’t shock me. But I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We arrive so eager, to learn, to adjust, to participate; only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won’t disintegrate.

(Jasmine 49)
The final crisis of the book comes when Jane is confronted with the souring home in search for his family, destabilizes her. She is caught between her duty towards the cripple Bud and her love for Taylor. She makes the final choice. She doesn’t feel guilty, but relieved. She has stopped thinking of herself as Jane. She feels potent enough once again to reposition her stars. Time would draw its own conclusions about her true identity. “Adventure, risk transformation-the frontier is pushing indoors. She cries through all the lives she has lived and for all her dead....I am out of the door...greedy with wants and reckless with hope.” (Jasmine 50)

*The Tiger’s Daughter* also reflects the confrontation between illusion and reality. But *The Tiger’s Daughter* had adopted the technique of documentation to bring out the contrast between two worlds and two attitudes. An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it. Tara was packed off by her father at early age of fifteen for America, because he was prompted
by suspicion and pain about his country. Tara is homesick in Poughkeepsie. Little things pained her. She sensed discrimination if her roommate did not share her mango chutney. She defended her family and her country vehemently. She prayed to Kali for strength, so that she would not break down before the Americans. New York was extraordinary and it had driven her to despair: “One day when she had thought she could not possibly survive, she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make the apartment more Indian.” *(The Tiger’s Daughter 34)*

It was fate that she fell in love with an American. It seems a device adopted by the writer around which she can weave her plots. Tara’s husband David was Western; she was dutifully devious in her marriage. She could not communicate the finer nuances of her family background and life in Calcutta. Her husband asked naive questions about Indian customs and traditions, she felt completely insecure in an alien atmosphere. “Madison Square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner.” *(The Tiger’s Daughter 39)*

After a gap of seven years Tara planned a trip to India, for year’s she had dreamed of this return. She believed that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be gone if she could return home to Calcutta. Bharati Mukherjee leads her heroine through a series of adventures and misadventures to a final self-realization and reconciliation. Tara’s homesick eyes noticed many changes in the city of Calcutta. She was outraged, and could not respond to these changes. She longed for the Bengal of Satyajit Ray, children running through cool green spaces, aristocrats despairing in music rooms of empty palaces. What confronted her was a restive city. Calcutta was losing its memories in a bonfire of effigies, buses and trams. An appetite for the grotesque and taken over the city: “Tragedy was not uncommon in Calcutta.
The newspapers were full of epidemics, collusions, fatal quarrels and starvation, stretching before her was the vision of modern India.” (*The Tiger’s Daughter* 51)

The writer interlinks the events like Tara’s visit to a funeral pyre at the river bank, her meeting a small beggar girl afflicted with leprosy, the vision of beggar children eating off the street, the superficialities in the lives of her friends, the riots and demonstrations and her claustrophobic rape by the politician Tuntunwala to bring out the trauma of Tara’s visit to India. Tara’s visit to Darjeeling is also marred by ugly and violent incidents.

Many of Tara’s doubts and conflicts are resolved by the strength, determination and quiet dignity of her parents. Tara realized that her earlier responses to Calcutta had also been similarly impatient. The visit to the ashram of Mata Kananbala Devi makes her share her love for her mother as well as the worshippers. The Indian dream is shattered but the writer leads the heroine to a final reconciliation: “Camac street had felt the first stirrings of death. With new dreams like Nayapur, Tara’s Calcutta was disappearing. New dreams occurred with each new bull-dozer incision in the green romantic hills. Slow learners like Tara were only victims.” (*The Tiger’s Daughter* 56)

At the end of the novel, Tara is involved in a violent demonstration, in which Joyonto Roy Chawdhary, a symbol of the old world order is brutally beaten to death. Pronob the youth tries to save him, but is himself injured in the process. This was a course of history which could not be stopped.

A close experience of both the worlds-the Western and the Indian gives Bharati Mukherjee an authentic and objective perspective with a delicious combination of malice, charm, irony and sympathy. She pushes both her heroines to the edges of their worlds, and liberates them for a new world order. One can question
whether being an immigrant has been a deterrent to Mukherjee’s own creativity. But it cannot be denied that hers is a voice which demands our attention.

Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* and *Jasmine* also depict the journeys of two young women to the U.S for different reasons. Both of them pass through torturous physical, mental and emotional agony. Jasmine starts her life in the U.S with a murder, Dimple rounds up her stay there with a murder. In their actions and reactions there is a striking semblance in spite of the wide difference between their temperaments and circumstances.

Dimple Dasgupta, the pliant, docile, obedient and submissive daughter of a middle-class Bengali family marries Amit Basu, an ambitious engineer, chosen by her parents; Delay in marriage had made her very nervous and anxious so when she is married to a worthy groom by Indian standards of marriage, her chances of happiness ought to be high. That she is disillusioned immediately after the marriage. She does not like the new name ‘Nandini’ given to her by her mother-in-law.

An average normal Indian woman usually exults in her motherhood: “She turns towards motherhood with an overpowering zest, with the enthusiasm of a child discovering that it can walk...As she lacks companionship, her husband having found no time for her, she turns towards her children for companionship and emotional fulfillment.” Dimple on the contrary successfully manipulates the termination of her pregnancy for the very simple reason that she wants to go to the U.S without any relics from her old life “I want everything to be nice and new.”

In the U.S Dimple is left alone with Amit. Back home she had held him in high esteem. The commendable comments and remarks of her friends and mother had drawn her attention to her husband’s virtues and qualities but in the U.S odds are against him. Lack of a job makes him less self assured and more self-centered. His
own problems partly turn him apathetic towards Dimple’s piling mental and emotional turmoil. The gap between the romantic fanciful Dimple and the matter of fact, Amit widens day by day in the U.S. Amit is panicky for the job, meanwhile Dimple is planning to buy a queen size bed.

In the midst of the homely atmosphere of the Sen Family at Queens, Dimple’s fits of insomnia are few but once they move to Manhattan she is lost. Jyoti Sen had warned Amit of the evil impact of Ina Mullick but Amit lacks Jyoti’s insight and acumen.

Amit fails Dimple on all planes - physical, mental and emotional. She tries to convey her fears and forebodings to Amit but neither does he try to understand her nor is he capable of rising above a mundane understanding.

Dimple has to cope up with her traumatic mental condition all alone. “She had expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place.” (Wife 109)

She turns towards Ina, Leni and ultimately Milt Glasser in her moments of crises. Ina and Leni fail her as friends. Milt proves to be a temporary transgression. The rebel in her is devising new means and ways to commit suicide. She is an alienated being undergoing the supposed after effects of alienation. The image is a foreshadow of her upcoming action. Like a lion she would ooze out the blood from a spot just under the hairline of her husband.

“I’m terrible in crises” she had told Meena and she is true to her words in the moments of her crisis. Her extra-marital abandon gives rise to growing feeling of guilt. Given the right opportunity she might have confided in Amit but Amit’s inattentiveness blocks the outlay. Torn by her psychic and emotional tensions, she
takes the drastic step of murdering her husband thinking that she cannot bear this sort of life forever: “but he never thought of such things, never thought how hard it was for her to keep quiet and smile though she was falling apart like a very old toy that had been played with, sometimes quite roughly by children who claimed to love her.” (Wife 212)

In a calm and cool manner she takes out the knife from the kitchen drawer and dives it down on a spot near his hairline repeatedly hitting at the same place seven times. Thus she punishes her inattentive husband for his lapses and ends up her marital life.

Jasmine takes over from Dimple. Like Dimple Jasmine too is a rebel for quite different reasons. Her husband Prakash is shot to death in a Jullundhur shoe-shop by the Khalsa Lions. Jyoti, benumbed with grief, resolves to complete Prakash’s mission and thus avenge his death. This village girl, in a stunt-film-like manner lands in Florida as an illegal alien. On her very first day in the U.S, she does her rapist Half-face to death with a knife. Unlike Dimple, Jasmine starts off her life in the US with a murder.

Dimple had an uncaring husband, so she butchered him. Jasmine had a faithful and loving husband who was mercilessly butchered by the terrorists, so she pledges to avenge his death. In the US during her sojourn in Florida, New Jersey, New York, Iowa and finally California Jyoti is discarding the old and taking on new identities till her metamorphosis is complete.

Jasmine too is excited by the new world. Professor Vadhera, she stays with Taylor without any pricks of guilty conscience. It is the sight of Prakash’s killer in Central Park that forces Jasmine to run away from New York to Iowa. She is running away for life not escaping from life which is again a positive step. Dimple was
obsessed with death, devising in her mind new ways of committing suicide. Jasmine too thinks of suicide for a brief moment after her rape. Benumbed with shame and despair she thinks of balancing her defilement with death. But the transformation from a helpless victim to a blood-devouring goddess Durga is instant.

Dimple is a taker, Jasmine a giver; she is a care-giver, recipe-giver, a preserver and a tornado. She is a vital, life-giving force to Bud, Taylor, Duff and Du—they all love her and depend on her. She learns how to reinvent both herself and the American dream. She finds a permanent home for herself with Taylor and Duff in California. Dimple’s feeling of guilt is transplanted by the feeling of relief in Jasmine.

Thus for Dimple the loss of old culture is neither an exciting experience. She is disillusioned on all planes—physical, mental and emotional. Freedom from the ponds of caste, gender and family instead of turning her joyful leaves her utterly lonely and desolate. Her killing of her husband is partly an act of desperation and partly an outcome of her guilty conscience. Judging herself by the Indian standards of marriage and womanhood, she is uneasy about her extra-marital relationship with Milt Glasser. Unable to cope with the crisis, she kills her husband.

Jasmine journeys through different continents, as also through hunger, ill-treatment, violence, rape and murder but she is not frightened at any time since her mission. She is willing to make all compromises and adjustments. Jasmine hops from place to place and person to person trying to find her real place in life. From Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jase and Jane may appear to be real transformation of the personality of the protagonist; from Hasnapur to Jullundhur to Florida, Manhattan, Iowa may appear to be moving from old world values to the brave new world. The woman who surrendered to Prakash to be moulded. According to his ideas is the person who wants
to be shaped according to the American way of life, and secure a place as a legal wife to an all-white American.

Her experience of having been raped by the Half-face does not leave any traumatic effect on her psyche. Jasmine’s rape is not only margined to the theme of the novel, it does not even reveal any significant or special aspect of American life. Rapes are being committed everywhere. One wonders what makes Jasmine to turn into Kali and kill only the Half-face.

Jasmine is an exile in flight from the old-world of India and old cultural values. Her sense and sensibilities are actively engaged with the world outside her. But in creating such a character, Mukherjee does not probe the inner consciousness of the protagonist nor does she depict the deeper struggle the Americans. Jasmine takes the bird-view of the American life and does not touch the deeper layers of values there. The novel looks at American life from an immigrant’s point of view leaving aside the American experience of the immigrants. Thus the Novelist refers to Kali, Ganpati, Lord Yama and especially the pitcher-theory of Hindu belief she does not widen in any way the American experience since she does not explore the Indian cultural and philosophical images. She even does not properly explain Kabir’s pitcher image of life. Kabir refers to the merging of the self into the Absolute-the Atma merging into the Param tatva. Mukherjee talks of the empty pitcher, and being born again and again in this same life.

The Novelist seems to consider marriage to a white person as perhaps the one way of assimilation to American life. Even when the protagonist journeys through a traumatic experience of being accused of rape, he resolves his conflicts, attaining self-awareness, after properly positioning his past life in the country of his birth. Her Jasmine repositions her stars in the new country with new hopes in accepting
marriage to Taylor. At every step she is a winner, her struggles, and her inner sensibilities do not of a much place in her life. She lives floating life as it were. She appears to have no real address, no specific mission, and no search for special identity. Mukherjee presents a protagonist who finds the new country where she can forget her past life which she considers as bad as death and lead a new life. What happens to her mission the novelist keeps us wondering at.

Seven years ago, Tara admired “the houses on Marine Drive,” but her stay at Vassar has changed her outlook on Indian life. The very houses she admired then, now “their shabbiness appalled her.” Her American attitude to life is readily sensed by relatives. They find her “stubborn the relatives attributed Tara’s improprieties to her seven years in America.” It is again America’s influence on her that makes Bombay’s railway station “more like a Hospital.” Tara’s attitude in air-conditioned compartment makes her observe the travelling companions: “The Marwari.....a circus animal who has gotten the better of his master,” and “The Nepali was a fidgety older man with hair.” “Both men, tara decided could effortlessly ruin her journey to Calcutta.” For Kim, the roads and railway -tracks reveal plentitude of life and are exuberantly human, but Tara finds “dry holes by the sides of railway tracks.” Tara’s rootless self makes the scenery, outside, “merely alien and hostile.” Such dreariness, vacuity and desperation are evoked by her American life:

New York...had been exotic.....there were policemen with dogs the underground tunnels. Because girls like her....were being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings....The only pollution she had been warned against in Calcutta had been caste pollution. New York was certainly extra-ordinary, and it had driven her to despair.

(The Tiger’s Daughter 34)
Tara is torn between contradictory emotions on seeing Aunt Jharna. While on the one hand she cannot sympathize with the aunt’s religious attempts to heal her child, on the other she thinks, “I don’t hate you, I love you, and the miserable child, the crooked feet, the smoking incense holder, I love you all.”

Similarly antithetical feelings beset her in the company of her friend’s “Seven years ago she had played with these friends, done homework with Nilima, briefly fancied herself in love with Pronob, debated with Reena at the British Council.” But now after her return from America: “She feared their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness.”

Her split personality raises doubts about her husband “probably he had not understood her either.” She is convinced of her “little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and centre” when she forgets “the next step of the ritual” in the prayer room. She even grows nervous over her mother’s “simple request to share piety with her family” and in consequence, she thinks “in the end she would not stay”.

For Tara, it is violence in American life that matter, but her friends do not accept the facts about American life. They want to be told about their fantasies of that life. Out of this predicament, her communication becomes devoid of significance. Helplessly she tells Sanjay:

how much easier she thought it was to live in Calcutta. How much simpler !o trust the city’s police inspector and play tennis with him on Saturdays. How humane to accompany a friendly editor to watch the riots in town. New York, she confided was a gruesome nightmare. It wasn’t mugging she feared so much as rude little invasions. The thought of stranger...looking into her pocket book, laughing at the
notes she had made to herself transforming shoddy innocent side streets into giants fangs crouching. (*The Tiger’s Daughter* 69)

Similarly Tara is caught in an antithetical tension when she realizes that admiration for her does not come from either quarter. While the Indians consider with suspicion her marriage “an emancipated gesturer” David does not give her any credit for “cleaning bathrooms”.

According to M. Sivaramkrishna, *The Tiger’s Daughter* is “visionless because it is voiceless.” Tara’s various questions about different modes of life are an attempt to communicate. The novelist’s vision of life is one of rootlessness.

*Wife* the novel opens with a curious portrayal of Dimple Dasgupta who “had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in the matrimonial ads” The paragraph presents a few more interesting things about the protagonist: Dimple wanted a different kind of life - an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips; to New Market for nylon saris so she placed her faith in neurosurgeons and architects. She fantasized about young men with moustaches, dressed in spotless white. Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns. Meanwhile her father finds a suitable boy for her. He is Amit Kumar Basu, a consultant engineer. Dimple is married to him. We are told by the author: “It was a perfect wedding. There were one hundred and five photographs to prove that it was perfect” Dimple Dasgupta becomes Dimple Basu and starts living with her in-laws on the top floor of a three-storey building on Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road. And now start her eccentricities. For no reasons at all she comes disliking everything: the name Nandini, her mother-in-law to call with; the apartment that is h-o-r-i-d in her terminology; the sofa-set; the gray cotton red roses inside curtains in the bedroom; the lace cushion cover etc. The magazine-fostered feelings regarding
mate, matrimony and decorated interiors gain full control over her and all of a sudden she finds her expectations and dreams shattered. The thoughts of happiness elude her mind. “Dimple Basu is a happy woman” she repeats frantically. Never for a moment she takes her to be a housewife and the woman of earth. Morbid longings, unreal imaginings, foul fantasies become her routine. Days roll on sapping her soul. No zeal, no mirth. What’s even worse, she discovers that she is pregnant. It’s more paranoiac. She wants to get rid of the vile foetus as soon as possible and pounces on “eating hot green chillis in the hope that her body would return to its normal cycle. Sometimes, under the cover of her loose sari, she gave vicious squeezes to her stomach as if to force a vile thing out of hiding.” Day in and out “she thought of ways to get rid of....whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes.” Mute and insensate to the call of motherhood, one day she skips her way to abortion and feels purged. Luckily, before things worsen, Amit and she set off on job-hunt-trip to the States.

The second part of the novel is about the Basus? Arrival in U.S. instead of showing improvement in her behaviour Dimple goes more and more morbid: “she was caught in the crossfire of an American communalism she couldn’t understand. She felt she’d come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America.” Prior coming hitherto she had a faith that “real happiness was first in the movies or in the West.” and had expected “apartments in America to resemble the sets in a Raj Kapoor movie; living rooms in which the guests could break into song and dance.” To her sheer disgust she finds nothing of the sort in Sen’s apartment where they had to stay until Amit got a job. Soon after a few days stay, she starts scorning Sen’s household. Not only this, Amit who fails to get an immediate job, instead of finding an emotional support receives her malice in turn. In Dimple’s belief “a man without a job was not a man at all.” Her frustration with Amit raises manifold. Amit too
collapses inwardly. However, he is still innocent about the secret broodings of Dimple who often dreams about her Americanization. In her new version she gives her heart away to their meantime shelter-provider Jyoti Sen and imagines “it could easily have been Jyoti instead of Amit that she had married. Since both were of the same caste and both were engineer.” In one of such moments of unblinking shamelessness she enjoys the deliberate betrayal of gazing on Sen’s body one midnight, but even fancies fail to cheat her well. Blight besets her thinking and envenoms her life. She is left pondering: “Life had held out such promises but was so slow to deliver it.”

The third and concluding part of the novel drives the last nail into the coffin. Dimple, who is “unaccustomed to the role of comforting angel”, grows prone to unanticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless indecisiveness. Her own body seems “curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt.” A dying bonfire becomes her visual image of life. In that land of money, honey and opportunity she turns sickly, sulky and soul sapped. Now and then “a creature of serpentine curls and heaving bosom” seems erupting through one of her orifices. The will to live, the vitality of sex and the vitality of romance lie nullified in her and she reflects over- nine ways of dying: “set fire - to sari made of synthetic fiber; head in oven; nick wrist with broken glass in a sink full of scalding dishwater; starve; fall on bread knife while thinking of Japanese samurai revivals.” So on continue her psychic fire drills. Amit, for no fault of his own is subjected to her hysterical crackles and fancy-fabricated charges – “You want me to die. I know; you’re just waiting for me to die.” Her frequent interaction with a hunk Milt Glasser and a flirt Ina inflate her hate for Amit beyond scales. Her fondness for Milt dissolves the last bonds of favour for Amit for “Amit was not like Milt and Ina.” In the heart of her hearts she likes Milt Glasser: “He was the only one she could talk to. With the others, people like Amit and
Ina and even Meena Sen she talked in silences. With MiIt she could talk about all sorts of things.” Consequently, she turns “much worse off than ever, more lonely, more cut off from Amit, from the Indians”. Heart and soul she is for Milt and dreams of sleeping with him on regular basis. As was predestined “an innocent duty-conscious husband falls a prey to the neurotic madness of his wife.” She heinously murders him and feels enthralled seeing his blood-spilling corpse. “The reader closes the book in utter disgust over the way the novel had tried to subvert the framework of an entire culture.”

Since times immemorial woman occupies a pivotal place in our society. She is viewed as ‘shakti’. She is Life-giving force and also the progenitor of culture and civilization. She is the zenith of God’s creativity and inspiration. Gods too revere and adore her for she, along with human beings, is the prime cause of divine origin. An ancient rich heritage has imbued her person with so sacred feelings regarding motherhood, wifehood and her social-image that cannot be eliminated by her exposure. Hence it is my view that what is of millennial worth should not be challenged.

There is more to adore in Amit and much to abhor in Dimple. Though the novelist has at the very outset made the reader aware of Dimple’s madness, the way she has frolicked with the concept of Indian womanhood under her thematic garb is utterly unfair. There is little to disagree with Ragini who warns Mukherjee “to at least refrain from writing on Indian themes and taking a vicarious delight in distorting and maiming them, simply because it is fashionable to deride anything that is Indian and a sure means of attracting attention.”

Jyoti -Jasmine- Jase- Jane and even Kali are the various names Adopted by the protagonist of the Novelist in Jasmine. A simple peasant girl from Hasnapur in rural
Punjab, Jyoti becomes Jasmine when she marries Prakash, a modern city man who believes in trashing traditions and declares impatiently. “There’s no room in modern India for feudalism.” Jyoti thinks of Prakash as Prof. Higgins who can break “the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make a new kind of city woman. To break of the past, he gave me a new name; Jasmine- Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities.” An identity change which begins thus continues for Jasmine when stunned by the sudden and brutal killing of her husband by terrorists, she decides to fulfill his dream and visit the U.S. Bred in traditional, rural India, her mission now is to reach a university campus in Florida, lie down on his new, unworn suit and commit Sati. As Half Face says, “Getting your ass kicked halfway around the world just to burn a suit. I never-heard such a fool notion.” One can explain her decision only by having a glimpse, into the type of society in which she grew up. As a girl-child she was almost strangled to death so that her parents can avoid later problems of marriage and dowry. Later, she finds the secluded life of widows intolerable. She sees her friend commit Sati rather than choose to live as a widow in rural Punjab. In that context, it is hardly surprising that she is willing to travel to the U.S. at any cost - on a forged passport, with under-world. Travelling companions, raped by a scarred stranger in an unknown motel etc. Taking on the dreaded form of Kali, biting her tongue to allow blood ooze out, she kills him in demoniac fashion. She then sets out to face the world and the country of her dreams. Travelling the length and breadth of the U.S.Professorji, Lillian Gordon, Wylie and Taylor and then Bud and Du are her family at different stages. As Jasmine says, “I have had a husband for each of the women I have been, Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, Half Face for Kali.”

The expatriate writers face a multi-cultural situation which may be combined with a personal anguish due to discrimination or a sense of rootlessness, if rejected by
their host countries. As coloured expatriates, both Bharati Mukherjee and Yasmine Gooneratne are likely to have faced their full share of racial discrimination. In spite of being married to a Canadian, Mukherjee’s experiences in Canada were far from pleasant. In fact, she took the risk of quitting her job and shifting to the U.S. Yasmine Gooneratne has been living in Australia for last twenty years and her personal experiences as an immigrant have coloured the protagonist. She is able to project the cultural confusion and confrontation of a multi-racial society. The clash of culture and the need for adaptation is a part of all expatriate experience.

As Bharati’s sister Vera warns them: “You’ll be miserable. There’s nothing there but Koalas and Kangaroos. And, the white Australa Policy?” To most Sri Lankan’s the U.S could be the land of their dreams but never Australia. It is the political and social unrest in their homeland that leads them to decide to move out. Strangely, a bad traffic jam on a busy morning is the last straw for Bharat and he accepts the offer from the University of New South Wales. To Jasmine, the U.S. is her dream world and her strange mission is soon forgotten. She sheds her Indian name and dress and adapts herself easily to every circumstance of life. In spite of clash of traditional Indian values and the American world she faces. Chameleon-like, she transforms herself. According to her, they are neither nostalgic for their personal past nor afraid of their unfamiliar present. Bharat and his wife are different because thoughts of the home and land left behind are ever present in their lives.

Some Australians take kindly to the Asians and regard them “as exotics who are having difficulty sending roots into alien ground.” like the bluebells from England or the immigrant Mynah and Cow. The friendly Maureen warns Navaranijini, “I think it’ll take exactly five years for the two of you to feel at home in Australia.” The locals expect the expatriates to change and harbour strange notions about the immigrants.
The uneven height of their 4 poster bed is considered responsible for their healthy marital relationship. At the other end of the scale, we have another Sri Lankan who approaches the immigrant experience with great seriousness and doesn’t see the funny side at all. He loves to be known by his full name; the pompous sounding Mekaboru Kiyanhati Balapan Koyako. He is considered a leader of the Sri Lankan community in Australia. In *Jasmine* we have a similar character – Prakash’s ideal guru Prof. Devinder Vadhera which now sounds like David O. Hara. Rather than accept failure and return to India, the esteemed Professor was actually a sorter and importer of human hair. Like the Koyakos, he and his family hold on to everything Indian. “They let nothing go lest everything be lost.” This made it impossible for them to be assimilated into the new culture. Little wonder then that Jasmine quits the place as she belongs to feel claustrophobic.

The expatriate faces the dilemma of being unable to return home and yet not finding a home in the adopted land. He nurtures the hope that he will be able to merge into the culture of the new land. They change names, clothes and even partners in the case of Jasmine. She runs off with one man when she is pregnant with another man’s child. No wonder Jasmine says, “I had been reborn.”- A total change from the girls of Punjab. This concept of rebirth in one life is repeatedly used by Mukherjee in this novel. Borrowing from sant Kabir’s well-in own couplet of water mingling with water, she uses the metaphor of air to indicate merging with the total experience of the new country. “I took in everything,” admits Jasmine. A large dose of Hindu philosophy figures in this concept of the self mingling with the Absolute. Mukherjee firmly believes that the multi-cultural U.S. welcomes all immigrants, irrespective of colour and race. Hence, after the initial, brutal assault, Jasmine faces no discrimination of any sort. Taylor and Bud Ripplemeyer lean on her and Jasmine too
takes their every wish as a command. She is confident: “I had landed and was getting rooted.”

The expatriate faces another difficult situation when he decides to visit home. “We would not behave like expatriates,” decide Jean and Barry before they go home on a visit. “Expats make fools of themselves losing their tempers,” is the usual opinion. Even the mundane and the accepted began to seem strange on a visit home. A number of reasons including the mindless ethnic violence in Sri Lanka strengthen their resolve to go back to Australia.

How much time does it take for an unfamiliar landscape to invade an individual’s mind, take possession of his imagination and change the colour not only of his words but of his soul? In every expatriate’s experience “there must surely have been a moment, small space in time...when the anchor was let down, the sails folded, the landing made.” ‘Acculturation’ or adoption of change in external behaviour begins early enough but ‘assimilation’ or the ability to react instinctively and emotionally to a culture is a far slower process. Breaking away from one’s ethnicity and absorbing the new culture is the only way for survival, suggest both the novels. A genetic transformation makes it possible for Jane to decide “to reposition the stars. For Jean and Barry’s daughter is allowed to grow up in a new country, free of the burdens of the Past.”

Bharati Mukherjee’s Wife falls into the category of the modern novel as it presents an intense inner world of neurotic individual. Instead of trying to combine the freedom of the individual with tolerance, Bharati Mukherjee chooses to glorify the alienated individual. Rootlessness and unreal existence are the main concerns. Her women characters are vested with passion, which they mistake for love and self-expression.
Dimple, the protagonist in *Wife* is an extremely immature girl who constantly dreams of marriage as she hopes that it would bring freedom and love. At the same time she is not clear about the concepts of freedom and love. This ambiguity underlying her mental make-up defines the incompleteness of her very being. After painful waiting which makes her desperate and suicidal, she is finally married to Amit Kumar Basu, an average middle-class, unimaginative, young engineer who dreams of making a fortune in America and retiring to live a comfortable rich life in Calcutta. But, soon after her marriage, she feels cheated. She begins to resent her new home, her in-laws and even her husband who doesn’t seem to be capable of feeding her fantasy-life. At this stage, when she begins to reconstruct her ‘ideal’ man from faces from magazines. The prospect of becoming a mother enrages her. She treats it as an outrage on her body and induces an abortion. She justifies herself by arguing that she cannot afford to take any relics from her old life to America. But, once again, even after going to America, her hopes are belied. She feels that the temporary joblessness has made Amit frail losing his erstwhile infallible. She is further shaken by the knowledge that America with all its outward glitter allows Indian wives only to create ‘little Indians’ around them. After this disturbing realization, Dimple sinks into a world of isolation. After a few pathetic attempts to merge herself into the new culture by wearing the borrowed outfit of Marsha and by flirting with Milt Glasser, Dimple experiences total estrangement from herself and her surroundings as well. Torn by the conflict between her fantasy world and the reality of her situation, she allows her mind to be totally conditioned by the commercials on T.V. and magazines so much so she loses the ability to distinguish them from the world of reality. Dimple finally kills Amit to suppress her guilty conscience.
Bharati Mukherjee presents the world of Dimple, a world of day-dreams and nightmares and her morbid psyche through a series of images. Dimple’s morbidity is evident while she is still at her parental home in the way she allows her conscious mind to be completely dominated by the colorful romance. Dimple sets out on a long journey of unreal, meaningless and morbid existence. As she has projected herself as a “sweet and docile” girl in her parental home, even her parents are not aware of her schizophrenic nature.

One cannot justify Dimple’s morbid imagination and insane behavior on the basis of her immaturity. But, it looks as though she is a fragmented personality, while one part of her wants to emulate traditional images, the other self revels in morbid musings.

Right from the very first day of her arrival in New York, all that Dimple hears from people and sees on the T.V. is about muggings, rape, murder an aspect of the new world that seems to hold an inexplicable but unending fascination for immigrant-residents like Jyoti Sen. Being an incurable addict to the bright colourful world of advertisements, Dimple falls an easy victim to the various magazine and T.V. ads. She accepts them literally and one example, sufficient to speak volumes about her total lack of maturity and depth, is a magazine ad which exhorted people to “express” themselves in their “surroundings”:

Express yourself in your surroundings. Discover your own grand passion and indulge it to excess. Then simplify the rest, throw out, be ruthless. That’s the secret to happiness. (Wife 87)

Fascinated and inspired by this ad, Dimple looks at Sen’s apartment, which she found lovely before, with distaste as now it seems to her only ‘convenient’. Perhaps, it is the other part of the ad she is trying to follow when she strikes an illicit relationship with
Milt Glasser in a passionate attempt to find an identity in America. In wearing Marsha’s clothes and shoes, in borrowing English words from Ina and Milt even to quarrel with her own husband, in devising various extravagant, mercenary schemes to commit suicide and to murder Amit, Dimple seems to be indulging in her passion to become a new woman and lead a very free, exciting life as the soap-operas on T.V. show. She even tries to justify herself after killing Amit: “Women on television got away with murder.” (Wife 213)

Though she is at times shocked at her own intensity of feeling and her capacity to hate, eventually Dimple exercises her ungratified passion through violence alone. Neither the cultural conflict nor a feminine need for freedom can account for Dimple’s responses. As she cannot come to terms with either her own culture or America’s culture, she finds herself as cross-roads, and visualizes her life as “a dying bonfire”. (Wife 119)

Through her innovative technique of alternately highlighting one or the other of the ‘mutations’ in her heroine’s identity Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane,—Bharati Mukherjee fills in details about different segments of Jasmine’s life in its meandering course through the terrains of Hasnapur, Jullundhur, Florida, Columbia Baden and hence to the road to California. The fragmentation of life suggested by the use of segments in life as plot-nodes acquires additional significance by the dominant narrative voice’s underscoring, not a disproportionate importance given to Jasmine when compared to the other characters, but of her total isolation as “a strange pilgrim in an outlandish shrine.” Melanine Kaye’s comment on this aspect of Bharati Mukherjee’s narrative technique invites close scrutiny:

Mukherjee’s particular gift is montage, a jump out movement that creates a bond with the first person, narrator and distance from
everyone else, thus underscoring with great economy the immigrant’s isolation, by-product of American opportunity.\(^5\)

Marriage to Prakash brings about a total change in her mindset. The ‘newness’ of life in Jullundhur, beginning with the change of her name to Jasmine, makes her realize that ‘motherhood’ need not be her sole destiny. Enthused by Prakash’s plans of eventually settling into a much better life-style in America with their own business concern, she starts assisting him in the repair of electronic goods by way of supplementing their meager income.

The desire to hold her own against the blind forces of destiny urges her to leave India, but unfortunately her American experience begins on a jarring note—her brutal rape by the deformed captain half-face, in whose ship she is smuggled into America. The dismal view of the Florida swamps that she gets on her first entry into America, “Eden’s waste: plastic bottle, floating oranges, boards, sodden boxes, white and green plastic sacks tied shut but picked open by birds and pulled apart by crabs,” seems to be an appropriate backdrop to the horrible fate awaiting her. Incensed by the outrage she becomes a veritable “Kali”, knifes him to death, sets the building on fire and walks out, distraught, dead tired, with no destination in mind. When she falls down, nearly dead out of shock, starvation and fatigue, Mrs. Lillian Gordon enters into her life like a deus ex machina. Her hospitality and her advice “let the past make you wary, by all means, but do not let it deform you” help her recoup physically and mentally and with her help she sets out to meet Professor Vadhera, the gentleman who was instrumental in Prakash’s securing admission in an engineering course. Dejected by the discovery that the Professor is eking out a living not by teaching but by trading in human hair, she decides to leave that house. Prakash’s struggle to make something more of his life than fate intended and his own ardent desire, “If we could just get
away from India then all fates would be cancelled. We’d start with new fates new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted. We’d be on the other side of earth, out of God’s sight,” is too deeply etched on Jasmine’s mind to allow her to agree and she leaves the place determined to live on her own. This move is, itself an indication that self-actualization is already taking shape in her life. It should be noted here that Jasmine’s protest, like that of Bharati Mukherjee herself, is not against Indian culture but against its ‘retentiveness’, its “particular way of partially comprehending the world.” After a short period of hand-to-mouth existence Jasmine gets the chance to work as caregiver to Duff, the little daughter of Wylie and Taylor. Jasmine enjoys her new financial independence as well as the affectionate treatment she is shown by her employers, Taylor in particular. Wylie’s falling out of love with Taylor and her decision to live with another man shocks Jasmine at first. But soon, a bond of intimacy develops between her and Taylor. Jasmine’s calm acceptance of both-the change in her own, scale of values and the largesse of Taylor in remaining above racial and cultural barriers is worth-noting:

Taylor didn’t want to change me. He didn’t want to scour and sanitize the foreignness…. I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia to sheath the heart in a bullet proof vest, was to be a coward. On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses’ bit, clean, brightly lit apartment I bloomed from a different alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase. (Jasmine 185)

While in Iowa, a providential meeting with Mrs. Ripplemeyer, whose kind offer of finding employment for Jane in the bank owned by her son, ends in Bud’s falling in love with her. Bharati Mukherjee’s use of friendly soul’s readily giving advice and assistance has to be understood as a tribute she wants to pay to American,
generosity rather than as a flawed narrative device. As she says: “My characters are survivors. They have been helped as I have, by good strong people of conviction.”

Jane settles down to a peaceful life in Bud’s house, happy in her new financial security and her new stepmother status with regard to Du, a sixteen-year old Vietnam war victim adopted by Bud, after his grown-up sons left, the house and he is separated from his wife Karin. Violence mars the even tenor of her life yet again, this time in Bud’s becoming a cripple waist downwards by a disgruntled farmer’s shooting at him from point blank range. It is not just Bud, but the entire countryside, the very sensitive of rural life that is the victim here as it was in Punjab at the hands of terrorist violence.

Feeling miserable thinking that if Karin were on the scene she would have somehow averted the disaster, she exerts herself to the utmost in seeing to it that Bud is comfortable. Her patience mollifies even Karin who was till then infuriated by the news of Jasmine’s pregnancy by Bud. The valuable, lesson she has already learned, that in “America nothing lasts -Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or wonderful that it won’t disintegrate”, fortifies her in warding off guilt feelings about usurping Karin’s place in Bud’s heart. She has learned to adjust to a new set of values but she has definitely not shed all values altogether. Her analysis of her relationship with Bud shows that there is a clear distinction in her mind between living with someone separated from his wife and deliberately breaking up a home “But would have left Karin or twisted in mid life until he dropped. I was a catalyst, not, a cause.”

A sudden letter from Taylor informing her that he and Duff would be calling on her shortly comes as a pleasant surprise. Du’s cool announcement of his decision to go to California and stay with his sister and her family makes her worry about it’s probably impact on Bud. An exile herself she fully understands Du’s need to ‘belong’
and silently watches him leave and feels and breaks the news to Bud as gently as she can.

She rebuffs the overtures of love made by young Darrel, their Next-door neighbor sorry for him for being tied down to farm work tending pigs, while his heart was set on going to some big city and get rich the easy way. His suicide shatters her and Bud’s plans to legalize their relationship by marriage add to her gloom.

Taylor’s arrival at this juncture is a welcome relief to her and when he in his winning way convinces her that there is nothing wrong in her leaving Bud, she feels reassured and consents to go with him and Duff to the west coast may be California, “greedy with wants and reckless from hopes.”

Jasmine’s walking out of Bud’s life is not a want on act of frivolity. Her two remarks, “The moment I have dreamed a thousand times finally arrives” and “I am not choosing between two men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness,” clarify for us that it was not a rash abandonment of responsibilities. In a way this decision of Jasmine is a resonant response to the courage she admired in Du in trying to take charge of his life, and the cowardice of Darrel in trying to run away from the problems of life by the extreme step of death. Her desire for self-actualization- “I want to do the right thing. I don’t want to be a terrible person” - has nothing to do with guilt associated with ‘sin’. Jasmine’s lack of guilt proves not her ‘callousness’ but her conscious striving; to do only what she thinks is right. Karin is aware of this, hence her statement earlier in the novel: “This is Puritan country. We are born with guilt or quickly learn it. Guilt twists a Person.”

Her sense of ‘relief’ at leaving Bud rather than guilt underscores that she was happy to be doing what she had been wishing to do from a long time back. Jasmine’s linking her life to that of Taylor is to be seen as a validation of her avowed belief,
“Treat every second of your existence as a possible assignment from God,” a reaffirmation of the courage she mustered in killing the mad dog saying “I was not ready to die.”

Jasmine may or may not appear as a ‘rabblemaker’ by everyone stepping into the orbit of her life, but at every stage in her troubletorn life, in all her identities as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, she seems to act boldly.

Mukherjee explores cultural confrontation in The Holder of the World. It is also a tale about dislocation when two cultures come into contact. This novel “has a wide canvas that sweeps across continents and centuries, culture and religions. Immigration, exile, alienation and foreign lands have always been the colour of Mukherjee’s palate and with The Holder of the World; she uses the familiar tones and shades to create a universe of infinite possibility and eternal time.”

Here we witness an intriguing meeting of two worlds, She lights up the making and very nature of the American consciousness in this novel. The inspiration behind this story was an ordinary incident on an ordinary day. In an interview, she recalled:

The novel got started because I was at an auction of Sotheby In New York....Whatever money my husband and I save is Spent on Indian miniature painting and my aesthetics for the novel evolves out of my love for Indian miniature painting.

It was here that she saw a miniature titled “A European Woman in Aurangzeb’s Court.” A Caucasian woman stood resplendent in full Mughal dress and she “suddenly realized that I was looking at a woman who three hundred years back had taken a lot of risks, had transformed herself.” Earlier it was always the journey from East to west but now this trip is in the opposite direction.
The novel generated favorable response from the critics all over the world. *The New York Times Book Review* admired *The Holder of the world* in the following words:

Ms. Mukherjee draws us with vigour and scrupulous attention to detail across time - from the present to the 17th and early 18th centuries - and space - from Salem, Massachusetts to the Coast of Coromandel, in India - into the footsteps of not one but two extraordinary women.... (an) extraordinary novel.¹⁰

Uma Parmeswaran has all praise for Mukherjee’s concept of virtual reality. In a review of the novel, she opinions:

In reconstructing a piece of Raj History, Mukherjee joins other novelists from her native India, such as Manohar Malgonkar, Kamala Markandaya, and more recently, Gita Mehta. She adds another dimension to linear narrativization by using the concept of virtual reality....¹¹

*The Holder of the world* demonstrates artistry to blend fact and fiction, head and heart, science and religion, East and West, history and imagination, the Old World and the New World. Here she travels in time and space, past and present, exotic and known and this lends to this novel an extraordinary dimension. It is a quest for identity.

The title *The Holder of the World* the literal translation of Alamgir, is a name for the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb. This is the story of two white women, one living in the seventeenth century and the other, in the present one. For a brief, lightning quick flash, two women face the brown-skinned Indian maidservant, Bhagmati. The artist creates a complex plot, communicating through the two main choices. Beigh
Masters is the narrator of the story. She makes the intentions of the author transparent in the very beginning of the novel:

I live in three time zones simultaneously, and I didn’t mean Eastern, Central and Pacific. I mean the past, present and the Future. *(The Holder of the World* 05)*

She is busy reading *Auctions and Acquisitions*, one of the trade magazines in her field with her lover Venn Iyer, an Indian computer Scientist, sitting beside her. She learns from the book that though people and their property get separated from one another, “nothing is ever lost, but continents and centuries sometimes get in the way.” It gives her clue to a large gem acquired by a small museum situated between Salem and Marble head. Now she is trying to locate what her client calls the most perfect diamond in the world, ‘The Emperor’s Tear’. It belonged to the last of the great Mughal Kings, Aurangzeb, and was stolen from him during a battle against Raja, Jadav Singh, The Hindu lover of the Seventeenth Century Puritan woman Hannah Easton. As Beigh tries to trace the diamond she gets interested with Hannah’s life more than the diamond:

> It isn’t the gem that interests me. It’s the inscription and the provenance. Anything having to do with Mughal India gets my attention, Anything about the Salem Bibi, precious-as pearl feeds me. *(The Holder of the World* 05) *

Beigh lives with her Indian lover for nearly three years. “He animates information; he is out there beyond virtual reality, re-creating the universe one nanosecond, one minute at a time.” *(The Holder of the World* 05) *Both Beigh Masters and her Indian lover are dealers in the things of past. They claim “The past presents itself to us”. Venn is of the view that “Every time-traveller will create a different reality.-Just
as we all do now. No two travelers will be able to retrieve the same reality ... History is a big saving bank.” (The Holder of the World 06)

The use of time travel to help Beigh unravel the mystery of ‘The Emperor’s Tear’ is a clever effort. Her searches around museums, East India Company documents and colonial literature, her travels to India and auctions all over the world, are commendable attempts find out a daring woman. She makes to seem plausible that a seventeenth-century Puritan woman could have tried into a different culture and met a Mughal ruler contemporary of the Sun King. Beigh’s pains taking piecing together of Hannah’s life is like building a picture-puzzle across time. Solving the last clue through computer magic turns it into the stuff of high-tech occult.

Arshia Sattar comments that Mukherjee “is at her most eloquent and intelligent when she explores the complexities of cultural confrontation and the politics of otherness.” 42 Here she presents the difference between the Old and the New Worlds, represented by America and India. As the narrator proceeds it unfolds the story of the Puritan woman of 17th century Hannah Easton, born in the American Colonies in 1670. (The Holder of the World 59) “She is from a different time, the first person, let alone the first woman, to have had these thoughts, and this experience, to have been formed in this particular crucible.” (The Holder of the World 59)

As Beigh Masters fumbles for more details about Hannah Easton, she discovers in her a remote relative of hers. As she proudly claims “I’m part of this story, the Salerm Bibi is part of the tissue of my life.” She discovers that ‘Rebecca Easton nee Walker’s grandmother was a cousin Charles Jonathan Samuel Muster’s father, with whom Beigh claims her kinship though she is not sure “Back on the scepter’s isle, three hundred years ago, we were Musters, Or Musterers .” She
presents a detailed description of the settlement and adventures of the Musters on the
Ellis Island and their coming to terms with the Eastons:

The first Masters to scorn the strained stability of his lot was one. Charles Jonathan Samuel Muster, born in Morpeth, Northumberland. In 1632, a youth of seventeen, C.J.S. Muster stowed away to Salem in a ship heavy with cows, horses, goats, glass and iron. What extraordinary vision he must have had, to know so young that his future lay beyond the waters....at the mercy of heathen Indians and the popish French. By 1640 he was himself the proprietor of a three-hundred acre tract that he then leased to an in-law recently arrived, and then he returned to Salem and the life of a sea trade, Jamaica to Halifax. Curiosity or romance has compelled us to slash, burn, move on, ever since. (The Holder of the World 10-11)

The year that young Charles Muster secreted himself among the livestock abroad the ‘Gabriel’, a noble woman in India died in child birth. That noble woman was the wife of most Lucretius Mughal King Shahjahan, Mumtaz Mahal, whose memory the kind immortalized, by erecting the Taj Mahal, a symbol of everlasting love. Three years later when Jonathan was barely twenty,

“he abandoned the country and built the first of many houses on a overlook commanding a view of the sea and the spreading rooftops of Salem. For the rest of his life he scuttled between civilized Salem and the buck skinned fringes of the known world, out beyond Worcester, then Springfield, then Barrington, gathering his tenant’s tithes of corn and beans, salted meat and barrels of ale, selling what he couldn’t consume and buying more tracts of uncleared forest with the
“profit...He was a New World Emperor” (The Holder of the World 11-12)

Beigh visits the museum of Maritime Trade and finds that “the curator’s note cards celebrate only Puritan pragmatism. There is no order, no hierarchy of intrinsic value or aesthetic worth; it’s a fly’s eye view of Puritan history.” She also comes across the Mughal opulence ‘flashy with decoration’ and she wonders over the gulf between two worlds:

What must these worlds have thought, colliding with each other? How mutually staggered they must have been;... (The Holder of the World 12)

The opulence of the Eastern World, their love for gold, diamond and jewellery drives the Westerners to disdain and despair. But their sense of snobbery does not permit them to kneel-down before the Eastern culture. They reveal in their own sense of pride and superiority as is clear from one of the inscriptions in the Museum:

We beat those Asians because our pots are heavy and black and our pothooks contain no jewels. No paintings, no inlays of rubies and pearls. Our men wore animal skins or jerkins of crude muslin and our women’s virtue was guarded by bonnets and capes and full skirts. Those Indian guys wore earrings and dresses and necklaces. When they ran out of space on their bodies they punched holes in their wife’s noses to hang more gold and pearl chains. Then they bored holes in their wife’s ears to show off more junk, they crammed gold bracelets all the way up to their elbows so their arms were too heavy to lift, and they slipped new rings on their toes and thumbs. So they could barely walk or make a fist. (The Holder of the World 12-13)
Beigh Masters hunts for every minute detail about Hannah. They get auctioned and sold to anonymous buyers. She is an ardent researcher, full of vigour, bubbling with confidence and having faith in her sincerity to achieve her goal. She dilates on her personality and the mental make-up:

There is surely one moment in every life when hope surprises us like grace, and when love, or at least its promise, landscapes the jungle into Eden. (*The Holder of the World* 15)

She is confident of finding this Eden, passing through the jungle around the world. As she goes through the photographic records of Hannah’s life in a museum in Massachusetts she gets the vision of the old world:

In a maritime trade museum in Massachusetts, I am witnessing the old world’s first vision of the New, of its natives, of its ferocious, improbable shapes, of its monstrous women, that only the Salem Bibi could have described or posed for. (*The Holder of the World* 16)

The largest painting bears a catalogue name *The Apocalypse*, but the narrator calls it ‘The Unravished Bride’. In this painting “beautiful Salem Bibi stands on the cannon-breached rampart of a Hindu fort.” In another painting she-notices “Salem Bibi’s lover, once a guerrilla warrior, now slumps against a charred tree trunk. He grasps a nephrite jade dagger hilt carved in the shape of a Ram’s head and, with his last blood-clotted breath, pledges revenge.” Salem Bibi becomes a co-wonderer of Beigh Masters, a constant source of vital energy, inspiration and adventure:

Fly as long as hard as you can, my co-dreamer! Scout a fresh site on another hill. Found with me a city where lions lie with lambs, where pity quickens knowledge, where desire dissipates despair! (*The Holder of the World* 19)
Now she has the confidence to claim that she knows Hannah’s ins and outs:

I know her like a doctor and a lawyer, like a mother and a daughter. With every new thing I have learned, I have come imperceptibly closer to the Emperor’s Tear. Three hundred years ago, it existed in her hands; I know where she came from and where she went. I couldn’t care less about the Emperor’s Tear, by now. I care only about the Salem Bibi. *(The Holder of the World 19)*

In Old World, Edward Easton had been an East India Company man with a sedentary occupation. Beigh searches for more details about Edward’s life and gets plenty of clues to reconstruct his life. She goes through East India Company ledger books, letters, books and papers stored in the India Office in white hall. Edward Easton’s entries stand out because of the primacy and angularity of his handwriting. Beigh, a twenty-year old girl, really contemplating her place in the universe and the ways of the World had appropriated an ancestor, a man who had gone before her, and though he was writing of strangers, she cherished his observations like an intimate letter from home:

A petty ruler on the Coromandel Coast of India is given the gifts armour, a wool coat and a spying glass. A ship on its way to Masulipatnam is stocked with hogs and 250 oxen. *(The Holder of the World 23)*

Beigh is proud of her discovery and boasts:

I was perhaps the only scholar in the world who had traced the ork of an obscure clerk from London to Massachusetts. I could sense all the movements in his life, his determination to remake his life before it was too late, to go west to the colony instead of east, where surely his
East India clerkship could have led him. I felt the same psychic bond
with Edward Easton that Keats did with the revealers on the Grecian
Urn. (*The Holder of the World* 25)

Hannah, a Puritan child was overburdened. “She had witnessed the fall, not
Adam’s Fall, Rebecca’s Fall. Her mother’s Fall infinitely more sinful than the fall of a
man”. But one thing is without question that “Hannah Easton, whatever the name she
carried in Massachusetts, in England, in India or even into history to this very day,
loved her mother more profoundly than any daughter has ever loved a mother.” (*The
Holder of the World* 30)

Mukherjee has quite skillfully brought together the seventeenth century
Puritan American society with the more liberated present day American society. Here
we see Beigh Masters, a modern American researcher claiming her affinity with
Easton family:

Like Rebecca, I have a lover one who would seem alien to my family.
A lover scornful of our habits of self effacement and reasonableness, of
our naive or desperate clinging to an imagined continuity. Venn was
born in India and came over as a baby. His family is all successful;
there was never question of anything different. He grew up in a world
so secure I can’t imagine it, where for us security is another kind of
trap, something to be discarded as dramatically as Rebecca stepped
out, of dog-blooded widow’s weeds into a life of sin and servitude.

(*The Holder of the World* 31)

Hannah, is brought to Salem by Robert and Susannah Fitch. They rear her up with
love and affection. Hannah has an extraordinary skill for needle work and soon her
reputation reaches the masses:
Temptation dogged the sensuous Hannah everywhere: in rich Client’s halls as she delivered her handywork of velvet gowns and quilted underskirts, coats flirty with ladders of bowknots and lingerie under sleeves, and caps of sheerest white muslin; at the baker’s as she passed by selves of German fried and sugared breads..... *(The Holder of the World 42)*

Even at the age of twelve, Hannah Easton’s work is known and families who would not have admitted her step-parents offering her cakes and tiny tokens of additional payment. Susannah, her stepmother, praises her needle work skill however, such is the fame of Hannah’s work and such is the charm of her magical personality that soon a marriage proposal comes for her from the Pynchon’s, one of New England’s upstanding families. But Robert Fitch politely refuses the offer. The narrator thinks that after all it was for her own good as well as for the good of the country because “if Solomon Pynchon’s marital overture had been accepted, the history of the united states would have been profoundly altered.” *(The Holder of the World 57)*

Hannah marries Gabriel Legge, the same man who had been courting her intimate friend Hester Manning who was found one day dead. May be she is imitating her mother’s behaviour. “He claimed to be the son of the owner of the swallow, three hundred and twenty tons. He had come from London, but hailed from Ireland, to scout the colonies for investment, for new forms of import and exports to the New World to mark its growing stature, its great wealth and taste for finer things.” The tall and dashing Gabriel Legge has an eye patch. But there is no doubt that he has an extraordinary capacity for making stories: “Tortured? Punished? Heroic? No one knew for sure. He had a thousand stories of imprisonment by Turks; banishment to forests; brigands, highway men, pirates.” *(The Holder of the World 63)*
Hannah’s acceptance of Gabriel Legge, a man of dubious character raises a lot of questions in the mind of the narrator and at last she comes to the conclusion that she imitates her mother by this act:

Why would a self-possessed, intelligent, desirable woman like Hannah Easton suddenly marry a man she recognized as inappropriate and untrustworthy? Why would she accept Hester Magning’s cast off, or betrayer? Guilt, perhaps, a need to punish herself for the secret she was forced to carry? Unconscious imitation of her mother, a way of joining her by running off with a treacherous alien? Gabriel Legge with his tales of exotic adventure was as close to the Nipmuc lover as any man in Salem. She sought to neutralize her shame by emulating her mother’s behaviour. (*The Holder of the World* 69)

Later on the narrator takes recourse to philosophy:

We do things when it is our time to do them. They do not occur to us until it is time; they cannot be resisted, once their time has come. It’s a question of time, not motive. (*The Holder of the World* 70)

However, Hannah is inquisitive and tries to drink every draught of the life’s cup. When Gabriel goes to his mysterious mission she finds a good engagement in the duty of a nurse. She can now use the same needle efficiently to the skull of men which she once used on clothes. Gabriel Legge proposes her to accompany him to India where he works as a junior factor in East India Company. Such is the curiosity of Hannah that she instantly accepts the offer and sets for India leaving aside her fortune and reputation in Stepney, England.

Hannah’s arrival in India in 1695 is set against a period of political and economic activity. Here she, as well as, we the readers confronts the realities of
British industrialists in India. “They had not come to India in order to breed and colonize, or even to convert. They were here to plunder, to enrich themselves.” But Hanna’s primary concern in this new world appears to be to peel the superficiality and social grace and dwell beneath it in a quest for a meaningful life. In fact, as soon as she steps on the shores of the Coromandel Coast, she feels an instinctive sense of belonging and decides that she did not “aspire to return to England upon the completion of Gabriel’s tour.” It is this curiosity and enthusiasm towards life which makes her a contemporary of the narrator who cannot withhold her sense of admiration:

Of all the qualities I admire in Hannah Easton that make her entirely our contemporary in mood and sensibility, none is more touching to me than the sheer pleasure she took in the world’s variety. (*The Holder of the World* 104)

She knows that she has come half-way round the globe and the life in the Indian sub-continent is entirely different. She cannot use her own western parameters for measuring this world. Her reactions are that of a tourist:

She was, in some original sense of the word, a tourist. She was alert to novelty, but her voyage was mental interior. Getting there was important, but savouring the comparison with London or Salem, and watching her life being transformed, that was the pleasure. She did not hold India up to inspection by the lamp of England, or of Christianity.

(*The Holder of the World* 104)

If she judged the world from a single, unassailable place, it might have been from a forest in Brookfield, before the expulsion from that New World Eden....She did not fear the unknown or the unexplored. Her character was shaped on romps with
Rebecca in the woods around Brookfield. And she needed time to sort out her errands—oh, so many errands—oh, so many errands in this vast new jungle. *(The Holder of the World* 104-105)

During their voyage her husband talked about the life and society in India. He had tried to explain her that everyone on Coromandel, belonged to a caste, if he was Hindu, a right-hand or left-hand caste, and everyone was either Shia or Sunni if he was Muslim. They all spoke different languages, they owed fidelity to different masters, they worshipped different gods, and their ancestors had come from different countries. It was all nightmarish for her. The immense variety was thrilling and exciting but it has been inconceivable to a Puritan soul like Hannah’s. Her world was not so varied, not so diverse. So she wondered that here are “not just Pagans and Muhammadans, but different gods and different ways of worshipping the same God.” *(The Holder of the World* 100)

Right from the moment Hannah sets her feet on Indian soil she is aware of the fact that she belongs to the land and people of this country are her brethren, and that she has got nothing to do with the race of those Britishers who have come here to plunder, to lead a life of comfort, lechery and convenience. Her encounter with English women, the wives of other factors, furthers her impatience with their pretensions to nobility and their self-conscious superiority among the local community. These were women who led ordinary lives in England but claimed command and respect here.

Martha Ruxton and Sarah Higginbotham are both examples of English characteristic of the women in the colonies. Their life of reason and etiquette is opposed to lives of their husbands whose ‘bibis’ become the primary topic of conversation among these women:
Any servant with a new sari, any cheekiness detected, anything missing, meant a good serving girl had passed over to bibihood. Bibis were simultaneously beneath notice, no more than cute little pets like monkeys or birds, and devious temptresses, priestesses of some ancient, irresistible and overpowering sensuality. *(The Holder of the World 131)*

The bibis are characterized by their sheer fleetingness and inability to tie down the English man for a lasting commitment. From the women’s point of view, the bibi was an object to be at once ignored. The bibi, Hannah is told, has to be admitted as a natural consequence of married life. Hannah’s acceptance truth testifies to her open-mindedness. She treated her situation in this manner:

Hannah felt herself exempt from the bibi jealousies of a Sarah or Martha.....She had not led the desperate sort of life, like Sarah, that substituted gratitude for tolerance. She was a faithful wife who had attracted her share of suitable beaux and suitors, and who resisted courting and temptations even when expectations and opportunities presented themselves. *(The Holder of the World 43-44)*

For Hannah India is an ideal place. The narrator contrasts the house in fort St. Sebastian with her former houses:

In Brookfield, in Stepney and Salem; a house was a barricade to stop encroachment. Outdoors was the prowling ground for Satan and his that she was to live in, like all houses in Fort St. Sebastian, was built to entice crystal-bright tropical starlight, spume-slented breeze, bugs, birds and butterflies through its huge barred windows. There were terraces shiny as marble, balconies made of hardy woods, a flat roof
for evening walks - ground level at night being considered unsafe- and
turreted parapets. Behind the main house were the gardens, kitchen
sheds, servants shed and stables. *(The Holder of the World 118-19)*

While mixing history with fiction, Mukherjee never shirks from reflecting
post-colonial anxiety. The Lucretius life style, cruelty, lechery, the Britisher’s feeling
of disdain towards the natives is contradicted with the deplorable plight of the Indian
masses.

“The fort in which the Britisher’s lived was Little England. The Fort
St. George Council’s penal code encouraged straight and narrow
living. Uncleanness, lying, cheating, drunkenness, swearing, missing
morning or evening prayers, using seditious words, mutinying,
dwelling, all were punishable with whippings, mountings of the
wooden horse.” *(The Holder of the World 127-28)*

Hannah has an altogether different experience with the first manifestation of a
bibi that she comes across in the form of Bhagmati. Pulling herself down from the
terrace of Hannah’s house, she is dressed in sheer muslin white which mesmerizes
Hannah’s consciousness. It is an image that persists in her mind as suggestive of the
sensuality, magical attraction and passionate representation of this land. In fact, as
Gabriel Legge sets out with the Marquis on a mission of piracy, Hannah feels no
remorse:

She was not ready to entomb herself in Morpeth or London. She didn’t
feel bereft - of roots, of traditions - as Martha and Sarah professed to
feel. Instead she felt unfinished, unformed. *(The Holder of the World
163)*
She is afraid before coming into actual contact with Raja Jadav Singh. She cannot hide her skepticism towards the Eastern faith:

The idea of Hinduism was vaguely frightening and even more vaguely alluring to Hannah. English attitudes saw Islam as a shallow kind of sophistication; Hinduism a profound form of primitivism...Muslims had restrictions, which were noble and manly; Hindus had taboos, which were superstitious and cowardly. Hindus were unreasonable, and unreachable, so tradition-bound that their minds were considered undeveloped, except for a wily ruthlessness among the trading castes.

*(The Holder of the World 219)*

On entering the new world, the world of Hindus she discovers in herself an Urge ‘to be able to name and memorize the new’. She wants to embrace this world only to sacrifice herself at the altar of true love:

She wanted the Raja and nothing else, she would sacrifice anything for his touch and the love they made. What she felt for the Raja was of a different order from what she had felt for Gabriel, or not dared to feel for Hubert. Gabriel and Hubert, for all their distinctive eccentricities, were men cast in one familiar mould, men who thrilled and disappointed within a predictable range. The Raja was an agent of Providence. He had saved her life, then saved her from the chilly, unfulfilled life of a governess. *(The Holder of the World 229-30)*

Jadav Singh continues to court her one quarter of each night for a fortnight. This alters the sensibility of Hannah. The Eastern love makes her more emotional. She is aware of the transformation of her mentality, her whole Personality:
With Gabriel she had clung to Salem’s do’s and don’ts. She had pulled and pummeled the familiar rules, hoping they’d help make sense of her own evolution. With Jadav Singh, she’d finally accepted how inappropriate it was in India; how fatal - to cling, as White Towns tenaciously did, to Europe’s rules. She was no longer the woman she’d been in Salem or London. The ‘Qasbas’ and villages of Roopconda bore no resemblance to the fading, phantom landscapes where she’d lived in old and New England. Everything was in flux on the Coromandel Coastline. *(The Holder of the World)* 234

Jadav Singh’s death and Hannah’s encounter with Emperor Aurangzeb mature her experiences in terms of her journey to the world of the mysterious East. She is ready to protect her Indian lover in spite of his dissociation from her. Her duty finally accomplished, Hannah returns to Salem but not before paying her deepest tributes to Bhagmati, her Indian Hester Manning.

The novel ends with Hannah’s return journey to Salem where she locates her mother from a mental asylum and brings up her “black” daughter Pearl Singh and fearlessly stays in Salem all her life – along with her mother’s five half Nipmuc children; and Beigh Master’s tracking the most perfect diamond in the world the Emperor’s Tear.

Thus, *The Holder of the World* portrays an entirely different picture of cultures - the Eastern and the Western. Hannah Easton’s voyage is mental and ‘interior’ rather than physical. It seems that the movement of the narrative is circular since the story ends in the same vein as it opens but the person does not remain the same. Her whole personality goes under a sea-change during her restless moves from Salem to Stepney:
In one rainy season, Hannah Legge had gone from woolen, clad English married woman on the Coromandel Coast to pregnant sari-wearing bibi of a raja; a murderer, a widow, a peacemaker turned prisoner of the most powerful man in India. . . . . She wasn’t Hannah anymore; she was Mukta, Bhagmati’s word for ‘Pearl’. *(The Holder of the World 271)*

Hannah Easton buries her Puritan past and emerges as a real fighter for life. The love she has got from Raja Jadav Singh makes her reckless and daring. Now she can face the holder of the world, the ‘Alamgir’, the Great Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, with courage and confidence. Her plea before the Emperor to stop the war against her lover is a superb piece of oratory:

I have come late in my life to the feeling of love. Love for a man, love for a place, love for a people. They are not Devgad people or Roopconda people, not Hindu people or Muslim people, not Sunni or Shia, priests or untouchables, servants or kings. If all is equal in the eye of Brahma as the Hindus say, if Allah is all-seeing and all-merciful as you say, then who has committed atrocities on the children, the women, the old people? Who has poisoned the hearts of men? *(The Holder of the World 268)*

Beigh Masters, the narrator, passes the final judgment about Hannah’s character and personality:

Wherever she stayed......she would have changed history for she was one of those extra ordinary lives through which history runs a four-lane highway. *(The Holder of the World 272)*
Mukhejee’s novel Leave It to Me appeared in 1977. This work continues the theme of immigration and in a way; it completes the trilogy beginning with Jasmine. The protagonist is a Eurasian orphan, Debbie Devi who is adopted by an upstate New York family of Italian origin. Born in India and raised as an adopted child, Devi Dee travels through America to find her bio-mom. By the time she has arrived in San Francisco and taken up with a band of aging ex-hippies and a psychotic Vietnam Vet, her identity crisis looms large. It leads her to track down her bio-parents in Laxmipur, Devigaon, India, and the orphanage where she was raised - the Gray Sisters – “Soeurs Grises” – Sore Grease - in Mount Abu. She learns from Fred, her hired detective, that her mother was the hippie follower of a sex-age guru, and her father the founder of the ashram, serial killer Roeo Hawk/Haque. The offspring of this unlikely liaison, Devi Dee - presumed missing or dead - is saved by nuns and shipped abroad to America, where she is raised as the adopted child of the Di Martino family. Twenty-three years later, having graduated from Suny, Albany, she sets out to seek her bio-mom in off-beat California.

Again here Mukherjee deals with the reality of ‘Time-Travel’. An individual grappling with different culture around the globe to find his real identity.

The plot of Desirable Daughter like Jasmine, begins with a female child and includes a large span of time. Desirable Daughter is scattered over decades. The narrative moves through memory and direct narration both, the action of the narrative talks about Calcutta, Bombay America. The title of the novel seems to be ironical as in Hindu society daughters are not at all desirable. The plot of Desirable Daughter is created in a tone to boldly resist this belief. Desirable Daughter shows Bharati Mukherjee describing not only two economies on two cities, but multiple places, their cultures, customs, traditions and people. The novel opens with a description of
Mishtigunj, a small town located in West Bengal and remain a place of prominence throughout. The author describes the scenario of Mishtigunj in the 1870’s as a place where the basic elements of life are septic, infected with tuberculosis it is a “place of magic” for the protagonist. Tara’s family is scattered not only across India, but across the globe, which gives her tremendous exposure of various places. Her oldest sister is a resident of New York, Parvati the second sister in Bombay and Tara herself lives in San Francisco. Their parents live in Rishikesh, the beautiful town in northern India. This novel speaks of the cultural differences between the Indian and American way of life. Mukherjee gives us a vivid picture of her childhood- a world that no longer exists. Three sisters moves to different directions, different continents and through different circumstances that is stressful but ultimately strengthen their relationship. Moving freely between generations, Mukherjee means together fascinating stories of the sister’s, ancestor’s, their childhood memories and dramatic scenes from Indian history. The plot swings back and forth and there are lot of flashbacks and forwards to pull of two cultures and cultures clashes.

*The Tree Bride* is a sequel to the immediately preceding novel of Bharati Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters*, hence bears strong resemblance to it in terms to the locations, cultures and people, among many other things. The protagonist is still shown to be settled in Upper Height, California with ex-husband, Bish. Since the novel shows the protagonist in pursuit of her ancestry, great grandmother Tara Lata, the novel takes the reader to several locations in the span of over 200 years in history. Although for most part, Mukherjee is confined to Mishtigunj (where Tara Lata was born and raised, in present-day Bangladesh), there are small references to other locations in India as well. The protagonist is shown to cherish her memories of India by recalling the smells of “drying saris, the slippery-never dry bathroom, the heavy air
and fatigue of tropical Sundays.” During the time that she spent in California, Calcutta had become “Kolkatta”, a name she found trouble getting used to. During her childhood (which represented the truly high-class Bengali upbringing in Calcutta), she found that although her family were “Westernized” outside, they could never truly accepted the Western traditions. The reader comes across criticism of the developing India as well as the developed West only regarding its infrastructure and advancement in technology, but also for its natives. India culture is also far superior than the bland European culture.

The Novel moves back and forth through time and across continents. The narrative is filled with more action and liveliness than Mukherjee’s previous novels while maintaining her refined and sharp style. India, its past and present, people and expatriate. The author has combined history, truth, guilt and love in a dramatically way, bringing out the continuous effect of past secrets. It is a beautifully written novel that travels between countries, continents, cultures and link people, past and present. In this novel, Tara attempts to bring together her past which is tied to Indian culture with her present as an assimilated American. It has a very complex and mysterious plot shuffling between cultures and continents. Mukherjee also takes up pages of history weaving them sharply, skillfully into an interesting narrative. In this novel as also in Desirable Daughter Mukherjee has created a tale both magical and mysterious emphasizing on sensitive healing for both the living and the dead.

Bharati Mukherjee’s novels are woman-oriented, that is, the main plot of her novels deals with the struggles of immigrant women. Her writing style has been compared to various things. She herself claimed it to be like active football ground and the painting of Mughal artists. But the fact is, as Roshni Rustomji-Kerns has rightly pointed out, her style is in the tradition of the Indian Epics, Ramayana and
Mahabharata. Her novels reveal story within story, which provides comparison and contrasts. The present is the offspring of past deeds and each action awaits a reaction. Fate is an omnipotent god and human life is a struggle between good and evil. Common people fight to survive and emerge as self-made gods. They are representatives, yet individuals. To Mukherjee “Art is about selection, stylization and metaphoric revelation.”

Theme of ‘Multi-culturalism’ in Mukherjee’s fiction brings together people, from different parts of the world, form new relations. Relationship plays a unique role in this regard. Men and women of different race, religion, caste meet and form a new world, a world ready to welcome humanity in all its forms, disregarding colour, class, gender, race, religion and caste. It is open to all sorts of philosophies, all -isms and all forms of relationships as long as they are helping in promoting happiness. This is American individualism.

In Mukherjee’s own words:

The theme my writing explores are the making of new Americans and the consequent two-way transformation of America. These themes have thrust themselves into my fiction because of my personal daily experiences as a naturalized American citizen.”
Works Cited


10. Ibid

11. Uma Parameswaran, a Review of *The Holder Of The World*. Print


