CHAPTER - 3

ART OF

CHARACTERIZATION
This chapter probes the mode of Characterisation in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee which is pivotal to the beauty of her fiction writing. In this chapter, we shall understand and interpret the prominent characters by analyzing their inner feelings, the perspectives and if they have been expressed well or simply in vague terms.

There are only a few characters playing an important role in the first novel, i.e. *The Tiger’s Daughter*. The protagonist Tara Banerjee Cartwright is shown to have different shades due to exposure to different cultures: American and Indian. She is consistently trying to relate to India as she was disconnected from the place while very young. She remains firm in her roots like her belief in traditions, the respect towards the elderly, the manner in which she addresses people, etc. however, she is also very liberal as compared to her folks in India for instance, in a scene where she is holidaying with family in Darjeeling, she chants “*Ma, Ma, Mata!*” with worshipers of the Goddess Durga; which she would never have dreamt of in America (*The Tiger’s Daughter* 173). The novel has impeccably brought out the phases of her transition.

Tara despite maintaining a firm ground on her opinions and mildly exasperated with the eagerness of her old folks to impress her, is in awe of their confidence and spontaneity: “Tara envied the self-confidence of these people, their passionate conviction that they were always right” (*The Tiger’s Daughter* 59). She faces flak from them for marrying an American whom they address as “mleccha”, which infuriates her.

Tara was initially “appalled” by the living conditions, hygiene, corruption and unrest in the country, which she describes as a “cunning world of slums and beggars, of sunless alleys and barricaded storefronts had disappeared” (*The Tiger’s Daughter* 81). The simplicity of this country bewilders her even as she realizes that all that she
witnesses in the country is the obvious: the cows and goats grazing in dust, children playing in mud and men sleeping on string beds under a banyan tree (The Tiger’s Daughter 116) However she realizes that life in India is much simpler than in New York (The Tiger’s Daughter 69): “How much easier she thought it was to live in Calcutta”. She also compares Darjeeling to Europe in appearance; and its beauty seems to move her completely (The Tiger’s Daughter 57,157and 162). She wants to call Calcutta her home, despite spending most crucial years of her life in New York. (The Tiger’s Daughter 165) She describes her overall trip to the country as “vague, pointless, and diffuse” (The Tiger’s Daughter 130). Tara’s love for her husband is made prominent in many situations. While she is visiting a bustee, a slum area in India, she realizes (yet again) how much she loves him while fearing death. She also describes him as a “curious animal” as husbands in general make their presence felt with a series of stratagems. (The Tiger’s Daughter 123)

Related characters in the novel like her family, friends and acquaintances are shown to be racial, sarcastic, biased and eager to please. Their racial and sarcastic nature is evident in their attitude towards Muslims, whom they express as “smelly, fat and oily” (The Tiger’s Daughter 89). They also address her husband as a “foreigner” rather than by name. In Reena’s opinion, all Bengali girls who went to America became rude and obnoxious. (The Tiger’s Daughter 105)

Many other characters in the novel such as her friends, relatives and even associates endlessly try to impress her with their (in)experience, lack of knowledge and common misconceptions. Their hospitality towards foreigners is made apparent when Washington McDowell visits Reena’s family in Calcutta. However, Reena’s mother’s feelings soon turn into paranoia and ultimately, hysteria as she fears her daughters’ future.
In the novel *Jasmine* ², the protagonist moves through different continents. She faces hunger, ill-treatment, violence, rape and murder but she is not frightened at any time since her mission. Her death-wish can be fulfilled only in the desired but alien new land. She is willing to make all compromises and adjustments. There are no deeply stirring situations. 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. But the person we see at the end of the novel moving away with Taylor is very much the same person we encounter at the earlier stages in the novel. 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 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 seems to take it in her stride as an American evil only to be crushed end conquered by the Indian virtue through the symbolic Kali. 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, here and there. One wonders what makes Jasmine to turn into Kali and kill only the Half-face.

Jasmine has no time to ponder over the consequences of murder and so must think of her mission to move away from the scene of violence. “I could not let my personal dishonor disrupt my mission.” After burning Prakash’s clothes and papers she decided that she just cannot commit suicide. She walks away only to be rescued by Lillian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady who finds a place for her in Taylor and Wylie
Hayes family as a care-giver in Manhattan. She becomes a care-giver and is treated as a member of the family and not just a maid servant. Here she is called Jase. At the very first meeting Jasmine falls in love with Taylor “I began to fall in love...with what he represented to me, a professor who served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking, even when she didn’t understand it. It seemed entirely American. I was curious about his life, not repulsed.” Here she stays for two years and learns the ways of American family life, husband helping in the kitchen, wife working for longer hours outside and that the young couple could adopt a daughter and not wait for the natural child. “Adoption was as foreign to me as an idea of widow remarriage.” She loves and admires the American world, “its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self absorption.” She longs to become the person the Hayes’s think her to be, their affectionate acceptance of her without any references, I wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, and affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer not widowed, raped, destitute, and fearful. From defensive living in Flushing, she moves to an assured life without fear and becomes an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue. Profligate squandering becomes her way of breaking with the panicky, parsimonious ghettos of Flushing. “Jyoti would have saved but Jyoti was now a sati-goddess; she had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida.”

She compares Prakash and Taylor. “Prakash-wanted to be infallible, Professorji Vadhera acted pompous, Taylor was fun.” She feels that “she had landed and was getting rooted” and lives “for today” though she states that “Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijd and wife.” She is even accepted as a tutor teaching Punjabi in the Indian Languages department though she is a six-grade drop-out. When she spots the killer of her husband Prakash she has already “bloomed from a diffident alien with
forged documents into adventurous Jase and assimilated the American spirit, her life had a new fullness and chargedness to it.” Could not Taylor be considered a Prospero figure in this magic land of America with whose help she learns to talk and walk American and turns into a new confident woman, since she considers him a father figure? To return to the normal real world, with normal-man-woman relationship with Taylor she must break away from this magic world and run off to a new place—a self-imposed exile from the world of Taylor, to detachedly find out her true relationship with Taylor.

The next we see her is in Baden, Elsa country, Iowa working for Bud Ripplemeyer, the banker. In a few months time, he is divorced and Jasmine becomes Jane to him and lives as his wife. Violence follows Jane, Bud is shot at and is confined to a wheel-chair, and Jane must take over the duties of a wife. Trying to make him comfortable and confident, she becomes pregnant but does not wish to marry him. She has fully assimilated herself to the American family life with adopted children and pregnancy, but is waiting for her real love which she finds when Taylor comes to her. From her duties towards others, she now thinks of her duty to herself. She changes because she wants to change and thinks of her happiness, her love, herself: “I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of American and old-world dutifulness. A care-givers life is a good life, a worthy life” but not a full life. She does not feel any guilt, she no longer thinks of herself as Jane. She has survived the worst in American life and now is free like an American to choose her place in Taylor’s life. Her attempt is to reposition her stars. She ventures out, greedy with wants and reckless from hope. The doors have opened and risk must be taken to become part of the American life.
The novelist refers to the broken pitcher again and again to emphasize the rebirth of Jyoti time and again. In this life she is born and dies many deaths but is reborn many times acquiring a new though “a fluid identity”.

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, leaving no time to reflect on the problems whether life is meaningful, or why one should think of East West, North or South when one can be a singular self as culture and history would shape one. But in creating such a character, in attempting to re-locate the character in a desired but alien environment, Mukherjee does not probe the inner consciousness of the protagonist nor does she depict the deeper struggle the Americans undergo in relating to each other. 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, their legal and illegal entry into country and its consequences. Thus though Mukherjee refers to Kali, Ganapati, 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- Atma merging into the Param tatva. Mukherjee talks of the empty pitcher, and being born again and again in this same life.

Jasmine, whose maiden name was Jyoti, is up against fate from an age as early as seven years. Born in Hasnapur, a small village in Punjab, she did not feel cowed down by the perdition of her widowhood and exile. The ‘scar’ on her forehead is “a third eyed” to her. Raging against fate and the norms of society which tried to
condition her existence, Jasmine asserts that she is not just nothing. Driven by a need of power, she kills a mad dog, refuses to marry anyone who doesn’t speak English as to want English is to “want the world”. Marrying Prakash, a young engineer, who too is obsessed like her “to make something more of his life than fate intended,” Jyoti begins the journey of realizing her ‘self’ and ‘potential’.

Renamed as Jasmine, sharing the ambition of her husband, she looks forward to going to America, a land of opportunities. Even when this dream gets shattered by the murder of Prakash on the eve of his departure, Jasmine does not regress into being Jyoti again. She does not shuttle between identities; instead, she decides to go to America and thus fulfill Prakash’s mission and perform ‘sati’ on the grounds of the university where he gained admission to study. But once landed in America, her old-self strongly conditioned by the society into which she is born, gives birth to a new, exuberant self that denies death and welcomes the prospect of a different life. Given a new insight into life by Lillian Gordon’s most practical and humanist approach that made life possible for anyone, Jasmine goes to New York. But, to her horror, she finds New York to be an “archipelago of Ghettoes seething with aliens”. Unlike Vadheras who have retired behind the ghetto walls and the “fortress of Punjabiness”, Jasmine longs to explore the new land which intrigues her. She wants to distance itself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like. Having learned to “walk and talk” American, she grabs every opportunity to become American and to prove to the world what “a girl from a swampy back water could accomplish”. As Duffs day mummy and Taylor and Wylie’s au pair in Manhattan, Jasmine becomes Jase, which marks the beginning of her acculturation. Eagerly responding to the warmth of friendliness shown by Wylie and Taylor who called her their “caregiver” but not a “maid servant” working at part-time jobs like answering phones and tutoring graduate students in
Punjabi at the University and absorbing the alien culture rather greedily, Jasmine gains a personality and becomes a confident individual. The transformation is quite fast but she is unable to slow down the pace as she is unwilling to abandon the ride she is on Pulling herself out of her native culture is painful but exhilarating at the same time as she feels it is cowardly to “bunker oneself inside nostalgia”. With the healing touch of people like Lillian Gordon, Kate and Taylor, who treated her as an intelligent, refined, sincere and affectionate person, Jasmine blooms from being a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase, living only for the present. The tugging between the opposing forces does not intimidate her, rather it excites her. Amidst the other immigrant domestics who hang suspended between the two worlds, Jasmine feels proud that she is getting rooted in the new world.

While America taught her to live with ease and confidence despite her fluid identity and undocumented status, Jasmine gave her care, concern and loves to those who believed her and who needed her. Taylor accepts her for what she is: he is neither condescending in his kindness nor uneasy because she is an illegal immigrant from a backward country. He confesses his love for her and his emotional need of her after Wylie deserts him. Touched by his sincerity and genuineness, Jasmine feels drawn to him. Her immigrant status does in no way obstruct the emotional rapport between them.

Another eventful chapter begins in Jasmine’s life when she leaves Taylor and Duff fearing their safety because of the hovering presence of death in the form of Sukhwinder, the Khalsa Lion who killed Prakash in India. A chance meeting with another saving angel, mother Ripplemeyer, a job in Iowa’s bank and a place in the banker Bud Ripplemeyer’s heart and home are more than anything Jasmine has bargained for. Her foreignness fascinates the fifty-year-old Bud who looks upon her
as an inscrutable mystery and feels rejuvenated by her Eastern vitality and wisdom. As summing a new identity to fit her role as Bud’s wife Jasmine becomes “Jane”. She looks upon herself a catalyst and not the cause to bring about the divorce of Bud and Karin in mid-life. For all America gave her, Jasmine paid back with gratitude and love. She serves Bud patiently and fondly after he was crippled. With her kind composure, she makes Karin understand that she is not her enemy and its Bud’s happiness that matters to both of them. She finds herself thoroughly welcome in the home and society of mother Ripplemeyer and longs to belong to that tribe which represented the best in America. Sought after by a University professor who wanted to share her out-of-body experiences with her Jasmine couldn’t help but marveling at America’s elasticity that can make a sixth-class drop-out from an Indian village to be, a fit companion to scholarly people. Touched by the American need to make intuition tangible and the belief in Eastern mysticism, she comforts Dr. Mary Webb that she certainly empathizes with her soul’s mutable genetic journey, having travelled in time and space herself.

To change from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jasmine to Jase, and Jase to Jane is not an easy process. She survived hideous times that involved rapes and murders, terrifying challenges and unimaginable crises. She is not sentimental about her Indian identity, nor does she suffer from nostalgic longing. Instead, she has used all her strength and resolve to forge new alliances in the friendly soil of the adopted homeland. The fusion between the East and West pleases her and she rejoices that her journey to America has unfolded her “affirming” self.

Bharati Mukherjee admits in an interview that her characters are a breed of pioneers who have the guts to forsake a predictable life in order to throw themselves into a new one. In Jasmine, she celebrates both the undaunted spirit and enthusiasm of
a village girl who blossomed out of a bruised past into a challenging personality and a complete individual and the status of immigration in the U.S., which facilitates aliens not only to be acculturated but also to be assimilated into their adopted land.

The second archetypal image that Bharati Mukherjee uses to bring out the protagonist’s feminist trait is that of Kali, the Goddess of Destruction. But since in Hindu mythology Kali is an incarnation of Durga, the Goddess of strength the image here is more relevant to the strength of a woman like Jasmine who has embarked on a perilous journey to the New World to fulfill her husband’s dream. Let’s hear it in the protagonist’s own words: “My husband was obsessed with passing exams, doing better, making something more of his life than fate intended...if you could first get away from India, then all fates would be cancelled...We’d be on the other side of the earth, out of God’s sight.”

After her husband’s death in order to reach USA she stows in a boat captained by Half-Face. But after landing in America when Half-Face demands his price Jasmine in a truly feminist gesture decides to kill the Devil Incarnate and Bharati Mukherjee brilliantly fuses two archetypal images to enact this killing: of Kali the Goddess of Destruction and Strength and the broken pitcher....the air inside is the same as the outside....there are no insides and outsides. “We are just shells of the same Absolute.” After Half-Face has raped her she wants to kill herself but checks herself because she feels her mission was not yet over: “I didn’t feel the passionate embrace of Lord Yama that could turn a kerosene flame into a lover’s caress. I could not let my personal dishonour disrupt my mission. There would be plenty of time to die....I extended my tongue and sliced it.” And as she does it she becomes Kali personified, the deity of, avenging fury-Death incarnate, and the killing becomes so easy. And she enacts a kind of death for her too: the death of the old self and out of the ashes rises
phoenix-like a new self. In order to show this death Bharati Mukherjee once again invokes the archetypal image of the broken pitcher:

I said my prayers for the dead clutching my Ganpati. I thought. The pitcher is broken. Lord Yama, who had wanted me, who had courted me, and whom I’d flirted with on the long trip over, had now deserted me....My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for and she has been reborn by killing not herself but Half-Face and she begins her journey into America, travelling light. “She had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida” the pitcher is broken, there is no difference between the inside and the outside and her soul, as it were, finds a new habitation: the feminist of the nineties marches on questing for a new identity (*Jasmine* 120).

Dimple and Jasmine, the female protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* and *Jasmine* too are faced with the problem of the loss of culture and both of them are endeavouring to assume a new identity in the U.S. Do they too find the loss of old culture an exhilarating experience? Are they thrilled at the prospect of giving up their old identity and assuming a new one? Does the society which is free from the shackles of caste, gender and family offer them the desired freedom? The present work will discuss Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* and *Jasmine* with these questions in mind.

Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* and *Jasmine* chronicle the journeys of two young women to the U.S for different reasons, under dissimilar circumstances. Both of them pass through torturous physical, mental and emotional agony affecting their whole being to such an extent that they are driven to violence. 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, about to migrate to the U.S. “She thought of pre-marital life as a dress rehearsal for actual living.” 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 is obvious. She does not like the new name ‘Nandini’ given to her by her mother-in-law, she finds the apartment very small and unattractive, the sight of the wounded crow is exceedingly loathsome to her, but at this stage it is a passive resistance only: “It was this passive resistance, this withholding of niggardly affection from Amit, this burying of one’s head among dusty, lace doilies that she found so degrading.”

She is only at a phone’s distance from her mother and her friend Pixie which helps in subsiding the rebellion brewing up in her. Moreover the talk of immigration makes her sanguine. Her unconventional mode of thinking can be perceived in her unusual reaction to her pregnancy. 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” (Wife 03). 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: “In want everything to be nice and new”, she informs Pixie on the phone.

In the US 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, down-to-earth realist 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. She prepares the salad with great care and effort, Amit refuses to taste it, Dimple offers to fix the tie for him as goodwill gesture, Amit turns down the offer of help.

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 “With so many Indians around and a Television and a child, a woman should not have any time to get crazy ideas.”

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’s psychological imbalances, her immoderate daytime sleeping, her nightmares, and her indecisiveness-everything remains unknown to him up to his dying day.

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-psychosis, psychosomatic disorder, delinquency and contemplation of suicide. The image of Chimera, the fine-breathing female monster with a lion’s head, a goat’s body and a serpent’s tail comes to her mind. 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 extramarital abandon gives rise to a 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 stunningly 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 unceremoniously ends up her disharmonious marital life.
Dimple and Jasmine are antithetical to each other. 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 Jullundhr 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 U.S 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 U.S 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. In *Wife* Bharati Mukherjee had portrayed the hollowness of the Indian institutionalized marriage; in *Jasmine* she is highlighting the impossibility of nuptial longevity in a country that thrives on change. In the U.S the Indian concept of formalized relationships and institutionalized togetherness holds no water.

Jasmine too is excited by the new world. Professor Vadhera and the ghetto community of the expatriates no longer excite her. She moves on to New York to join a hippie couple, the Hayes and their adopted daughter Duff as a caregiver. The graduation from a care-giver to a beloved of Taylor distinctly shows her novel uninhibitive approach towards life. She stays with Taylor without any pricks of guilty conscience. Dimple caries on the liaison with Milt which precipitated the crisis. 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: “It was the murkiness of the mirror was not yet over.” In Iowa she achieves a new identity as Jane Ripplemeyer with Bud, a fifty-year-old agro-banker and their adopted son Du, a young Vietnamese orphan. Bud, deeply in love with Jane, proposes to her but Jane, carrying his child, is in no hurry to grab this proposal of marriage. She cohabits with Bud, the prospect of unwed motherhood does not disturb her in the least. Bud’s divorced wife Karin cannot unbalance her poise and equilibrium; she tells Karin to write her name on a slip of paper and burned it again to release her tension. She has come a long way from the Jyoti of Hasnapur in Punjab. Unlike Dimple, she has graduated from vulnerability to power: “I feel so potent, a goddess” (Wife 121). 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 “It isn’t guilt that I feel, its relief.”

Thus for Dimple the loss of old culture is neither an exciting nor an exhilarating experience. She is disillusioned on all planes-physical, mental and emotional. Freedom from the ponds of caste, gender and family instead of turning her hilarious, leaves her utterly lonely and desolate. Her killing of her husband is partly an act of desperation and partly an out-come 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, on the contrary, has broken away from the shackles of caste, gender and family. Jasmine has learnt to live not for her husband or for her children but for herself. But she has achieved a new identity only through and with the help of her cultural past. She brings death to Half-face as goddess Kali, she brings happiness to Duff and Taylor as a traditional, self-sacrificing Indian woman and she is offering love to Du as a loving Indian mother who exults in her motherhood. It will take many more years for the likes of Dimple and Jasmine to completely sever their links with their past.

Mukherjee, in *The Holder of the World* shows an immigrant from America who came to India in the seventeenth century and imbibed herself in its culture. As in *Wife* and *Jasmine* she no longer experiments with the experiences of Indian immigrants in America. She focuses on the continuum of the immigrant experience moving from the small and the singular in the vastness of the three time zones simultaneously - the past, the present and the future. From America to India the worlds collide with one another.

Hannah Easton arrives in India from Puritan Massachusetts and “translates herself” into Salem Bibi, the mistress of Raja Jadav Singh. In the mid twentieth century Beigh Masters and her cybercast boyfriend Venn, of MIT strive to create the greatest “data plasma” in the world. They set on to unearth something useful from layers of history, life and times of the Salem Bibi and the Emperor’s Tear. Beigh Master depend s on her intuitive powers of the mind and the heart. She visits the Maritime Museum in Massachusetts to look into the dusty debris of Mughal miniature paintings, goes to auction houses and searches several historical records and memoirs.
The transmigration of the Salem Bibi’s soul through time and space becomes an allegory of Beigh Master’s personal discovery. She is the witness not merely of the occasion of the sin, but the birth of the sin itself... In the scorched sceptic month of August Hannah caries claustrophobic memories of the event throughout her life. She too later profligates the concept of a proper English lady to become the bibi of Jadav Singh, who is fighting the Mughals. She was brought up in an orthodox set up of the Fitch household, gained all the conventional wisdom of housekeeping, developed an obsessive love of needle work. Through her embroidery perhaps she expressed her hidden subdued and suppressed emotions: “her embroidery is vibrant, passionate and wild, so full of the lurking devil.”

Hannah neither forgets nor forgives her mother’s crime of elopement. She never shares her emotional tumult with anyone. In the Puritan family circle of Fitch she could never imagine talking about her mother. Her husband Gabriel Iegge is a colourful raconteur. He never has the time or sensibility to listen to Hannah. He is employed as a factor of the East India Company. Hannah’s fate brings her to India; her marriage with Gabriel emulated her mother’s behaviour. The Company wives have nothing in store for her. She finds a good friend in Bhagmati, her Indian ayah. She narrates fragments from the Ramayana. She is attracted to the events of Sita’s life because she proves her purity to her husband and to her society in a trial by fire. “The god of fire, Agni, embraces her and expels her unscorched.” An interesting parallel is that Hannah’s life was also a trial by fire but unlike Sita she never withstands the Agnipariksha for the sake of her husband.

Whenever, Aurangzeb comes to see her, she is reminded of Ravana the demon king of Lanka in Muslim disguise. Though she fails in her mission for armistice between the Raja and the Emperor, somehow, she purloins the diamond, the
Emperor’s Tear, from Aurangzeb’s war tent and escapes towards the fort of Panpur. She hands over the diamond to Bhagmati. The diamond ultimately found by Beigh Masters in a cyber spatial finale, when Iyer takes her through the miracle, Bhagmati thrusts the world’s most famous diamond into her dying womb. It is in her grave that they find the holder of the world of the seventeenth century.

Unlike the other protagonists of Mukherjee’s novels, Hannah Easton, the heroine of *The Holder of the World* travels not from East to West but just the opposite, from West to East. The novel is about time travelling. The opening lines of the novel:

I live in three time zones simultaneously, and I don’t mean Eastern, Central and Pacific. I mean the past, the present and the future.

It takes us to the seventeenth century Mughal India full of riches. Mukherjee has recaptured the past reality. She has described the grandeur and exotica of then India.

She beautifully blends Mughal India along with mythological illustrations from Ramayana with the modern day computech age. In other words the novel is a form of ‘computerised history’. Man’s search of his identity, in a world of rootlessness and uncertainty, takes him back to history or past, which gives him a base to hold on to. This is exactly what Bharati Mukherjee seems to bring out in this novel.

Like Jasmine the heroine of Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World*, is a journey of Hannah Easton not by chance or a forced one. It is more an escape from the rule bound claustrophobic influence of Puritan world. Hannah’s early life points most emphatically a fascination for passion and feeling, which she weaves her colourful, bright tapestries: ‘the embroidery it the embodiment of desire’ a desire to escape from the dull, grey of puritan outpost. Her embroidery even shows her hidden and imaginary world, which the narrator describes as:
'On a field of light blue’, Hannah created “uttermost shore”.

Again she says that it is unusual for:

“a twelve year old Puritan orphan who had never been out of Massachusetts imagined an ocean, palm trees, thatched collages, and black skinned men casting nets and colorfully garbed, bare-breasted women mending them; native barbs and on the horizon, high masted Schooners....., through bright-green foliage, a ghostly white building it could even be the Taj Mahal is rising.” (The Holder of the World 44)

Hannah Easton’s memories or her mother’s abduction by her Indian lover and her disappearance into the wildness, physically breaking the barriers of her Puritan society, remains in her mind forever. This later helps her to embrace the new, exotic world of Mughal India in it’s entirely for it is the world that she was in search of. So, when she meets a swash-buckling, adventurer, Gabriel Legge, she agrees to marry him, not because she loves him but just to squeeze out her constrictive society. She did not believe him, but she too longed for escape.

In Hannah’s character, we find the adaptability she proves to be a pure product of times and space, her marriage and her training, exposed to range of experience that would be extreme even in today’s world but none of it, consciously, had in or affected her outer behaviour.

Debbi Di Martino, a.k.a. Devi is the protagonist of the fifth novel Leave it to Me 6 penned by Bharati Mukherjee. An adopted daughter of an Italian couple, the initial parts of the novel tell us that she does not exactly hold high regard for her parents. Soon after she describes her traumatic childhood, she states that the Di Martino were as alien as anyone else (Leave it to Me 27). After almost three decades
of existence, she has not fully accepted herself as Debbi. All her life she felt imposed upon to do things she did not want to do.

Debbi shared a close relationship with one Wyatt, who she described as having a low, soft voice capable of “driving girls to drugs and housebreaking.” (*Leave it to Me* 12) Neither was exactly optimistic about the other. Wyatt considered Debbi a bad influence and vice-versa. Her loneliness and the hunger for affection is apparent in several thoughts: “Take me, love me, shelter me” (*Leave it to Me* 17); and during her description of Frankie, the man she fell for, her first “mature lover” and envied for his upbringing: “Frankie made Asian childhood sound fun something I wanted to claim, something I’d been robbed of”. She admits that Frankie was responsible for the new her. However, she also confessed to her mother after a sour break-up with Frankie that he’d not exactly been, in her opinion, a nice man. Her lack of remorse can be seen in the chapter following the break-up.

In her transformation to a true “Californian”, she becomes Devi Dee, a woman who like a true American goes for bliss, happiness and optimism. She called it her rebirth as a woman quicker, stronger and sharper than she had ever been. Not only did she discard her former nature, but also her upbringing as she embraced Hinduism. However, her hatred for Beth shows her double-standard nature: she is grieving with the public in Beth’s funeral while feeling happier within (*Leave it to Me* 174). Despite her new self, she is constantly on the hunt for something else, as though she is still not content with the basics of life. There are a number of people throughout the novel she envies and hates even.

Her love for Pappy, the only man she’d looked up to as her own is visible throughout the novel. She is shown to compare every man in her life with him, from Frankie to Ham. On the other hand, she is also seen comparing between different men
in her love life like comparing Frankie to Ham and Ham to Frankie and Larry, etc. It is apparent that she was most comfortable with Frankie as she admits Ham and Larry were “harder to read”. Although Devi is attracted to Ham physically, she later reveals her selfish side when she admits that “I went along with Ham because I might need more favors” (*Leave it to Me* 96). Ham in turn is possessive about Devi.

The novel *Desirable Daughters* starts with the story of Tara Lata, “The Tree Bride” born in the present-day Bangladesh in the mid nineteenth century. She is born to an orthodox family in a small village, and is described as a generous woman who “opened her house to beggars, to the sick, then to the young soldiers fighting the Raj”.

The protagonist, Tara Chaterjee is based in the San Francisco and she considers herself “a young woman like so many others on the street: ethnically ambiguous, hanging out in the coffee shop, walking dogs, strolling with boyfriends” (*Desirable Daughters* 25). She married one Bishwajeet Chatterjee whom she fondly calls Bish and describes as “the posterboy of Indian entrepreneurship”. Tara found it difficult to cope with the treatment given to her by Bish, which she expresses as “only been provided for, stupendously provided for inside the gated community, endlessly on display at dinners and openings”. Bish in turn had loved her for her selfless nature, which was rare among other women. The differences between them regarding their son Rabi widened the gap further. She later calls the relationship they share as an ‘illusion’. Her days away from Bish brought enormous changes in her, like her ability to cook. Despite the time the spent together, they were strangers to each other, there were facts about each that the other wasn’t aware of. The three sisters shared a close bond until they reached teenage, when each became detached from the rest. They were strangers to each other, which explain their lack of ability to understand each other at difficult situations, even the desire to involve themselves in tough times.
However, she is much closer to the middle sister Parvati, probably due to the narrow age-gap between the two. Their upbringing, as she says was extremely ‘sanitised’ (*Desirable Daughters* 116). As for Padma, Tara thinks of her as a blunt and overbearing woman (*Desirable Daughters* 196). Padma considers her reputation and the respect in society as the thing of utmost importance, even more than the safety of her sisters.

Tara remains secretive about her divorce to her relatives in India. However, throughout the novel she is shown to be thinking about him every so often, indicating that she was not entirely over him. In fact, India was now so alien to her and her son Rabi that on a trip to the country, Rabi felt more at home with a dog. San Francisco was the home India never was to her. Her live-in relation with Andy, an ex-biker also remains a secret. Tara considers her boyfriend Andy a better father than Bish to her son.

She also has slightly strained relationship with her son Rabi. This is due to her lack of ability to relate to him. She considers herself a woman unfit to be a mother, envies her sister for her skills in handling sons. Transformations/ changes in personality are not uncommon to Tara.

The novel *The Tree Bride* is the most unique piece of work composed by Bharati Mukherjee as it follows a pattern different from all of her previous writings: as a sequel to the preceding novel, although the protagonist is Tara Chaterjee; it is primarily based on the life and death of Tara Lata her great-grandmother. As the protagonist explores the major events in her life, many characters are introduced to create a web of a well-spun story.

The novel starts with a short description of the present of Tara Chatterjee, pregnant and reconciled with her ex-husband. Her doctor, Victoria Khanna is English
in origin, but is well acquainted with the sentiments of Indians. Tara, a Calcutta-born Bengali now based in USA is proud of her roots that are seeded in present-day Bangladesh, but confesses she is “ashamed that she grew up inside a group mythology that blamed expulsion from Bangladesh on the beastliness of Muslim fanatics which shows that she is anti-racist.” Her childhood according to her was not as pleasant as she considers herself an average, middle-class Indian whose orthodox background resulted in shame. Her perspective on British colonialism in India indicates her optimistic thinking. She was not only optimistic, but also enthusiastic about history.

When the author takes us back to the nineteenth century, we learn of several people that were related to Tara Lata and had important roles in history: Jack Snow, Olivia and Mist to name a few. Jack Snow is represented as a strong, able and eligible male; a true master. John Mist is shown as his reincarnation as again a man who barely spoke. Mist holds high regard for Olivia, his strength and his support pillar. Mist also undergoes eternal transformations, from a weak subject to a strong-hearted and firm-headed individualist. His attachment with India is made apparent in his memories and thoughts of the country; and the loneliness and feeling of loss upon leaving the country.

Crabbe, a British envoy’s character is a comparatively weaker one, who is prone to most negative feelings: envy, hatred and anger. Not much is explained about Crabbe further. Most part about the central character Tara Lata is explained in the preceding novel Desirable Daughters rather than the Tree Bride itself.

A common element in all novels of Bharati Mukherjee is the transition a character undergoes when moving from a developing nation like India to a much advanced economy like America. Mukherjee’s main protagonists are immigrant women and their reactions to given situations are the subject matter of her novels.
These heroines are round characters who develop with the development of the story. They are Mukherjee’s voice, yet they are free to react in any possible way. In fact, Mukherjee has pointed out to Russell Schoch that sometimes, “to humanize all sides”, she gives her “best lines to the villain” ⁹. The other characters of Mukherjee’s novels present the comparison and the contrast. They are basically rigid.
Works Cited


