CHAPTER 4

SYMBOLISM: USE OF PRIME SYMBOLS AND ITS EFFECT ON IMMIGRANTS LIFE
In her interview with Tina Chen and S.X. Goudie, Bharati Mukherjee remarked: “Art is about selection, stylization, and metaphoric revelation.” \(^1\) She has also stated that “Fiction must be metaphor. It is not transcription of real life but it’s a distillation and pitching at higher intensification of life. It’s always a distortion.” \(^2\)

To Mukherjee, novels are a metaphorical narration and not a documentary of real life, so one must interpret them accordingly. Through the use of symbolism in her novels Mukherjee uses her fiction to present the current problems of the world and also to suggest solutions to these problems. The life of a single person who is an immigrant Woman has been used as a symbol of the lives of all the people of the world and the Problems faced by this woman symbolically represent the problems of the current world. Through the steps taken by her female protagonists in different novels, Mukherjee suggests the options chosen by them as solutions to these problems. Mukherjee is forewarning society that if it does not become flexible or change its attitude towards women, then it has to be ready to face the adverse effects.

All of Mukherjee’s female protagonists are rebellious not by nature, but because of the unsympathetic attitudes and norms of society. They have changed and transformed to survive in their adopted land and they are threatening the set rules of the society. The remedy suggested by Mukherjee regarding the problems of immigrant life in particular, is the transformation of both the external world and the person in question. In the case of an individual, her works suggest if one cannot change one’s surroundings then one must change oneself. In the case of society, her works suggest it must accept the changing attitudes of individuals, as they are products of its own rigidity.

Everything in Mukherjee’s novels appears for a purpose. Her stories are an emblematic staging of ideas like the conflict between good and evil, the theory of
cause and effect, world peace and terrorism, the formation of a utopian world, clashes between social obligations and individual freedom and the re-establishment of the lost values.

One can easily categorize these symbols on the basis of their role in Mukherjee’s novels. It is through symbols and metaphors that she portrays the destiny and the irony of life, her idea of America, the nature of the character, the reasons for transformation, the past and its ghastly secrets, cultural differences, social confinement, the double standards of society and human relations.

The titles of the novels are themselves symbolic and this continues with the names of the female protagonists and their pairing with their male counterparts. Animal imagery is used to show the destiny, the irony of life, the heroine’s psychological show evil tendencies; America as a symbol of liberty and equality; journeys, death and reincarnation to show inevitable changes occurring in life; cultural differences to show problems; trees and plants as symbols of deep-rooted emotions and social confinement; language representing demands of globalization; man representing the patriarchal social order to show gender discrimination; characters from Indian mythology to devotion, divine justice and feminine courage; natural calamities to show divine justice and also to show that heroines are god’s tool to fight against evil; the home to show confinement, safety, stability and rigidity; location, surroundings and graphic scenes to present the mood of the character; characters and things of past life to present the cause and effect theory; violence to present feminine courage and empowerment of woman; horoscopes to show a definite future - are used in her all novels.

The titles of Mukherjee’s novels have a symbolic sense. Her first novel titled *The Tiger’s Daughter* represents the hold of the father on his daughter’s life, or the
hold of society on an individual’s life. Tara Cartwright (nee Banerjee), the female protagonist, has always been over-shadowed by her father’s personality. The title also presents the irony of life. At the end of the novel, the daughter of highly influential man of Bengal gets raped by a corrupt politician. This represents the corruption of Indian politics and Tara represents the victimization and exploitation of democracy. Her next novel Wife mocks at the old concept of marriage. It presents the changing features of a female protagonist who is trapped between the old and new concepts of marriage. The irony lies in the fact that a novel titled Wife ends with the wife killing her husband. Mukherjee’s third novel Jasmine is the story of Jasmine, the beautiful flower whose fragrance wafts through the air. It symbolizes the transformation of Jyoti (light) into Jasmine (flower). It depicts the fact that no matter what parents dream of for their children, they are destined to change. The title Desirable Daughters mocks at those who are gender biased. Mukherjee tells Russell Schoch that she has chosen the title Desirable Daughters:

Because in Hindu societies especially overprotected patriarchal families like mine, daughters are not at all desirable. They are trouble. And a mother who, as mine did, has three daughters, no sons, is supposed to go and hang herself, kill herself, because it is such an unlucky kind of motherhood to have. And I wanted then to play in also the sexy looks of the three sisters in the book. That sex itself is the form of tool for revolution that enables these three sisters in the novel to break out and make their own lives. Some of them decide finally not to break out, and they come back to the fold.

The title The Tree Bride, sequel to Desirable Daughters, symbolizes the lifetime confinement of a woman, named Tara Lata, by society. The irony is that the
wife of a tree, mother of many villagers, a living deity, actually falls in love with a
man and gets killed while working for his mission. This shows that society can bind
the human body but it can never confine the human heart and soul.

In each and every novel of Bharati Mukherjee, names are associated with
identity, either retaining it, or letting it go. The female protagonists and other
characters have either been given new names or are fighting to retain the old one. For
example, in Wife, Dimple fights to save her name. It symbolizes how much the sense
of identity and belonging matters to her. Her husband tells her about his mother’s
desire to change her name. “There’s one small thing”, he said, “My mother wants to
call you Nandini. She does not like Dimple as a name.” (Wife 17) Her mother-in-law’s
rejection of her name is a rejection of accepting her for what she is, and is an assertion
of her authority over Dimple’s life. Dimple refuses to accept it and insists on keeping
her old name, which shows her sense of self-respect and identification with the past.
On the whole, the matter has no significance for Arnit. As he says, “Nandini, Dimple.
. . What’s in a name, for sake?” (Wife 18) For Dimple, her name symbolizes her sense
of identity and Amit’s reaction to the whole issue presents his indifference,
carelessness and lack of respect for his life partner. This affects Dimple’s psychology.
She feels alone in her in-law’s house. She in fact starts talking to herself.

“Dimple Basu”, she said to the oval mirror in the bedroom. “Dimple
Basu is an exciting name.” (Wife 20)

Though Amit calls Dimple a “hopeless romantic” (Wife 24), yet he himself
asks Dimple to call him “Mit, Mit”. (Wife 21) He has his own romantic tendencies,
revealed through this desire to be called by a boyish nickname.

Dimple is dismayed by Amit’s attitude. She feels Nandini is an “old-fashioned
and unsung” (Wife 30) name. Thus, Dimple who used to think of winning her
husband’s heart through “passive resistance” (Wife 09) now feels it “degrading” (Wife 30). Under frustration, a whole new character evolves in Dimple. She feels rejected by Amit and his family and starts loosing self-confidence. It is only in America that she regains her confidence when people like Jyoti, her husband’s friend, Vinod Khanna, a man who offers her a job, Bijoy, Jyoti’s friend and a successful businessman, Ina, bold and beautiful wife of Bijoy, and Milt, an American friend of Ina and Bijoy Mullick, appreciate her beauty, intelligence and talent. Milt, in fact, has appreciated her name saying “I like dimples, for God’s sake!” (Wife 125) It is one of the reasons that she has fallen in love with Milt who has acknowledged her beauty and praised it.

An ironical situation arises when Meena, Jyoti’s wife, who has been living in America for a long time reveals to Dimple her fury and fear regarding her mother-in-law’s intention of naming her new born daughter “Aloknanda or Dipali” (Wife 204). Meena ends up finding a name “Nandini” for her daughter. (Wife 205). This adds to Dimple’s frustration as she used to think of America as a land of liberty but finds women still suffering from social bondage.

By repeating the name Nandini in the novel Bharati Mukherjee is pointing to the futility of attaching too much importance to the past. It is the present that matters. The irony of Dimple’s life is that she has imposed importance to trivial things and has been wasting her energy on them. In America she realizes that a name rarely has any significance when the life of an individual is changing rapidly. Meena’s persistence in naming her daughter herself makes Dimple realize that it is a worthless issue. One would be better off letting life take its course without imposing unnecessary rigidity.

Again, when Amit calls Marsha, Milt’s elder sister, “a lady professor” she corrects him by saying “Just a professor” (Wife 82). Dimple, who has been witnessing
all this, realizes that the law as well as society ensures equality for both sexes and if
the husband, Professor Prodosh, is not referred to as a ‘gentleman professor’, or will
his wife be referred to as ‘lady professor’.

In *Jasmine*, the name of the female protagonist undergoes various changes. Before
her marriage she is called Jyoti, a name given to her by her grandmother. After
her marriage her husband Prakash names her Jasmine. In America she refers to herself
as Kali after killing her rapist Half-Face. Lillian Gordon, who has saved her life by
providing food and shelter and has taught her the art of living in America as an
American calls her “Jazzy” (*Jasmine* 133). At her husband’s Professor Mr. Vadhera’s
house, she is just a “cousin-sister” (*Jasmine* 144). Taylor, her first American employer
and lover, calls her “Jase or Jessy” (*Jasmine* 159). Duff, Taylor’s adopted daughter,
calls her “Day Mummy”. Wylie, Taylor’s wife, calls her “care-giver” (*Jasmine* 175).
Jasmine’s name ‘caregiver’ symbolizes self-reliance, self-esteem, “professional”
status and duty (*Jasmine* 175). Jasmine feels “a care-givers life is a good life, a
worthy life.” (*Jasmine* 240) Bud, her new employer and father of her would-be child,
renames her “Jane Ripplemeyer”. He, in fact, wants to marry her before the birth of
their child and feels good having her with him. Though Darrel, Bud’s client and
family friend, tells her, “You two [Bud and Jasmine] are a joke all over Elsa County.
Those Dalton guys, they call you the Odd Couple.” (*Jasmine* 218) Darrel himself calls
her “Juh-ane” (*Jasmine* 217). The name Bharati Mukherjee has adopted for the title is
‘Jasmine’, which is given to the heroine by her husband Prakash who has brought her
to the city. In Jasmine’s own words:

He wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me
a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new
name: Jasmine he said, “you are small and sweet and heady, my
Jasmine. You’ll quicken the whole world with your perfume.”

*(Jasmine 77)*

Each of these names marks a turn in Jasmine’s life and circumstances, a step forward in her adaptation and evolution. Jasmine herself acknowledges:

I survived the snipping. My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane [name given by Bud, her employer and father of her would-be child], a fighter and adapter.

*(Jasmine 40)*

Unlike Dimple, Jasmine has accepted whatever life has offered her and used it to her advantage, to grow and to develop. That is why there is no frustration, no regret and no resentment.

So it is in the case of Professor Vadhera of *Jasmine* whose name changes from (“Devinder Vadhera” to “Dave Vadhera”) *(Jasmine 143)* with respect to the changes in his profession from a scientist to a hair-specialist. In fact, it is the same with all the immigrants who have left their native land to survive in an absolutely strange land, which is most of the time hostile towards them. Dimple realises that a name has no significance because the immigrant’s life is destined to change. No matter how hard one tries to hold on to the past, one has to establish a new identity. She realizes that people must change to survive. Mentally, she changes fast, but in her life-style, she cannot, because her husband Amit, being a typical Indian husband, feels no need to give her personal space or privacy. Thus, to achieve the transformation she desires, Dimple decides it better to break the marriage bond which demands that a woman be subservient.

The name Tara of the heroines of *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* also has symbolic meanings. First, it presents the contrast between the heroine and her
ancestor Tara Lata, who is her namesake. Second, it symbolizes that like stars these women, Tara and Tara Lata, have become guiding lights for other women. In the Hindi language, Tara means ‘star’. Tara Lata, the freedom fighter, has become a symbol of patience and Tara, the heroine, has become an ideal by breaking old norms of the institution of marriage. Characters like Dr Kajol, friend of Tara’s sister Padma, appreciate her boldness in divorcing a multimillionaire and feels that Tara is “courageous” (Desirable Daughters 242)

The husbands in the lives of Dimple, Jasmine and Tara, are symbolic of the patriarchal system, which thrives on gender discrimination and orthodoxy. Dimple’s husband Amit can think of nothing and nobody other than himself. To him marriage is a gratification of a man’s desires and to fulfill social obligation. Wife and children are prestigious gifts that enhance a man’s position. The role of a woman is to please and serve the man and in return, the man is supposed to provide for them. That is why when Amit fails to get a job in America, he is frustrated and again when he finds that women enjoy an equal status he tries to confine Dimple in Marsha’s home and allows her to be friendly only with women like Meena Sen. He asks her not to be friends with Ina Mullick who drinks and smokes and has only American men and women as friends. He, in fact, tries to discourage Dimple by accusing her, blaming her, mocking her and also by never appreciating her, fearing that she might become egoistic and rebellious. He hinders her way to independence. He supports Jyoti who believes that “When a woman starts going wrong, it’s usually because her husband didn’t look after her enough.” (Wife 68) He thinks, “With so many Indians around and a television and a child, a woman shouldn’t have time to get crazy ideas.” (Wife 69)

To Prakash, Jasmine’s husband, a wife is a valuable commodity to be looked after, to be maintained and a status symbol. It is his duty to take care of her. She is his
pride. That is why when he finds out that Jasmine is working to earn money he becomes furious, for he thinks it is his duty to provide for the family and for Jasmine’s to work is a shame for him.

Bish, husband of Tara of Desirable Daughters, is a step ahead of Prakash. Even after his divorce he keeps his marriage oath and looks after his family. To him “Marriage is manifest dharma, his test, his duty, the outer sign of his inner strength and harmony.” (Desirable Daughters 266)

He blames himself for their unsuccessful marriage and tries to make-up for it. It is his desire to re-marry Tara before she bears him a child.

Bharati Mukherjee also uses animal-symbols as metaphors for the inner life of the characters. Animals like a “dead baby lizard” have been used to show the lack of emotion and enthusiasm, the inactivity and pessimism in life (Wife 07). It also shows deep hatred and dislike. So when Amit tells Dimple that he “is not good at saying things . . . She let him grab her and push her down among the pillows and fall on top of her. Sometimes in bed she thought of the baby lizard she had found in her pillowcase.” (Wife 22)

The symbol of fish has also been used in Wife. The wastage of ten kilograms of fish on Dimple’s wedding day symbolizes heroine’s ill-fate and forthcoming problems in marriage. It has been considered one of the “mishaps” during her wedding ceremony (Wife 15). Again, Amit tries to flush away the goldfish given to Dimple by her friend Pixie, thus asserting his authority and his superior position in the marriage. Flushing of goldfish represents Amit’s intention of flushing away Dimple’s friendship with Pixie.

The goldfish, swimming mightily, had withstood three flushes of the toilet (Wife 39)
That day, Dimple has told Amit about her courageous childhood deed of holding a snake, but Amit mocks her off and in flushing away the goldfish has tried to undermine her confidence as well.

Fish again appears in an aquarium belonging to Ina, a modern Indian woman living in America. The whole scene is used to present Dimple’s frustration and feeling of alienness. The one-way look into the aquarium makes Dimple nervous and jealous. She feels herself unfit in her new surroundings and becomes “furious at their [fish’s] ignorance of being watched” (Jasmine 83), when she herself is so self-conscious and unsure.

The mouse symbol is used by Mukherjee in Wife to show Dimple’s hatred and frustration due to unwanted pregnancy. Mice that eat into wood are here symbols of an erosion of identity. Pregnancy makes Dimple feel cheated by Amit, so she expresses her anger by killing mice.

“I’ll get you!” she screamed. “There’s no way out of this, my friend!” She seemed confident now, a women transformed. In an outburst of hatred, her body shuddering, her wrist taut with fury, she smashed the top of a small gray head. To Dimple the dead mouse looked pregnant. (Jasmine 35)

The irony is that Dimple herself is pregnant and she ends up killing her would-be child.

In Jasmine, the episode of dead dog floating in the river near her village, and its being busted into pieces after her touch, symbolizes that Jasmine’s desires will be lost forever. It symbolizes pessimism and loss. She feels the stench of dead dog even in America. “That stench stays with me. I’m twenty-four now, I live in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa, but every-time I lift a glass of water to my lips, fleetingly I smell it. I
know what I don’t want to become” (*Jasmine* 05) - a shattered person with shattered dreams that only give off a stench.

The killing of Jasmine’s father by a bull and Jasmine’s interpretation of the incident symbolizes the role of fate and destiny in human life. She tells Taylor:

Perhaps Pitaji’s life assignment was merely to crunch one small piece of gravel as he jumped out of the bus that morning, and once he did it, perhaps God took the form of a maddened bull, or God took the form of nettles that caused a perfectly harmless bull enough pain to charge. Perhaps my father’s assignment was to be just that; to die in a freakish accident before he could marry me off so that I could be free to fall in love with Prakash. (*Jasmine* 59)

Every incident is thus interpreted to mean more that meets the eye - the visible blends into the invisible, the physical into the metaphysical and the transitory into the eternal. Mukherjee also uses tree and plants as symbols, furthering the perception of the sublimal and the manifest connection between human beings and their environment. In *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*, the character Tara Lata is married to a tree and becomes the tree bride. This marriage to a tree means chaining a woman to a place. It also symbolizes the significance of the past in an individual’s life.

In *Jasmine*, a banyan tree has been used to symbolize old beliefs and customs. It also symbolizes the struggle between destiny and human will. The story begins with: “LIFETIME ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears - his satellite dish to the stars - and foretold my widowhood and exile.” (*Jasmine* 03) The story ends with the heroine deciding to form new relationships, discarding the ill-fate foretold her under the banyan tree.
The plants in Marsha’s house where Dimple and Amit have been staying till they get a house for themselves also have symbolic meanings. Dimple talks to Milt about the cactus which should have flowered, but is spoiled.

She held it up to Milt, asked his advice in terrified tones, anticipated his disapproval. “What more does it need? Vitamins? Compost of tea leaves? I’ve given it all I could.” Since the plants belonged to Marsha [Milt’s sister], Dimple expected him to feel proprietary about them, to scold her for killing so many, even the hardy little ivies and geraniums. “Love”, answered Milt . . . “Like us they respond to love. It’s really very simple.”(Wife 187-88)

The same is true of Dimple. The only thing missing in her married life is true in love. If for Amit, marriage is to satisfy and gratify man mentally, physically and socially, for Dimple marriage is meant to make a woman happy. She marries Amit in the hope of getting rid of the dullness of her past life.

The electrical appliances that the heroines learn to use in America have their own significance in Mukherjee’s novels. Even as they become more and more familiar with these appliances, these highly emotional women start reflecting some of the mechanization and efficiency of machines. Dimple thinks of all the facilities provided by America as a miracle, and so does Jasmine, who, even when she is raped, does not fail to appreciate the hot water facility.

I [Jasmine] had never used a Western shower, standing instead of squatting, with automatic hot water coming hard from a nozzle instead of cold water from a hand- dipped pitcher. It seemed like a miracle, that even here in a place that looked deserted, a place like a mad house or a prison where the most hideous crimes took place, the water should
be hot, the tiles and porcelain should be clean, without smells, without bugs. It was a place that permitted a kind of purity. (*Jasmine* 117)

Dimple also appreciates technology as a power. Nevertheless, it is true that the ubiquitous presence and use of modern appliances is making humans unemotional and detached, which in turn affects human relationships and human life. Dimple’s friendship with television stars and Jasmine being impressed by Du, her adopted son’s efficiency with electric gadgets, present the same idea.

It is only through Tara of *Desirable Daughters* that Mukherjee has presented the drawbacks of the electronic and mechanical world. The bombing of Tara’s house by a terrorist in *Desirable Daughters* and the murder of Victoria Khanna, Tara’s doctor-cum friend, with a mobile bomb in *The Tree Bride* makes Tara hate modern appliances. It shows how human beings become victim to their own inventions. Mukherjee’s novel *The Tree Bride* echoes her appeal to go back to the world of humanity.

In Jasmine, Taylor, Jasmine’s first employer and lover, provides the solution to Jasmine’s problem of getting rid of unwanted products advertised on television.

He [Taylor] wrote on a package in thick marking pen RETURN TO SENDER. That’s all you need to do, he explained. If something gets too frightening just pull down an imaginary shade that says RETURN on it and you can make it go away. (*Jasmine* 186)

The home in Mukherjee’s novels symbolizes confinement and rigidity on the one hand and safety and stability on the other. The home life offered by husbands to these female protagonists of Mukherjee is so secure that it gives feeling of confinement. As they are constantly moving they fail to belong to any particular
place. This lack of belonging makes their lives hard and outlooks limited, confined and resigned.

In *Wife*, Dimple never feels at home anywhere. In India at her parent’s and her mother-in-law’s house she feels imprisoned. In her husband’s friend Jyoti’s place in America, first she feels comfortable and then bored. At Marsha’s place, she feels as if she is living in a hotel “only paying rent” (*Wife* 209). She has plans for her own “dream house” in which there will be a statue of the love goddess Venus, a house that will be a symbol of her dream of a perfect love, a perfect relationship. That is why she tries so hard to love Amit. She never thinks of living in America permanently. Yet her idea on the location of her dream house changes as she changes. She decides to persuade Amit “to settle in Ballygunje rather than in Kalyani”. (*Wife* 89) Marsha’s brother Milt’s remark to Indians that “New York’s home for chrissake!” (*Wife* 124), is an irritated comment that immigrants do not consider America their home and always plan to return to their native land and that is why they feel unsafe in America.

To Tara and Jasmine home is a place where they can live comfortably, and feel safe. It is the people and not the place that matters to them. Tara’s mother says that “Home is where you belong”, when her son Rabi recites:

Have thou no home, what home can hold thee friend? The sky thy roof; the grass thy bed, and food what chance may bring, well cooked or ill, judge not. No food or drink can taint that noble Self which knows itself: Like rolling river free, Thou ever be, Sannyasin bold! Say OM TAT SAT OM. (*Desirable Daughters* 297)

However, for heroines like Jasmine home is a prison, a confined space. As Catherine Miller says, Bharati Mukherjee creates “female characters who break beyond the boundaries imposed on them by their gender and also their race, class, and
economic status.” Miller also feels that, in Mukherjee’s novels, “Physical houses become traps, and the care involved in a house becomes a sentence of imprisonment.” They have been out in an insecure world forming the identity of an alien and to them the strange is the familiar.

Each of Mukherjee’s heroines is an embodiment of courage and terror. Devi/Debby of Leave It to Me, has been named Faustine by nuns and Karin, wife of Jasmine’s lover-cum-employer Bud, calls Jasmine “tornado” (Jasmine 205). That is, Mukherjee associates human power with nature’s power. Thus destructive power works both outside and within the individual and one has to fight both to maintain balance.

Violence, in Mukherjee’s novels, is used to symbolize the rebellion of the suppressed, as well as the awakening of an ignorant and it works against the age old patriarchal social system. In an interview published by Ballentine Mukherjee says that:

I also wanted the violence to be emblematic of the violence in the real world. Just one small example: These days we can’t board a plane without going through a metal detector. As in real life, some of the violence in the novel is caused by malevolent people. But there’s another kind of violence that intrigues me more. I’m thinking of earthquakes, tornadoes, typhoons, floods, wildfires. Debby is violent in the way that such forces of nature are. The Gray Nuns who rescued her must have guessed this since they named her Faustine after a typhoon.

Mukherjee claims that sex and violence in her novels are symbolic by nature. They present the empowerment and emancipation of her heroines. In her own words:
In terms of psychic violence and female sexuality, I grew up at a time and in a class in Calcutta when you couldn’t say the word “sex”. I’d never said the word “sex” and we certainly were not allowed to think of it; I didn’t even know how the male anatomy was constructed. So for me or for my characters who are coming not from villages but upper-class, urban Indian settings, sexuality becomes the mode of resistance or a way to rebel. After all, if you’re coming out of a society where sex is the unspeakable, the unutterable, then doing it or acknowledging your sexuality results not only in individual rebellion but actually constitutes an attack on a whole patriarchal, Victorian, hypocritical society. And why psychic violence? Ultimately, physical injuries are less affecting than the wounds inside. You lose a leg, you get a prosthetic. But what do you do about the scarred psyche?  

In Mukherjee’s novels talk about murder, suicide, violence and death is so common that it becomes an integral part of the novels. The heroines are not dumb victims—they take revenge without regret, *Wife* is full of it. The strange thing is that in India, Dimple used to think of committing suicide only. When she reaches America, the concept of murder becomes a concrete reality, with people talking about it in an almost nonchalant manner. Thus through her, Mukherjee shows that in a society as civilized, progressive and democratic as the United States of America, people live in constant fear of murder. Even technology is part of the killing process. Enslavement to the machine is killing human emotions, as human beings are taking on the characteristics of the machines they work with.

Human values are dying because the concept of family is dying. An independent life is good only for those who have guts enough to live alone. These
immigrant women are not as bold as America demands they be. They need male support, if not financially, then mentally and physically. They want to belong because they are brought up that way. Only those who once possess can understand the real sense of loss. By talking about murder, Mukherjee forewarns society and individuals against the presentation of a one-sided picture of the world. Children should be taught about both the good and the evil of the world, only then can they fight against evil. Hiding reality is of no good. If a child is shown only the good side of the world, it will fail to survive. Through murder Mukherjee presents the ugly picture of the world because it is also part of the world. Its knowledge can enable an individual to fight or find ways to escape suffering. Thus Dimple and Tara, of Wife and Desirable Daughters respectively, fail to cope with unexpected happenings and blame others for their unhappy situations. They have never been exposed to death, rape, murder and discrimination in their lives, so they react as typical losers. Dimple kills her husband and Tara blames her sister for her condition. But Jasmine has already faced atrocities since the beginning of her life. She tells her first employer Wylie that her mother tried to kill her, for “She wanted to spare me the pain of a dowryless bride” (Jasmine 40). Jasmine thus reacts to her situation like a fighter, a survivor.

Murder presents the ugly side of life, the violent nature of humankind. It embodies and enacts the atmosphere of terror existing in today’s world. The abortion and murder committed by Dimple is both literal and metaphorical. Dimple is killing not only a person, but also the double standards of society and conservative ideas that work invisibly but powerfully behind the institution of marriage. Dimple’s mental trauma leads her to contemplate various ways to commit suicide, but suddenly she does a turnabout and commits murder instead. It is a powerful metaphor, negative
though it is, pointing to the fact that Dimple finally takes action to rid herself of the husband who has always caused her misery.

In Mukherjee’s novels the concept of death includes the concept of rebirth. It presents not only the end of one life, but also the beginning of a new one. She focuses on an absolute transformation for which death or an absolute end of one phase of human life is a must. Indeed, death is associated with psychological conditions. That is why her heroines define their change of name as an end of one life.

Bharati Mukherjee reveals that:

Violence is very connected with Diaspora and the transplanting from one’s original culture into a new country, no matter for what reason we’ve come to the new country, implies or necessitates death of one’s former self or mutilation of one’s former self and so I want to think that the physical violence in my novels are really my metaphorical or artistic way of showing the psychic damage that takes place. . . .

In Wife, Dimple has not been willing to change her name to Nandini, for she was not ready for a rebirth or to take on a new identity. In America, however, she is willing to into a new person and can talk freely about “love and death” (Wife 85). This freedom of expression opens the way to clearer thought and decisive action. Through the novel she is undecided about suicide and murder. In the beginning the legendary wife Sita who has walked on fire to proof her purity, has been her ideal, but when she meets a practical woman like Ratna Das, a rich woman who has married for money, she feels that it is foolish to “walk through fire for anybody” (Wife 47). Thus a woman intending to commit suicide ends up committing murder.

Jasmine’s many names - Jane, Jasmine and Jyoti - are “ghosts” to her (Jasmine 21). She feels, “We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of
dreams” (Jasmine 29). She is afraid of her past. To her “experience [past] must be forgotten or else it will kill” (Jasmine 33). After her father’s death, her mother has been consoled by Lahori Friend. She said

Why cry? Crying is selfish . . . Family life and family emotions are all illusions. The Lord lends us a body, gives us an assignment, and sends us down. When we get the job done, the Lord calls us home again for the next assignment. (Jasmine 59)

After Prakash’s death, she feels that he is exhorting her, forcing her to realize that “That Jyoti is dead” (Jasmine 96). She then thinks that though she has no children from Prakash, they have created life as “Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine” (Jasmine 97). After killing Half-Face, her rapist, Jasmine feels that she is a “walking death” – “Death incarnate” (Jasmine 119)

While talking about reincarnation with Dr Mary Webb, who teaches Sociology Jasmine tells her, “We do keep revisiting the world. I have also traveled in time and space, It is possible” (Jasmine 127). She feels:

Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine, Duffs day mummy and Taylor and Wylie’s au pair in Manhattan; that Jasmine isn’t this Jane Ripplemeyer having lunch with Mary Webb at the University Club today. And which of us is the undetected murderer of a half-faced monster, which of us has held a dying husband, which of us was raped and raped and raped in boats and cars and motel rooms? (Jasmine 127)

In Desirable Daughters and The Tree Bride, the cause of the death of Tara’s namesake ancestor Tara Lata is a focal point. In Desirable Daughters, Tara talks of Death and God’s hold on human life. First she blames her parents for not letting her sister Padma get married to the man of her choice. She thinks that “none of this would
have happened, if you hadn’t opposed the marriage, if you had let her act” (*Desirable Daughters* 303). But soon she realizes “the futility of questioning fate, or blind random chance, or character,” for now she feels:

If Didi had married, would she have stayed married in Calcutta? .... Something else, equally calamitous would have happened on the same date, at the same minute. Perhaps an earthquake, a plane crash, an automobile accident. Who are we to question God? (*Desirable Daughters* 303)

Tara also talks of goddess Manasha, “insecure and therefore demanding goddess” who “in her familiar cobra form . . . had killed the Tree Bride’s boy husband-to-be,” and uses “her identity as queen of snakes to call our self-protective little lives into question by injecting them with venom and demanding reverence through the infliction of unexpected pain” (*Desirable Daughters* 304). At the end of the story while working on the life of Tara Lata, her ancestor known as Tree Bride, Tara recalls her father’s quote, “*Bishey bish Khai*, only poison delivers us from poison” (*Desirable Daughters* 310). Thus, all that happens in one’s life is pre-decided and the only thing one can do is to do things with one’s full capacity. Human life and death are in the control of a supernatural power.

Mukherjee uses characters from Indian Mythology to convey great symbolic significance. Goddess Sita, Manasha, Kali and Lord Yama are frequently used to show human fear, devotion and feminine courage, and also to show that humans are mere tools to exhibit divine justice. Sita, the ideal Hindu wife, has been used as the prototype of the submissive, obedient wife. Kali, on the other hand, represents womanly courage and strength, as well as a tool of supernatural power to right the wrongs of the world. Devi Manasha represents death and fate, whereas Lord Yama
represents death itself. These figures have not only symbolic and representative significance - they are also characters in the novels. In Wife, Dimple looks upon Sita as an ideal to be followed, but as she grows and becomes acquainted with the modern world her views change. She starts thinking of Sita’s act of going through fire on her husband’s demand as a foolish act and the demand itself as unjustified. She thus claims a stake on having a life of her own choice and desires to end the previous one completely.

In Jasmine, the heroine identifies herself with Goddess Kali, who represents the violent aspect of a woman. She kills her rapist Half-Face not because he raped her but because he mocked at her mission of committing Sati. She had decided to die on her first day in America, but the rape changed all that and surrender became victory.

The vision of lying serenely on a bed of fire under palm trees in my white sari had motivated all the weeks of sleepless, half-starved passage, the numbed surrender to various men for the reward of an orange, a blanket, a slice of cheese. I had protected this sari, and Prakash’s suit, through it all. Then he had touched it. He had put on the suit, touched my sari, my photograph and Ganpati. My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debts and sins all paid for (Jasmine 120-21).

When she kills Half-Face sitting “naked” on him with “mouth open” and “pouring blood”, “red tongue out”, the whole murder scene represents the way Goddess Kali had killed Mahisasur, the Buffalo-Demon. (Jasmine 118)

In Desirable Daughters and The Tree Bride, the heroine Tara, after having lots of experiences in life re-marries her ex-husband and turns into a devoted wife. At the end of the novel The Tree Bride, when Tara goes to India to perform a proxy-
cremation of her ancestor Tara Lata, she is told the story of a legendary king Harish Chandra, who did everything to keep his promises and to perform his ‘dharma’ (religious duty). This makes Tara realize that people who perform their duty as is expected from them are the ones who experiences the bliss of life and marriage. In the beginning of her marriage, she has been introduced by her mother-in-law to a woman who has been serving her husband who is suffering from Parkinson’s disease. Her mother-in law tells Tara that “she holds the bedpan under him. She cleans him with her own hands. And she has a master’s degree from the Delhi School of Economics.” (Desirable Daughters 83) At that time Tara laughs at the idea. Marriage to her is all about sex and enjoyment. Later, when she reunites with her ex-husband she realises her mistake and becomes a devoted wife helping Bish to restart his life. She now understands that marriage is not merely physical satisfaction. Marriage is not to have true friend who can understand, respect and support whenever needed. It is actually to be ‘that friend’. This ultimately helps Tara win her ex-husband Bish’s heart back.

Hence, each legend from Indian mythology helps in creating the backdrop against which the reader understands the ideas working behind Mukherjee’s novels. It is not that Mukherjee blindly accepts all the moral ideas presented through legends. She actually distills the old story to fit modern demands. For example, the concept of Sita has been used in different novels in different ways. In Dimple’s case it has been used to discard orthodoxy and move forward. In another novel, The Holder of the World Sita’s ordeal is presented in yet further depth:

Sita passes the trial by fire. Rama, relieved, installs her in the palace as his queen and gladly fulfills his conjugal duties and passions. At night he lies awake torturing himself with imagined violations Ravana may have committed on Sita. No, its worse: he can forgive Ravana his rape.
His fear is that Sita might have enjoyed it. After the first, no future lover leaves a mark: *Rama doesn’t know*. Distrust his own and that of his advisers drives him to banish Sita, now pregnant with twin sons, to the forest. Years pass . . . Remorse and loneliness brings Rama into the forest where he accidentally rediscover Sita. Eager to re-store serenity to himself, and his family to the palace where it belongs, he begs Sita for one more trial by fire. This time Sita refuses . . . this time she stands up to Rama and the unfair institutions of Ayodhya. (*The Holder of the World* 176-77)

In the novel *Desirable Daughters*, without using the name of Sita, Mukherjee has shown a choice that Sita might have made. When husbands are devoted to their wives and their families, wifely devotion too comes into play.

Physical attraction is a short-term phase of human life. Mutual understanding, care and respect are the powerful base for love that will last throughout life.

Mukherjee’s aim of writing novels is to present reality through fiction. She reveals through her novels that if in the United States of America and other advanced nations, love marriages are acceptable and in India arrange marriages prevail, then one must understand that each type is justified in its own society, location and situation. Problems arise when people from different cultures meet and fail to understand one another. Through her novels Mukherjee introduces people of different cultures to each other. She suggests that if these people, understands each other, then many current problems will be solved.

‘America’ is another symbol used in all of Mukherjee’s novels. It symbolizes democratic values like liberty, equality and fraternity. To Mukherjee’s heroines, America is a place where they can fulfill their desires. Anne Brewster has rightly
pointed out that “The New World is figured as a place where anyone can be a success, including Immigrants.”  

Bharati Mukherjee in *On Being an American Writer* answers those who question American writer’s sensitivity:

> What do American writers know of oppression from tradition, from family, religion, the state, and foreign invasion? Americans can settle injustice in a lawsuit. We can escape domestic brutality with a divorce. We can vote the rascals out of office. We can buy state-of-the-art medication to relieve our anxieties and enhance our self-worth.  

She reveals her views on America in *American Dreamer*. To her

> The United States exists as a sovereign nation. “America”, in contrast exists as a myth of democracy and equal opportunity to live by, or as an ideal goal to reach. All countries view themselves by their ideals. Indians idealize the cultural continuum, the inherent value system of India, and are properly incensed when foreigners see nothing but poverty, intolerance, strife, and injustice. Americans see themselves as the embodiments of liberty, openness, and individualism, even as the world judges them for drugs, crime, violence, bigotry, militarism, and homelessness.

To immigrants the democratic ideal is the very soul of the American continent that is why they have left their native land in the hope of living in a land of peace, love, comfort, luxury and happiness. Through her novels Mukherjee warns them of possible disillusionment. She is suggesting that if immigrants want to enjoy the American democracy, they have to pay for it. They have to accept change and be ready to start anew. If they want to be considered as part of the American mainstream,
they must learn, understand and respect the American culture. In doing so, they might have to form a new identity.

In *American Dreamers* she writes:

In this age of diasporas, one’s biological identity may not be one’s only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration. The experience of cutting myself off from a biological homeland and settling a citizens has tested me as a person, and made me the writer I am today. 19

Mukherjee is not blind to its drawbacks. She simply suggests through her novels that one must not have a blind belief in all that is said about America. Each individual might have different experiences in the same surroundings, depending on the individual’s capacity and strength to transform adverse conditions. In an interview Mukherjee says:

I have a clear-eyed love of the United States. I have chosen the United States as my “homeland” because I believe in the democratic ideals that are guaranteed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. I love the ideals embedded in these two instruments, and because I love these ideals; I speak out - in essays and through fiction – when that idealism is corrupted. 20

Dimple realises it and feels, “In America, anything is possible” and “You can be raped and killed on any floor” (*Wife* 129). Jasmine has also learned that:

In America, nothing 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 181)

Comparing and contrasting the values of relationships in India and America, Tara of Desirable Daughters wants to tell her ex-husband Bish, “Bish! What you eat, what language you speak, where you sleep - in our world they meant everything, but we’re not there anymore. Here, dharma and duty, they don’t mean a damn thing.” (Desirable Daughters 266)

‘Multi-culturalism’ in America has its own symbolic sense. People, coming 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.

Many a time immigrants fail to understand the American sense of individual respect and, fearing its ill effects, create a ghetto wall around them. This certainly confuses the new generation, which fails to attach itself to any country. In their attempt to discover their identity, they sometimes work against society and society, instead of understanding them, banishes them. This again frustrates them and they become more rebellious. Mukherjee tells Runar Vignisson:

The proliferation of ethnic ghettos, I think can be very very dangerous, especially in the nineteen nineties. The more alienated the new non European immigrants feel the more they become the seething hot bed of terrorism, trouble or potential violence. 21
‘Terrorism’ reflects the forces of evil working against world peace. As Mukherjee writes about immigrants, this factor becomes very important. In America, people from different parts of the world live together, so they need to show tolerance and respect towards each other. Murder and serial killing stalk the pages of these novels, which deal with the lives of ordinary women looking for happiness. Throughout the span of Dimple’s life presented in the novel one sees a scared woman suspecting every person of being a murderer. Fear of the Khalsa terrorist Sukhwinder terrorizes Jasmine’s life and it is because of him that she leaves New York and Taylor, her lover, and goes to Iowa. In Desirable Daughters, Tara’s life is stalked by a terrorist, Abbas Sattar Hai.

Abbas Sattar Hai and Sukhwinder are the links between terror on the individual level and terror on the national, global level. Just as in the various relationships certain norms are set to actually help its functioning, so too in society various laws are made to sustain peace. The rule breakers in both cases are considered outlaws or pariahs. They have to suffer exile. They are not allowed into the main stream and so they react against society. They plan to terrorize the world in the hope of making their voice heard. In doing so, they commit more evil. The result is that they either succeed in attracting and spoiling a new generation or they are completely destroyed themselves. Society as a whole and the individual are thus caught up in a web of cause and effect. Through the revolts of her heroines Mukherjee presents the working of human psychology and how a peace-loving person becomes rebellious. In The Tree Bride, Mukherjee talks of the ruthless British rule in India, of terrorism in East Asia and its causes. She points out the religious and political backing of terrorism. Then she weaves all these threads into an overview of how world terrorism affects individuals like Tara. Bharati Mukherjee told Dave Weich:
Here [in *Desirable Daughters*], when I used the Dawood gang I was anticipating the Daniel Pearl kind of kidnapping, which is going on. The Dawood gang was involved very recently in the attack on the American Center in Calcutta, my hometown. But it wasn’t until the World Trade Center was demolished that the average citizen began to realize how, like Tara, you can be living your life; immersed in your own personal conflicts should I go back to my husband? Why did my Hungarian lover leave me for someone else? etc. — while unknowingly you are enmeshed in someone else’s incredible fantasies.  

Mukherjee’s fiction is full of symbols and metaphors. Money, rape, sex, suicide, death etc. are used as symbols.
Works Cited


2. Ibid


   All subsequent references to this work will appear in the chapter in parentheses.


21. Bharati Mukherjee, an interview with Runar Vignisson, SPAN Journal of the