Chapter VI

Summation

Things do not change, we change.

-Thoreau, Walden

Man’s perception of the surrounding world depends upon such variables as his attitude, education, psycho-somatic orientation, socio-cultural forces, socio-economic and socio-linguistic backdrops, etc., which among other items are usually covered by the blanket term ‘culture’. Culture is a sum total of customs, arts, social institutions, etc. of a particular group of people. A culture within its ambit works as a unifying factor, whereas, across socio-cultural groups it works as a dividing factor.

Cultural crossovers pave a hybrid culture and a new process of socio-cultural assimilation. A mixed cultural milieu makes room for vistas of communication and dialogue in this cosmopolitan world. In his major work *Culture and Society*, Williams defines culture as, “Individual habit of mind, the state of intellectual development of a whole society, the arts and the whole way of life of a group or people” (2).

In recent years through a great body of fiction written by writers of Indian origin, the diasporic writers have emerged on the literary scene. A large number of these diasporic writers have given expression to their creative urge. The need to establish one’s root becomes more acute in the case of diasporic writers.
In recent work, *Displacement, Diaspora and Geographies of Identity*, Lavie and Ted Swedenburg metaphorically define the space occupied by the expatriate/immigrant as “Trishanku’s heaven” (334). It is interesting to note that the physical uprootedness and psychological rootedness locates them in an ‘in-between’ position.

They locate and establish the cultural nuances within the diasporic space. While negotiating between the parent and immigrant culture diasporic writers occupy what Homi Bhabha calls “intersticial space” (3).

In Indian notion, culture has both individual and social connotations, especially when it propagates the terms *Kula* and *Shila*. *Kula* implicates biological and cultural heredity of both an individual and a group. It is a lifelong discipline, an intimate conviction, a commitment to and a mutual relationship with one’s resource tradition. *Shila* is the behaviour pattern that individuals and groups develop for themselves. Since *Kula* is the received one and *Shila* the changing one, the two concepts stand for tradition and change respectively, and make culture an ongoing process. The concept is well illustrated in the image of a person walking. Unless the back foot is firm on the ground, the front foot moving forward loses balance. In India, culture is regarded as a dynamic, multidimensional, ever onward movement. The *Aitreya Brahmana* dictum *charaiveti* (ever move on) can be recalled in the context. A culture is enriched as it flows through the complex interweaving of history, crossing borders in some form or
other in every phase, but without losing contact with what flows into it from the upstream.

In *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, Eliot defines culture “as the development of an individual or a group or class or whole society and one of the major problems faced by many individuals in today’s world is finding oneself displaced from one’s own culture” (21). The sense of dislocation is a process where the individual feels geographically, culturally, linguistically and psychologically estranged.

London-born, U.S. raised Jhumpa Lahiri, when she started writing seriously, she set her stories not in Rhode Island she grew up in, but in Kolkatta, that existed elsewhere, for the majority of her Western readers. In an interview Jhumpa Lahiri gives her reasons:

I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor a former resident
- a valuable position I think for a writer. I learnt to observe things as an outsider, and I also knew, as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way I did not seem to belong to the U.S.

(www.rediff.com)

Setting stories in Kolkata, she argues, privileges her to a "double vision”. There was the necessary combination of distance and intimacy. Jhumpa Lahiri tells that she
has been learning about the city where her parents were born. It has been a wonderful part of her life. She admits that it is not her home.

Indian –born Bharati Mukharjee is eager to be considered an American writer, to belong to the mainstream of the country of her adoption. She does not wish to be called an exile or an expatriate because to her “acculturation” is an important process which has the exuberance of acceptance or assimilation and not the pain of difference or exclusion or alienation. Her earlier writings reflect the pain of exclusion while her later ones portray the ability to forge an identity while being also accepted by the new cultural milieu. She says in the Indian American cultural context: “I see it now as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated” (“Introduction”, Darkness 3).

The first chapter entitled Introduction deals with the aspects of cultural transaction in the recent Indo-Anglican and diasporic fiction. The term culture has been explained, and different definitions of great thinkers and critics are given. Critics like T.S.Eliot, Matthew Arnold, Lionel Trilling, F.R.Leavis, Raymond Williams and Homi. K.Bhabha’s notion of culture and how literature becomes the best medium for preserving culture are also highlighted. Migration is inevitable in the life of any being. Of course diaspora refers to displacement. It has become a personal choice in the journey of life. Terms like ‘Identity’ and ‘Hybridity’ are discussed at length with substantial ideas of recent literary theoreticians. The latter part of 20th century has a number of novels with diasporic themes. The researcher also outlines his intention to take up this topic for research. A very short biography of Bharati Mukherjee and
Jhumpa Lahiri along with their works has been presented. Articles and books on these writers by learned scholars and critics have been brought to notice.

The second chapter **Place and Displacement** traces the migration and the experiences of the immigrants portrayed in the select novels of Bharati Mukherjee. An important concern of the post-colonial literature is related to place and displacement. The concern with identifying a relationship between self and place leads to a crisis of identity. The self may have eroded either because of “dislocation” or “cultural denigration”. The theme of exile is frequently concerned with place and displacement and establishing of new relationships.

In *Jasmine* (1990), Bharati Mukherjee celebrates the freedom of anonymous in the U.S. and the American reverence for the autonomy of the individual. The energetic protagonist of the novel, who was born as Jyoti, metamorphoses herself into personae like Jasmine, Jase and Jane, according to the requirement of the situation. By the time she starts her first person narrative, she has become a confident accomplished woman who is not only an adept “caregiver” to American households, “wife” to so many men, but also speaks with authority about diverse subjects such as farming, films, politics, science, medicine, accents of various Englishes spoken around her, Indian philosophy, Indian literature and social issues such as poverty. Her confidence level is very high throughout the novel, despite some real dark patches in her life. Jasmine is a fighter, survivor and achiever. She recalls that if, “we could just get away from India, then all fates would be concealed. We’d start with new fates, new stars. We could say
or be anything we wanted. We’d be on the other side of the earth, out of God’s sight (JAS, 85).

Braving illegal migration, hunger, cold and even rape at the hands of an ugly monster appropriately called Half-Face, Jasmine sounds philosophical, typically in the Hindu way when she realizes: “My body was merely the shell, soon to be discarded. Then I could be reborn, debt and sins all paid for” (JAS 121). In the novel Jasmine, the protagonist creates an unorthodox variety of family that is possible only in the liberal climate of America.

In The Tiger’s Daughter (1990) the novelist has adopted the technique of documentation to bring out the contrast between two worlds and two attitudes. An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it. Tara was packed off by her father at an early age of fifteen for America, because he was prompted by suspicion and pain about his country.

It was fate that she fell in love with an American. Tara’s husband David was painfully Western; she was dutifully devious in her marriage. She could not communicate the finer nuances of her family background and life in Calcutta. Her husband asked naïve questions about Indian customs and traditions. She felt completely insecure in an alien atmosphere.

After a gap of seven years Tara planned a trip to India. For years she had dreamed of this return. She believed that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of time abroad
would be erased quite magically if she could return home to Calcutta. The protagonist in the novel *The Tiger’s Daughter* is an autobiographical presentation of the author herself. On her visit to India after seven years Tara feels bewildered. There is a strange fusion of Americanness and Indianness in the psyche of Tara. Neither can she take refuge in her old Indian self nor in the newly discovered American self. The outcome of this confrontation is her split-up psyche. The attitude of her friends who approve foreign manner, foreign etiquette and foreign fashions but not the foreign marriage makes a criticism of the conservative attitude of the Indians, who feel crazy for foreign things, dresses and items but do not approve marriage with foreigners. Tara’s journey to India proves frustrating, slowly leading to disillusion, alienation, depression and finally her tragic end.

In her novels *Jasmine* and *The Tiger’s Daughter*, Bharati Mukherjee has shown a dual cultural shock. Jasmine and Tara leave their respective countries in search of their dreams. This migration or cultural transplant leads to a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice. Bharati Mukherjee has presented a fascinating study of the problem of a displaced person in America as well as India.

Bharati Mukherjee’s sixth novel, *Desirable Daughters* (2003) marks a new trend in her writings. In her earlier novels, leaving one’s native country for an alien land meant liberating oneself from the clutches of a convention-bound society. In the same manner, clinging on to one’s own native culture while living in an alien land was presented as something to be shunned and total assimilation into the host culture was
hailed. In *Desirable Daughters* Bharati Mukherjee acknowledges the alternate ways to belong. In addition to that, she focuses on cultural hybridity, simultaneity and the third space of enunciation which are markers of the post-colonial condition of our existence.

The protagonist Tara has a postcolonial way of looking at nation, identity and culture. Firstly, Tara, the Brahminical upper class elite is a product of the colonial period. She belongs to the group of cultural mimics. Now in dislocation, she becomes the marginalized section of the dominant culture, lays claim to the host culture and again rewrites the chronicle of the family and the nation. In fact, Tara writes from the centre rather than writing back to the centre.

The third chapter titled *East-West Encounter* analyses Bharati Mukherjee’s short story collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*. Bharati Mukherjee depicts the problems of the people emigrating to America and the dream of new life which tempts them to go there. The collection of stories presents a rich vision of the free new world that is America, through a variety of American characters but who essentially hail from different countries of the world. While characters from European countries are taken to be the real Americans, those having their origins in the Third World countries are looked upon and brought into focus as immigrants who dream of realizing their destinies in America. The theme of all the eleven stories is immigration and the reciprocal effect of the immigrants.

The novel, *The Namesake* is a narrative about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis into America, over thirty years, the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their America born children in different ways: the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle “home” in the new land. The immigrants are caught in a mix of two worlds, cultures and experiences. This has generated the binary of the local verses the global, East verses the West and the globaliser verses the globalised. Some are caught and lost in the differences while others blend the best of both the worlds.

The nine stories in the debut winning short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* sub-titled *Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* deals with the pangs of loneliness and a sense of being an outsider felt by the second generation immigrants of Bengal in the alien land. Jhumpa Lahiri defines her position in her work by viewing herself as an interpreter of the emotions of pain and affliction.

Out of the nine stories included in the collection, two stories present Indian characters exclusively against the Indian back drop locale, traditions, superstitions and taboos. Of the two stories, BooriMa in “A Real Durwan” and Bibi Halder in “The Treatment of Bibi Halder” evince the same characteristic traits of diasporas. The other
seven are based on the inner landscape and struggles of Indians who have settled out of choice on compulsion in Boston and beyond. Shoba and Shukumar in “A Temporary Matter” become exiles, not of countries and culture but of their still-born child. Lahiri’s expression of the sense of alienation continues in “When Mr.Pirzada Came to Dine” where Pirzada suffers from the agony of separation from his family, wife and seven daughters who are in his homeland Dacca. In the title story, “Interpreter of Maladies” we find in one hand the prosperous American couple along with their children and on the other their guide Mr.Kapasi. The story begins with the complexities of communications and matures with misunderstanding and misinterpretation and ends with disillusionment. “A Temporary Matter” is a story of a couple with a still born baby. They have a ruined married life as they are not in good term with each other. In the story, “The Third and Final Continent”, we meet a few characters who are well-adjusted and happy. In “Mrs. Sen”, the protagonist of her eponymous story is hardly a fish out of water for feeling diminished.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s latest work Unaccustomed Earth contains eight stories. They trace the lives of Bengalis who have moved to the United States. These stories scrutinize the fate of the second and third generations. In this collection, the second and third generations become increasingly assimilated into American culture and are comfortable in constructing perspectives outside of their country of origin.

The title story, “Unaccustomed Earth” dramatizes the divide between immigrant parents and their American-raised children. It is about three generations, and the
relationship among the three, the father, his daughter Ruma and her son Akash. “Hell-Heaven” powerfully portrays the trauma of immigrants whose lives are struck between two worlds without belonging completely to either one or the other, creating a void in their lives. “A Choice of Accommodation” dwells on the theme of power dynamics between a Bengali American husband Amit and his alcoholic wife Megan. Lahiri in “Only Goodness” shows Sudha as a successful woman with Roger, her American husband and Neel her infant. But Rahul, Sudha’s brother, is a total failure. In spite of Rahul, a failure, his parents had neither renounced nor banished him. But due to the changing values and acculturation, Sudha had to shut Rahul out of her life in keeping with Roger. But Sudha was still only goodness to him. “Nobody’s Business” is a manifestation of the aspirations of two immigrants to move ahead in the race of life. The second section of Unaccustomed Earth titled “Hema and Kaushik” is a trilogy revolving around the theme of loss and reunion through principal characters, Hema and Kanshik undergoing various trials and tribulations. In the conflict of cultures, Hema emerges triumphantly whereas Kaushik meets premature death and is lost. Through these eight stories, Lahiri effectively highlights the variety of immigrants’ experience in America.

The fifth chapter Conflicts, Confrontations and Alliances makes a comparative study delineating the similarities and dissimilarities in the select fictional writings of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri.
Cultural transactions that play a very important role in these fictional writings are convincingly described with substantial facts from the texts and other renowned critics. The quality of culture transactions in all its multiplicity forms the crux of the accomplishments of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri. Moreover their treatment of this aspect in their works is similar and at the same time different in many ways. Both of them deal with the cultural transactions that occur in the lives of the immigrants.

Bharati Mukherjee’s multi-dimensional characters do not share any hostile distancing from their homeland. They even do not neglect the call of the alien identity. The rigid concept of irreconcilable hostility thus seems to be receding in favour of an evolving consciousness of coexistence, cross cultural transaction is an interactive, dialogic and two-way process rather than a simple, active – passive relation. Bharati Mukherjee’s characters with different socio-cultural experiences relate to a process involving complex negotiation and exchange.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a perfect interpreter of a cultural multiplicity. She is faithful enough to project Indian culture and tradition in realistic terms. Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories are perceptive critique of human relationships, bonds and commitments that one has to make with homeland as well as the migrated land. A sense of alienation pre-occupies the hearts of people culturally as well as geographically cut off from their homeland. A sense of loss runs all through her stories. Her stories establish interpersonal bond without bondage. The first generation expatriate like Ashima in
The Namesake has greater difficulties in settling down in the new land, whereas, the second generation expatriates like Nikhil and Sonia seem to fit in better into the new culture. This may be because they gradually cease to be expatriates.

Though Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri are feminine immigrant writers, they differ considerably in their responses to the experience of immigration from India to America. Bharati Mukherjee, a first generation immigrant, has represented the journey from India to America as symbolic of the rite of passage from the constricting space of patriarchal traditions to the realm of freedom of self-assertion. She has advocated assimilation into American culture relinquishing traditional Indian roles and values. On the other hand, Jhumpa Lahiri, a second generation immigrant has tended to highlight the difficulties that the process of immigration entails for first generation immigrants, as well as their children raised in America.

While other writers of migration write a new place with a sense of loss and erosion of original culture, Bharati Mukherjee writes emphatically of gain on arrival to a new place. She refuses to accept Calcutta as “home”. The alien western culture, which has almost become a second self to her, is constantly in clash with the culture of her native soil. Jhumpa Lahiri’s parents considered India “home” even after living abroad for 30 years, India is home for them. Jhumpa Lahiri’s familial ties to India were not enough to make India “home” for her. At a press conference in Calcutta in January of 2001, Jhumpa Lahiri described this absence of belonging. “No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to. That is
why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile” (rediff.com)

This study focuses only on the select fictional writings of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri. There are many other aspects like cultural transactions in the short fiction of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, a comparative study of these writers with their male counterparts (men writers of diaspora), voices of Indian diaspora and so on for further exploration. A critical analysis of this field would be a fruitful reading for future research scholars.