Chapter 5

REPRESENTATION OF INDIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: BHARATI MUKHERJEE
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Literary works by Indian immigrant writers in the USA began to appear in the 1970s. These works proliferated in the 1990s and have received a wide recognition since then. Most of the authors writing now are women with a strong urban background. Bharati Mukherjee, who played a pioneering role in the representation of lives of Indian immigrants and expatriates in the new world, is the earliest and perhaps the best known among them. Others like Meena Alexander, Anjana Appachana, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni or Indira Ganesan appeared later. The latest to burgeon is Jhumpa Lahiri, the daughter of an Indian immigrant couple. She has been considered one of the most promising fiction writers in America today. She won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1999 for her first book Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond (1999).

Transcultural confrontation, identity crisis and a change in gender perception brought about by the experience of migration figure prominently in most of the writings by immigrant women writers in the USA. In Bharati Mukhejee’s works the major characters, mostly women, face the new world with grit and determination. Those who fail to do so either disintegrate or are doomed to live an obscure life. Many of her characters are invested with heroic qualities. They are given pioneering roles. They negotiate a difficult socio-cultural space and confront innumerable instances of social prejudice and gender violence. In the end they emerge as transformed characters who come to understand the new socio-cultural reality better.
The transformation, however, is not one-sided; as a result of interactions with the immigrants the white American characters in her works also find their perspectives changed. Mukherjee herself sees immigration as having effects on both the immigrants and the ‘host’ society. In an interview with Ameena Meer she categorically states that immigrants in the USA “are undergoing many transformations within themselves”, but at the same time they are also changing America by their very presence. Mukherjee lays emphasis on the greater visibility of immigrants in the fast changing immigrant scenario of the USA. Empowerment of marginalized people thus feature prominently in her works.

It may be noted that Mukherjee differentiates between immigrants and expatriates. This differentiation is important for our understanding of her critical position on the American socio-cultural scenario. Immigration, according to her, has ‘exuberance’. Immigrant experience is a series of reincarnations, deaths of earlier experiences followed by rebirths full of promise. She hails immigrant Indianness as “a set of fluid identities to be celebrated.” She projects this unstableness through her fictional characters. Expatriation, on the other hand, is a sort of static state; it is a refusal to be amalgamated into the new society. Uma Parameswaran says that a central tension in the expatriate Indian writing stems from the writer’s inability to either “wholly repatriate” or “wholly impatriate” themselves into their adopted country. Mukherjee refuses to institutionalize such a condition either for herself or for her characters. She speaks of her own transition as “a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration.” She further says, “I see myself as an American writer in the tradition of other American writers whose parents or grandparents have passed through Ellis
Elsewhere she has emphasized the same point: "I am now an American. I am not an exile, not an expatriate, not a political or economic refugee. I am an immigrant. I have voluntarily settled in the U.S. with my husband and sons ... Most importantly, I have made emotional, social and political commitments to the country I have adopted. What can be more reasonable or more natural than ... to write as an American on American and immigrant themes?" 

In Bharati Mukherjee's fictional works we often find that her immigrant protagonists from Asia have an easy movement in the white American societies. This is because the atmosphere in the USA after the Civil Rights Movement has somewhat thawed. The socio-cultural scenario has become easier to negotiate. This is the period after the enactment of the Immigration Reforms Act of 1965 when immigration restrictions for Asian immigrants were considerably eased. By and large the post-Civil Rights terrain was thus considerably less hostile to the coloured immigrant communities, and the society at large was trying to act in a politically correct way. Indian immigrants thus did not have to confront blatant instances of racism, as their Chinese American or Japanese American counterparts had to do earlier. It is therefore easier for a writer like Bharati Mukherjee to feel at ease with the white American culture and devise the plots and characters of her works accordingly.

The racist bias in American institutions and white American psychology, of course, has not vanished. This naturally makes an Indian immigrant, like any member of other ethnic groups, self-conscious. The struggle for equal status continues even after the Civil Rights period. This point has been stressed by Ruth Frankenburg and Lata Mani when they argue in an essay that the struggle against
entrenched institutional and cultural racism continues even in the post-Civil Rights period, and that the prefix ‘post’ does not necessarily mean an abolition of inequality from the United States. They observe that all the affected people necessarily “battle on a discursive and political terrain that is distinctly ‘post-Civil Rights’.” The struggle for equality in the enjoyment of civil rights has now assumed subtler form as legislative discriminations have been abolished. The official encouragement of multiculturalism also has apparently eased the overt inter-racial tensions to a large extent. But Indian American writers, like those of other Asian American communities, take note of a subterranean discourse of subjugation that often comes to the surface. Bharati Mukherjee, for this reason, rejects the term ‘hyphenization’ because in the existing situation in America it is applied only to non-white citizens. The term is, moreover, suggestive of their subordination to a white ‘centre’. Her rejection of the hyphenated label “Asian-American” is part of her strategy to fight against a mentality that segregates the coloured citizens of America. The following extract from her article “Beyond Multiculturalism” clarifies her position as a critic of the American cultural scenario today:

It is to sabotage the politics of hate and the campaigns of revenge spawned by Eurocentric patriots on the one hand and the professional multiculturists on the other, that I describe myself as an “American” rather than as an “Asian-American”. Why is it that hyphenization is imposed only on non-white Americans? And why is it that only non-white citizens are “problematized” if they choose to describe themselves on their own terms? My outspoken rejection of hyphenization is my lonely campaign to obliterate categorizing the cultural landscape into a “center” and its “peripheries”. To reject hyphenization is to demand that the nation deliver the promises of the American Dream and the American Constitution to all its citizens. I want nothing less than to invent a new vocabulary that demands, and obtains, an equitable power sharing for all members of the American community.
This long passage records Mukherjee’s protest against the asymmetrical relationship that exists in the USA even today. The lack of a vital, equitable relationship between members of different communities encourages an insulated existence for the new coloured immigrants. Multiculturalism, in a narrow sense, also creates segregation by emphasizing the right to practise one’s own culture but not insisting enough on the need to go beyond one’s own cultural boundary. Mukherjee thus proposes that “interculturalism”, by which she means a healthy cross-cultural interaction, should be the basis of multiculturalism. In her own fictional works her protagonists go beyond their own cultural boundary to interact with Americans belonging to dominant communities. They meet each other, strike up friendships, love, marry or part company – all on equal terms. Mukherjee asserts her literary objectives to the following effect:

As a writer, my literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show that I (and hundreds thousands of recent immigrants like me) am minute by minute transforming America. The transformation is a two-way process; it affects both the individual and the national cultural identity. The end result of immigration, then, is this two-way transformation: that’s my heartfelt message.  

Mukherjee’s literary works thus cannot be read without keeping her objectives in mind. Novels like Jasmine set out to exemplify this “two-way transformation”. In this novel the protagonist goes through several transformations and her contact changes those white Americans whom she meets. In her novels the characters find the American people hospitable as they have opportunities to interact with a large cross-section of the American people. They look back to their past in India only to affirm that keeping the old ties have become problematic as it is no longer easy to sustain.
Bharati Mukherjee clearly sees herself as an American writer, as one who has been writing in one of the many literary traditions of America. She does not trace her literary roots among Indian writers. She says that although she hails from India, her roots and emotions are now “here in North America”. It is clearly a division between ‘here’ and ‘there’, and between ‘now’ and ‘then’. Her snapping off of the continuity of tradition seems to be a strategy in support of her claim that the new literatures of the immigrants are more American than otherwise. She thus puts emphasis on the process of integration to the American tradition(s) as a necessary move of the first generation immigrant writers. The severance of cultural links is an act of deliberate choice. It is an investment, to use Mukherjee’s own phrase, “in the present and the future rather than in the expatriate’s homeland.” It is a matter of ‘abandonment’ of one culture for another to facilitate her entry into the immigrant traditions of America. Immigration to her is a gain in this sense. In this respect, she is quite different from the American writers of Chinese and Japanese descent who drew upon the cultural traditions of their countries of origin.

5.1 IMMIGRATION PERSPECTIVES

Bharati Mukherjee’s novels The Tiger’s Daughter (1971) and Jasmine (1989) explore two different aspects of immigration. The former deals with an expatriate’s relationship with the country of origin, while the latter enumerates the process of an immigrant’s gradual absorption into the socio-cultural fabric of the host country. In the process Mukherjee also works out the role of cultural memory in the life of an immigrant. Both the works, particularly The Tiger’s Daughter, partly critiques the socio-political conditions of post-colonial India. In the final analysis the protagonists
find the immigrant space much more preferable for the development of their personalities.

In The Tiger’s Daughter Bharati Mukherjee shows that nostalgia and cultural memory are integral parts of an expatriate’s mental state but as one spends some years in the adopted country, the effectiveness of these gradually wear out. One then finds it difficult to adjust to the ways of life and habits in the ‘home’ country one has left years ago, specially when the country goes through a serious socio-political crisis. The protagonist Tara Banerjee Cartright, an expatriate character, also shows unmistakable efforts towards integration to the country of her adoption.

Mukherjee herself writes about the novel as follows:

My first novel, The Tiger’s Daughter, embodies the loneliness I felt but could not acknowledge, even to myself, as I negotiated the no-man’s land between the country of my past and the continent of my present. Shaped by memory, textured with nostalgia for a class and culture I had abandoned, this novel quite naturally became my expression of the expatriate consciousness.¹²

The loneliness of which Mukherjee speaks here is embodied in the character of Tara Banerjee (not yet a Cartwright) who had migrated to the USA seven years ago. The novel describes her nostalgia which she felt in her early academic days at Vassar, USA. As “each atom of newness bombarded her”, she longed for her usual life in Calcutta.¹³ Her attempts to communicate with fellow students were largely futile. There was an invisible wall between Tara and the white students. As the narrative claims, her privileged Bengali upper class background and an effective training by the nuns at St. Blaise School in Calcutta helped her survive initial problems of cultural adjustments. In this period of nostalgia praying to the goddess Kali, whose picture she had kept in her suitcase, gave her sustenance. She clung to
the religious icons and old cultural habits which comforted her in small ways. Later, socialising with fellow Indians through gatherings in Indian Students’ Association helped her to ward off loneliness to a certain extent. She kept contact with her parents, relatives and friends through correspondences, which at the initial stage was of great emotional help.

The novel, however, does not concentrate much on Tara’s experience in the USA. The focal point is India, more precisely Calcutta of the early 1970s, when it was in the grip of a serious socio-political turmoil. But the novel is not even concerned with Calcutta. It is more properly about Tara’s relationship with the city of her childhood. Her visit to the city is designed to highlight her expatriate sensibilities – to show the extent of psychological distance created as a result of physical separation from her ‘home’ country and its culture. As the novel demonstrates, she no longer feels at ease with the Indian way of life, not even when she is in the midst of friends and relatives.

Mukherjee in an interview particularly mentions that in The Tiger’s Daughter she wrote about a class at a particular period in Calcutta’s life. She further mentions that it is about a class and a way of life that has become extinct. She obviously refers to the passing away of the colonial tradition of the imperial feudal state represented by Tara’s ancestor Hari Lal Banerjee of Panchpara to whom the book devotes a chapter. The last survivor of this tradition was Jayant Roy Chowdhury, the last “scion of a zaminder family, owner of tea estates in Assam” (TD136) and also the owner of a large property in Tollygunj, now occupied by squatters. This class is being quickly replaced by the post-colonial upper middle
class elites – the new capitalists and company executives. This new class is placed in the foreground of the novel.

The novel opens with a short chapter describing Catelli-Continental Hotel on Chowringhee Avenue. The hotel is described as having a colonial heritage. Formerly, Europeans used to throng its rooms and balconies. Now their place has been taken by the members of the new elitist class. They gather there for “their daily ritual of espresso (coffee) or tea” (TD 4). The turbaned gatekeeper sees groups of young women in pale cottons and silks and elegant old men carrying puppies and canes. The narratorial voice calls the hotel “the navel of the universe” (TD 3). It is in Central Calcutta and remains the centre of focus in the novel from the beginning to the end. It is a citadel for the privileged class who watched from its balconies the city outside. The poor people lived at the peripheries of the city like Tollygunj. There Tara noticed “sly eyes”, “impudent ears”, an obsessive distrust of, and an anger against, all people who were not squatters”(TD 141). The slogan “DEEPAK GHOSH LIBERATES, CAPITALISM ENSLAVES” had ominous foreboding for Tara and the people of her class. The slums were the breeding ground of social discontent and political violence that would soon engulf the centre. Tara’s visit to this slum world at the insistence of Joyonto Roy Chowdhury, an eccentric man with a huge property, is a device in the novel to shift the focus temporarily to the ‘other’ Calcutta of which Tara and the elites in general are ignorant. Their view from the ivory tower of the Catelli-Continental was too limited to be true. They were, however, well aware of the potentiality of this section of people to inflict a severe blow to the rich. Tara and others were naturally afraid of their own future.
All that Tara had seen serves to intensify her sense of isolation. She was at the same time disenchanted with her friends and relatives for their naivety, crudity and sometimes over-sensitivity. They had also misconceptions about America and Americans. Tara’s irritability about the Indian popular misconceptions about America suggests that she had already acquired a different perspective about her adopted country. To the average Indian, America is a land of ease, comfort and material success. They idealise the country, and enviously look at those who have settled there. Tara’s relatives in Bombay who received her at the airport were both jealous and over-admiring. So were Tara’s friends in Calcutta. In fact, the book is a critique of the post-colonial Indian mentality and reality, seen from an Indian expatriate’s point of view. The colonial hangover of admiration for “whiteness” as a model of beauty and object of lust is brought out by the impromptu beauty contest at a Darjeeling hotel where a white American woman called Ann Whitehead bared her body. Some anglicised young men shamelessly betrayed their fascination. Many Indians imagine an all-white America, excluding even the Black Americans. This is revealed by the McDowell episode. The American identity of McDowell, a black American who visited Calcutta, was questioned by the Bengali families in Calcutta. Tara, who had a better idea about the pluralistic, multi-ethnic background of America, acknowledged that “young McDowell had been one of the others from the beginning” even in Calcutta (TD 184). Tara is obviously equipped with proper knowledge about the American social reality.

Bharati Mukherjee also critiques the emerging post-colonial political situation. The political power has passed into the hands of rich, opportunistic and corrupt people like Jhunjhunwalla who is presented in a comical way. The moral
bankruptcy of the up and coming leader is revealed through an incident at his Nayanpur Estate where he raped Tara.

Tara’s expatriate sensibilities were roused by her disenchantment with the reality in Calcutta. Although she was not yet fully integrated to the American culture, it was quite clear that she had developed some psychological roots there. She constantly kept contact with her white American husband through exchange of letters, invoked his imaginary presence in India by thinking about his likely reactions to things Indian, and made him a constant reference point. Maya Manju Sharma in an article comments that Tara’s husband serves as the “externalization of a foreign point of view”. Tara feels more at ease with these acquired views than with those of her friends and relatives in India.

The short visit to Calcutta worked as a catalyst to deepen her alienation from her native country and her own people. It also roused her expatriate sensibilities. She asked herself the question, “How does the foreignness of the spirit begin?” (TD 45). She thought of three situations. It might have originated “right in the center of Calcutta” – in St. Blaise School where girls from well-to-do families were trained by missionaries with the help of foreign textbooks and foreign outlook. Secondly, the ‘foreignness’, which she acquired in Calcutta, was further intensified in Vassar, USA after her migration. The landscape and cultural habits there had their impact on her. Thirdly, it was in Madison in 1967 that she fell in love with David Cartwright and later married him. Thus through the protagonist’s self-assessment Mukherjee charts out Tara’s cultural movement away from India to America. But Tara’s assertion of ‘foreignness’ of spirit suggests that true Americanness can be acquired through education in a missionary school in India, later supported by actual living in
a foreign land and through marriage with a foreigner. It indicates a lack of depth in the character. Mukherjee does not address the question of how one can get psychologically separated from the native cultural spirit so easily.

In “Imaginary Homelands” Salman Rushdie, himself an immigrant writer, recognises that for immigrants it is the past that is foreign, and that “the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time.”¹⁶ Both real immigrants and fictional characters mostly correspond to this view. Physical separation from the ‘homeland’ and the gulf of time often offer a romanticized view of the land one has left behind. A lot of immigrants live on cultural memory, and in a way continue their cultural habits and therefore fail to integrate properly to the new environment.¹⁷ Tara in The Tiger’s Daughter does not conform to this trend. She is eager to sever her cultural roots as she fails to respond to the present reality of the city of her origin. She wants to escape from it altogether. Emigration to the USA has supposedly offered her a haven of peace and a commitment to the cause of her adopted country. Mukherjee seems to be unable to explore the psyche of an expatriate at a deeper level. She only skims on the surface. Mukherjee obviously thinks that characters of Tara’s background do not have deep moorings in their native culture. She is perhaps too eager to justify her own decision to abandon her roots. So Tara seems to be a mirror image of the author.

Tara is free and happy in her conjugal life because her husband is a white American with a western attitude to marriage as companionship. Mukherjee’s point of view is that for the average wife in a traditional family in India, marriage is an imprisonment and the incumbents suffer from claustrophobia. When the location changes as a result of emigration a woman from a traditional society expects much
more freedom than is allowed in the home country. But when her immigrant husband still behaves with the old mindset, marriage becomes a psychological cul-de-sac for her. There is an intrinsic contradiction or incongruity in such a situation. While life goes on with full vigour and promise, the woman leads a segregated life within the fortified institution called marriage. This aspect is dealt elaborately in Bharati Mukherjee's novel Wife which we shall discuss later.

Bharati Mukherjee works out her notion of immigration and integration to a great extent in her novel Jasmine (1989) through her protagonist Jyoti Vijh. Jyoti went through several transformations which are termed in the text as 'rebirths' or 'reincarnations'. This first-person narrative records the protagonist's progressive movement from a rustic girl in an Indian village (Hasnapur) in Punjab to a westernised woman in America. This movement towards a western identity is attested by the changes in her first names (Jyoti-Jasmine-Jazzy-Jase-Jane), each indicating a progress towards the culture of the West. The plurality of names, as Abha Prakash Leard observes, also "helps to mask her ethnic difference and enables her to survive in a hostile, alien land."18

Jasmine broadens the social text in Mukherjee's fictional world in the sense that its protagonist Jyoti Vijh, unlike Tara Banerjee Cartwright in The Tiger's Daughter (1971) or Dimple Basu in Wife (1975), comes of an impoverished, unenlightened family from rural Punjab. Mukherjee elaborates the idea that immigration to America offers scope for empowerment even to a marginalized woman from a Third World country. The famous 'promise' of America is, however, open only to the brave who is not afraid of looking forward, leaving his or her cultural baggage behind.
Displacement was in Jyoti's family history, as her father was forced to flee from Pakistan during the Partition of India. The memory of this migration, which ran through the family perhaps, made her mentally prepared for further displacement. But the author now made Jyoti to emigrate to America illegally. She was unaccompanied by a male spouse. This is indicative of the protagonist's courage and willingness to adapt to a new country and a new life. The milieu to which Jyoti belonged allowed little social mobility to a woman. Jyoti, who was impelled by her will for freedom since childhood, grasped every opportunity that came her way. Initially, she was inspired by a schoolteacher, who, despite his limitations, introduced her to the exciting world of English literature and language. Secondly, Prakash, her progressive-minded husband, took her out of the closed life of her village Hasnapur to Jullundhar, a small town, and helped to broaden her vision. Emigration to America where Prakash wanted to study was part of the vision. After Prakash fell to the bullet of a Punjab extremist, Jyoti, whom he had renamed Jasmine, migrated illegally to the USA. Here she adjusted herself pragmatically to the new ways of life, and was most receptive to American values. Thus she is presented as an immigrant woman with the right type of mindset for acculturation and integration.

Mukherjee's dynamic protagonist was not in favour of living an insulated life in America. Mukherjee keeps Jasmine cooped up in an Indian ghetto in Flushing for five months in order to give an inside view of what Jasmine considers to be a stagnant life. This life is in sharp contrast to the dynamic life flowing outside. Jasmine detests such a life and says in exasperation that Flushing is a neighbourhood in Jullundhar. The Indian immigrants in Flushing have moved very little from their
old mindset. The life here is complete with Indian newspapers, magazines, Hindi video films, and Indian food, spice and dress shops. The English language is irrelevant to many of the inmates here. Complaining of too much English on the American TV channels, an old Punjabi woman wonders whether it has any relevance in her immediate surroundings. She is so oblivious of her existence in a 'foreign' country that she questions the relevance of English in her neighbourhood. She represents the extreme type to whom the foreign cultural impact is non-existent – she lives as she did in the parent country. From this arises the theory of cultural continuity as imperative for the immigrants whereas Bharati Mukherjee’s protagonist Jasmine considers it to be wrong. She rejects it out-right.

Many old men and women remain unchanged even after a long stay in the host country. They are unchangeable. They cannot understand Western cultural norms; neither can the host society understand their culture. The formidability of cultural barrier is brought out in Mukherjee’s story “The Management of Grief” which has an Air India crash at the background. Based in Canada, the story shows how Judith Templeton, an employee of the provincial government, who has been desperately trying to help the families of the crash victims, is simply overwhelmed by the magnitude of the cultural incomprehension that she confronts. She cannot understand why an Indian widow should be still ‘hysterical’, even though a considerable time has elapsed after the tragedy. She also cannot understand why an old Sikh couple should still wait for the return of their son who had died in the crash. As the narrator explains, signing Judith’s official papers for financial assistance is, to the Sikh parents, synonymous with acceptance of their son’s death as finality. The narrator herself had lost her husband and two sons. Her apparently calm exterior
hides the intensity of her grief. But Judith misunderstands the apparent calmness as a sign of her indifference to the tragedy. She mentions that according to the western textbook prescription on grief management a bereaved person goes through the following stages – rejection, depression, acceptance and reconstruction.²⁰ Bereavement in Indian psyche does not follow such a neatly divided pattern. The sense of loss is deeper and of much longer duration. The western prescription that re-marriage is a major step towards reconstruction is also contested by the narrator. Judith’s master degree in Social Work fails to offer much insight into the non-western psyche.

Jasmine noticed the same traits of resistance to Western culture among the members of the older generation in Flushing. Mukherjee in her works has repeatedly advocated against what Salman Rushdie calls “adoption of a ghetto mentality”.²¹ Rushdie observes, “To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers would be, I believe, to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the ‘homeland’.²² In Jasmine the members of the Indian community in Flushing represents an ‘exile’ mentality, an unwillingness to go beyond one’s own cultural boundary and interact with others. Bharati Mukherjee here shows that Dave Vadhera, with whose family Jasmine stayed for some months in Flushing, was never successful because of his insular attitude. Jasmine was disgusted with this insularity of the community. She tried to come out of the environment of an “artificially maintained Indianness” (I 145). She procured a green card, a passport for entry into the wider American life.
Although Jasmine rejects outright the ghetto-like life in Flushing, it must have provided a breathing space for her to get acclimatized to America slowly in the environment of an Indian community. If someone, particularly one with the background of Jasmine, who had not even completed her high school education, were thrown directly into the mainstream American life, culture shock would be a distinct possibility. Sucheta Mazumder, a historian, observes that Asian ethnic ghettos are “a genuine response to the needs of the new immigrants who live, work, or find support services there. Even highly trained professionals may find … their foreign credentials unacceptable” in America. So they all need some time to get adjusted to the new reality. Hence, although Jasmine did not like the insularity of Flushing, such a transitional camp was a necessity for most immigrants. From her location within the community, she must have gathered an idea about the requirements with which she can confront the mainstream American life. Bharati Mukherjee as an author feels the necessity for this transitional phase to prepare her protagonist to face the new reality. But the pace of Jasmine’s progress into the mainstream American reality seems to be too fast. Hence there is some implausibility in the character. The author of Jasmine is obviously in a hurry to Americanize her protagonist.

It may be noted that Bharati Mukherjee keeps the Vadhera couple childless. Dev Vadhera’s mother complained that America had drained her son of ‘dum’ (energy) and turned her daughter-in-law into a ‘barren field’ (I 147-148). Although the mother-in-law is not a spokesperson for the author, her reference to the loss of vitality perhaps reflects metaphorically on the essentially ‘barren’ future that awaits persons like Dev Vadhera. The ‘grandmotherly’ wish of an ‘Indian’ mother for a
grandson or granddaughter is conveyed here, but at the secondary level it is an artistic ploy by the author to suggest through the character of the mother that potency, creativity and success are associated with an open, interactive life in the larger America.

The desire for participating in the larger life is connected with the issue of nostalgia. Nostalgia, as a form of attachment to the old culture, plays a negative role in the immigrant’s desire for integration to the new socio-cultural fabric of the adopted country. Jasmine does not have this sort of attachment. Her looking back only serves to arouse in her a sense of disapproval for the socio-political space of India and a preference for that in America. Bharati Mukherjee’s attitude to nostalgia is revealed in the way she devises her plot in the short story “Nostalgia”. 24 Here the main character Dr. Manny Patel cannot avoid intermittent attacks of old memories. The materially successful psychiatrist was married to a white American, had an expensive car, and his son was studying at an expensive school. But his sense of loss for the old country was as pressing as his sense of achievement in terms of material gain. He missed his parents and was sorry for not marrying an Indian girl through an arranged marriage. In a fit of despondency he drives into the “little India” in Manhattan. There Dr. Patel met Padma, a sales girl, with whom she spent a night at a hotel. He wanted to experience an Indian life in an Indian environment with an Indian woman who might satisfy her hunger for an Indian wife. But Padma’s blunt information that she never had an orgasm in sexual interactions has the effect of an advance warning. The reader understands that Dr. Patel’s symbolic act of having a meaningful interaction with his own culture through the sexual intercourse would not be reciprocated. Later Padma was discovered to be a prostitute. This undermines
the nature of Dr. Patel’s pursuit of a cultural experience with which he was no longer in touch.

Jasmine’s attempt to break out of the paradigms of a traditional Indian society is evident from the beginning. She associated the study of English literature and the acquisition of English with empowerment. Her modern mentality is evident from her decision to marry Prakash, a ‘city man’, who knew English and windows of whose mind were open on the west. This marriage was held in a non-traditional manner—“no-dowry, no guests, Registry Office wedding” (I 75). The couple lived in a rented house rather than in the house with Prakash’s extended family.

Jasmine, by emigrating to the USA, escaped not only the social injustice heaped upon widows in an overtly patriarchal society, but also escaped the religious intolerance bred by the Sikh extremist movement (of the 1980s) in Punjab. The movement also conveyed resentment against the Hindus, the majority religious group in India. Sukhbinder Singh, an activist, is presented as intolerant of modern ideas and other faiths. He killed Prakash in the broad daylight as the latter had earlier opposed Sukhbinder’s discourse on extremism. Jasmine, however, locates an anti-feminine focus in Sukhbinder’s extremist discourse. Sukhbinder had earlier called all Hindu women ‘whores’, and said that the sari, the usual dress of a Hindu woman, was the sign of a prostitute. Sikh women, it may be noted, usually wear salwar kameez. Sukhbinder also issued a threat to her brother, “Keep your whorish women off the streets” (I 65). Thus in the broader conflict between the two communities, women are made scapegoats on the basis of gender. The sari is semiotically taken as an object that signifies the moral degradation of women belonging to another community. Thus Jasmine thought that she was the real target
of the bomb attack in which her husband died. Jyoti, now renamed Jasmine, recreated the scene to this effect: “Instant replay in slow motion. I am screaming, Prakash and I stumble together, Sukhbinder guns the motor, shouting ‘Prostitutes! Whores!’ ... The bomb was meant for me, prostitute, whore” (I 93).

The death of Prakash signals the end of Jasmine’s life in India. She obtained forged travel documents with the help of her brothers and set out for the USA. Her purpose was to burn her husband’s suit which he ordered for his use at the institute at Tampah where he had earlier secured his admission. This is a very weak excuse for Jasmine’s migration and Half-Face, who raped her later at a motel laughed at Jasmine’s explanation. But Jasmine’s plan of burning the suit has some symbolic value in the context of the text which we will discuss shortly.

Her journey is seen as a process of transformation. She is now in an in-between stage, ready for entry into a new country. Jasmine generalizes the condition of the migrants to the following effect:

You see us sleeping in airport lounges; you watch us unwrapping the last of our native foods, unrolling our prayer rugs, reading our holy books, taking out for the hundredth time an aerogram promising a job or space to sleep, a newspaper in our language, a photo of happier times, a passport, a visa, a laissez-passer (I 100-1).

The uncertainties and dangers of the journey are projected through such expressions as “What country? What continent? We pass through wars; through plagues” (I 101). She feels herself “old, very old, millennia old, a bug-eyed viewer of beginnings and ends” (I 35).

Jasmine’s actual arrival in the USA and spending the first night in a motel called Flamingo Court may be symbolically interpreted. Jasmine was lured into the motel by the mischievous captain of the trawler in which she travelled. The captain
nicknamed ‘Half-Face’ was in the business of ferrying illegal immigrants. Jasmine’s first encounter with America was most horrid. The motel is described as “a place like a mad house or a prison, where the most hideous crimes took place” (117). In this motel Half-Face, the vile face of the new culture, laughed at her, her cultural symbols, and ultimately raped her. It aroused Jasmine’s spirit of revenge, and she killed Half-Face. Jasmine enacted the role of Kali, the Hindu goddess, in her moment of revenge. She bent over Half-Face with a sharp knife in hand. She said, “wanted that moment when he saw me above him as he had last seen me, naked, but now with my mouth open, pouring blood, my red tongue out” (118).

Jasmine’s assumption of the identity of Kali and her committing the act of murder suggest that a certain amount of depersonalisation has taken place in her character. She would no more be her usual self. The act of violation on her destroyed much of her moral inhibitions, and made her move from place to place on the surface of American life.

The sense of impurity after the rape overwhelmed her. She emphasized the need for cleaning her impure body and purifying her soul. Then she even tried to kill herself. But a sense of mission to burn her husband’s suit stopped her from committing the suicide. After murdering Half-Face, she burned the suitcase with Prakash’s suit and the white sari in it.

Jasmine was acting in a highly motivated way, although the motivation could have been a parody of a residual of an old practice of sati in which a widow burned herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. The white sari, the cultural signifier of Hindu widowhood, was sought to be protected from impurity all through the
harrowing experience. The image of Jasmine as a sati is clearly evoked when she says:

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 (in the Half-Face's trawler), 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 (i.e. Half-Face) had touched it. He had put on the suit, touched my sari, my photographs and Ganpati (J 120-21).

The 'numbed surrender to various men' is not seen as an immoral act here as it was necessary for survival for the final act of burning the suit and committing the sati. But the defilement of the body, of the religious icon (Ganpati) and of the Hindu cultural symbol (white sari) rendered the mission impure in a certain way. The cleaning of the body was imperative for retrieving a sense of purity of body and soul. And the murder was an act of delivering justice in the form of an Indian goddess. While the white sari is symbolic of widowhood, the suit serves to represent in a way the absent figure of the dead husband. The burning of the suit would act as the burning of the dead husband on whose funeral pyre Jasmine would immolate herself as a sati.

The suit, however, assumes multiple significations. It assumes the connotations of westernization as Prakash had ordered it for himself on his intended westward journey. Jasmine, temporarily representing the old Hindu practice wanted to destroy it before her self-immolation. In this way she can symbolically maintain the primitive Hindu faith.

The suit can also represent the memory of Jasmine's husband, or more broadly her link with her Indian past. Unless she destroys it, she cannot properly
integrate to the American society. The cultural baggage of the past, in Mukherjee’s opinion, must be discarded in order to look forward to a meaningful future.

Now the journey, as envisaged by Jasmine, will be care-free and devoid of the shackles of all socio-cultural inhibitions: “with the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out of the front drive of (the) motel to the highway and began my journey, traveling light” (I 121). This travelling light, not burdened by the luggage of cultural memory and traditional values, would be a different experience for her.

Jasmine’s rape is thus a significant incident in the novel. It drastically changed her life. She gave up her plan of committing sati and instead pursued on an altogether different, ‘flotsam’ course of life. The sudden reversal of her decision cannot be adequately explained unless one takes note of the traumatic nature of the experience of the rape. It unhinged her psychological dependence on the traditional moral codes of sexuality. It affected her moral vision. Her mind was already in an unsettled condition due to her husband’s violent murder. On both occasions she acted impulsively. After Prakash’s death Jasmine decided to migrate hazardously to America only for the purpose of burning his suit on the campus of the institution at Tampah where he was to study. After the rape and subsequent murder of Half-Face, Jasmine again impulsively decided not to kill herself, and set out instead in search of a new life of struggle.

Jasmine is projected by the author as a “fighter and adapter” (I 40). Her journey through American landscape, demonstrates this too. She was quick to learn the American way of life and unlearn the traditional Indian life. She was trained to talk and walk the American way; she quickly adopted the American code of social
behaviour. D. Laksmana Rao observes that Jasmine was “anxious to shed her past, by violence if necessary, and make herself again all over. She slips into her new identity and fits into the new ethos as though born to it.” Gurleen Grewal also makes the same point when she says that in Jasmine the protagonist’s transition to a western worldview is awkwardly manoeuvred. She says, “Changing world views appears to be a matter of changing clothes.” She fitted very well into her role of an au pair girl at the house of the Hayes and established a good rapport with them. She observed the process of separation between Taylor and Wylie Hayes, and later at the end of the novel even “replaced” the white wife. She left for Baden in Iowa and became a live-in companion to Bud Ripplemayer. Her ease with American life and her sense of belonging are expressed to the following effect:

The house looks small and ugly from the dirt road but every time I crunch into the driveway and park my old Rabbit between the rusting, abandoned machinery and the empty silo, the add-ons cozy me into thinking that all of us Ripplemeyers, even us new ones, belong (13).

Jasmine said, “Bud calls me Jane .... Jane as in Jane Russel” (126), and confirmed, “In Baden, I am Jane. Almost.” (126). Bud wanted to institutionalise his relationship with Jasmine by marrying her officially. She, however, did not marry him. She would not chain herself to one place. So when Taylor approached her, she readily left Bud and left for California with him. Taylor’s invitation for heading towards the West was too tempting for her to resist: “Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncalked windows” (1240). Hence she was “out of the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants from hope” (1241). The novel thus ends with a
note of a new beginning, a “repositioning of her stars” (I 240), perhaps with another transformation in the offing.

American life is dynamic. The frontier psychology of mobility still inspires American characters to move from place to place, to explore greater possibilities. The pursuit of individual happiness, rather than commitment to social institutions like marriage, lends instability to American life. Mukherjee’s protagonist in the novel noted with anxiety how Wylie could decide to leave her husband Taylor and child Duff for her lover without any obvious reason, except perhaps individual happiness, and how Taylor could respond to the decision without any apparent disturbance. She reflected on this instability: “We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is for ever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful that it does not disintegrate” (I 181). She herself later internalised this spirit when she decided to leave Bud for Taylor. In America, as it appears in the story, one can live on the surface without striking roots because it is a life of movement. It is a one-dimensional life without values. By leaving Bud, Jasmine herself replicates Wylie’s desertion of Taylor. Jasmine states that she was not choosing between men, but was instead “caught between the promise of America and old world dutifulness” (I 240). She ultimately decided in favour of “the promise of America”. Since she headed westward for California which has a historical association with “gold rush”, Jasmine’s journey signifies not only mobility but also participation in the American dream of prosperity and success. Jasmine’s desertion of Bud has shocked many Indian critics. It might appear that to Jasmine no individual was important. What was of paramount importance was the ideal of personal happiness. Bruce Robbins
also thinks that Jasmine is more in love with the promise of America than with any individual, and that her acceptance of Taylor as a partner is "less a union than a fresh departure." Often this is seen by critics in terms of Americanisation. But if we consider that Jasmine was once devoted to her husband Prakash in India, her total disregard for her partners in America seems more a result of trauma. This trauma resulting from her husband's violent death was reinforced by her being raped on the very first day of her arrival in America. This must have deeply affected her personality and destabilized her value system. Since then she became flotsam.

Bruce Robbins comments that Mukherjee succeeds in projecting her short story "Jasmine," which is included in her collection The Middleman and Other Stories, as "one allegory of a society of multiple subject positions" without any specific centre. This obviously goes well also with the protagonist's characterization of her own self in the novel Jasmine. She observes in the novel that she has been undergoing several 'reincarnations' in the new space. Mukherjee delineates Jasmine's "multiple subject positions", or what the protagonist terms as 'reincarnations', mainly through inventing different names (signifying different identities) in different social conditions. Abba Prakash Leard also thinks that "Mukherjee subverts the notion of a fixed, uniform subject." Usually the multiplicity of identity is treated as indicative of Jasmine's adaptation to different American situations where she can easily change her identity. But this in a sense also indicates a sort of rootlessness that may be a by-product of immigration. She assumes one personality after another without really integrating to any. In her flotsam life she chooses Bud or Taylor as her partner, but does not marry anyone.
She floats on in the American life, never dropping the anchor to have a settled life. Hers is a life of restlessness, symptomatic of a restless mind.

There is not much of an attempt on Bharati Mukherjee’s part to problematize the immigrant character or the immigrant’s social space. Mukherjee does not show the subtle interplay of factors which have an important role in any encounter with a different culture. She presents Jasmine as poorly educated in the beginning of the novel, yet the character behaves like a very literate person throughout the rest of the novel. There is no indication in the text that she had educated herself in America. Mukherjee in fact grafts her own consciousness or cultural taste on her protagonist’s mind. Gurleen Grewal observes that “it is the success of Mukherjee’s own investments, literary and otherwise, in America, that Jasmine registers through the narrative consciousness of Jane.” 29 The white American characters, it appears in the novel, easily accepted Jasmine within their fold, although they considerably romanticized or exoticised her. Acceptance of an immigrant in the West is a complicated issue involving race and class. Salman Rushdie, who spent most of his life in the United Kingdom as an immigrant, spoke of his own easy success and integration to the new ‘homeland’ as more of a ‘freak’ than a normal course:

I can’t escape the view that my relatively easy ride is not the result of the dream-England’s famous sense of tolerance and fair play, but of my social class, my freak fair skin and my ‘English’, English accent. Take away any of these, and the story would have been very different. Because of course the dream-England is no more than a dream. 30

Although in Jasmine’s case the geographical space is America, the criteria of acceptance are not much different. In that sense Mukherjee’s depiction of reality lacks plausibility. But one may recall here T.S. Eliot’s comment that “only the lower
classes can assimilate” and that others always come up against differences of feeling that make them “humiliated and lonely.”

Eliot himself suffered from such alienation in England. He signed his final contribution to the Christian Newsletter with the pseudonym “Metoikos,” a Greek word meaning “resident alien.”

Jasmine obviously came from a poor family and Indian rural background. She did not have any socio-cultural background to be proud of. This could have facilitated her so-called assimilation. But Rushdie’s comment, made from the point of view of a coloured immigrant, should not be ignored. One should, however, remember that for Mukherjee America is more a mental space than a geopolitical one, and only a courageous woman like Jasmine can survive through the challenges that immigrants usually face.

5.2 GENDER PERSPECTIVES

There is a good corpus of writings, mostly short stories, by Indian immigrant women writers on how women in general respond to the immigrant social space in the USA. Seen from women characters' perspectives, this new space offers them a greater scope for realizing their potentialities as writers, professionals and above all as individuals. There is inevitably a contrastive perspective on their country of origin which, as they project it, used to restrict their movements and impose inhibitions on their consciousness. They also find the same traditional mindset among the members of the immigrant community. Women have limited contact with the mainstream society, as they usually socialise within the community and their husbands do not always encourage them to come out of their narrow domestic existence.
Against such a backdrop of social life among the Indian immigrant writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have been able to record stories of a few women who try to break out of the insular life and enjoy a sense of freedom. These writers speak of reinventing their own identities in the immigrant situation. This requires an evaluation of the inter-ethnic relationship in the larger American society, and also a review of their own socio-cultural status as women both in the old country and the new.

The writers obviously stress the need for discarding the old-world mindset in the new world, and of approaching life with a new outlook. On looking back most of the women writers realise that the old-world social environment was repressive for them. Meena Alexander, for instance, observes in an article that a sense of shame seems to attend on women's self-expression in the environment of Indian families. She says that as a young girl she had to write behind the public gaze, often in the only available private space of a bathroom. Bharati Mukherjee too states that she had to hide her ways for self-expression from her friends, relatives and the nuns of her missionary school. Her facility in writing was considered to be just "a womanly accomplishment", not a very important thing in itself. Such a reception is not conducive to the development of artistic skills in women. On arriving in the USA women usually find a far better scope for self-expression. For immigrant women, who in general had previously lived in a state of inhibition, even minor acts of self-dependence can be a source of thrills and gratification. Bharati Mukherjee, who has shown this aspect as an important gain for women characters in her works, says:

For an Indian woman to learn to drive, to put on pants, cash checks, is a big leap. They are exhilarated by that change. They are no longer having to do what mothers-in-law tyrannically forced them to do.
This is more or less true of many Indian women who come from traditional backgrounds. Narratives of actual experience of women show that they find the new experience liberating despite the fact that they have to face a life of hurdles and challenges. Sucheta Mazumder, a social historian, who has worked extensively on Asian immigration to the USA, supports this view. She observes, "For immigrant women arrival in America can be liberating. Societal norms of the majority community frequently provide greater personal freedom than permitted in Asian societies."36

Much of Indian American women writers' works centre on the theme of female characters' longing for identities of their own. The following lines from Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's poem "We the Indian Women in America" are indicative of their mood of exultation:

We the Indian women in America  
Watch us (i.e. ourselves) hold the world  
Like a great goldbrown gulabjamun  
Juicy and sweet as a promise in our hand – 37

The use of the simile of a tasty Indian sweetmeat gulabjamun to represent the experience of the new world suggests a sense of exhilaration that the immigrant women feel. This newfound space excludes the old feeling of claustrophobia suffered under the dominance of patriarchy. The United States is not certainly free from social evils like racism, public insecurity and different forms of discrimination, but here a woman can pursue her own interests independently, if of course the husband or mother-in-law is not repressive. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's story "Clothes" Sumita, the protagonist, expresses this feeling. Sumita is a new immigrant, whose husband was recently murdered in his own departmental store.
She refuses to go back to India. She tries to assess what her likely status will be if she returns to India as a widow and also what she enjoys in America. America, in her opinion, will save her from the ignominy of gender discrimination that exists in India:

I don’t know yet how I will manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must. Because all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings! 38

The USA, as the extract mentions, may be a land of murder, rape and other forms of violence but she still prefers to remain whole in the dangerous land and decides to stay back, instead of donning the mantle of widowhood in India and being just an accessory to a joint family.

Panna, the protagonist, in Bharati Mukerjee’s “A Wife’s Story” partly enjoys some freedom in the land of promise because she came to the USA alone to study, leaving her husband back in India. 39 She is a brave woman who has learnt to negotiate the social space in the new world to live with comfort and ease. One day she goes to watch a Mamet’s comedy at a theatre with a male Hungarian friend. The play is full of social slurs on the Patels, a common surname among Indians hailing from Gujrat – it hurts Panna’s feelings as an Indian. But such an experience helps one to shake off oversensitivity about one’s own culture and helps her in participating in the process of acculturation. Insult, as she says succinctly, is a kind of acceptance; one has to be able to feel objectively about one’s country. Panna could participate in the larger socio-cultural life in America with confidence and ease because she was not accompanied by her husband or watched over by parents-in-law or some one else of her husband’s family on whom the psychic hold of the
Indian mind is strong. For the immigrant wives, therefore, the physical presence of their husbands or in-laws implies an enforcement of the socio-cultural norms of the old country. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s short story “Clothes”, which we have mentioned earlier, the presence of the mother-in-law works adversely on the mind of the female protagonist Sumita. She feels hesitant to put on clothes like women of the mainstream culture. The clothes become the symbol of lost opportunity of liberation from the mores of a traditional society. The incongruity of her situation is expressed through the image of a glass paperweight with inside pictures which are immobile. She finds herself caught up in “a world where everything is frozen in place, like a scene inside a glass paperweight.” She says, “I stand inside this glass world, watching helplessly as America rushes by, wanting to scream.” The conflict in her case is between mobility of the American life and the basically restricted nature of her married existence.

Dimple Basu in Mukherjee’s second novel Wife is not as clear-headed as Sumita in Divakaruni’s story just mentioned. Dimple saw both marriage and emigration to the USA in terms of an escape into a life of opportunity. Physical separation from India and its culture was seen as a passage to freedom. But she was dismayed to find the old ways of life pursued by the Indian immigrants even in America. This she felt acutely when she stayed temporarily at the house of Meena Sen who still remained the same old housewife with the same old mindset. The vision of liberation in America took some beating. At her own rented flat Dimple lived a monotonous routine life. The trouble for her was that geographical displacement did not bring about any change in her husband’s perceptions about women in the new cultural space. Her husband Amit Basu, an engineer, tried hard to
adopt American practices outwardly, like adding new words to his vocabulary and collecting jokes for future use at social gatherings and so on. Dimple mocked at such attempts. Amit, however, never tried to change his own outlook. He failed to re-assess husband-wife relationship in terms of the social norms in America. Dimple, an educated woman, needed to be treated as an individual. Amit continued to act as her guiding spirit and did not consult her on any matter. He did not allow her to accept a job at an Indian American’s business enterprise. The great patriarch refused to change her role. Uncomfortable in the actual social interactions in America, she developed a psychosis which worsened as a result of patriarchal control which her unsympathetic husband exercised even in America.

The novel attempts a psychological profile of Dimple Dasgupta, a young woman born and brought up in Calcutta, then married off to Amit Basu, a suitable boy who emigrated to the USA for a prospective bright career of an engineer. It is a story of Dimple’s frustration, torn as she was between her traditional wifely duties imposed on her and the new hope of freedom and companionship which she saw as possible in the new environment. Brought up through a conservative education and social norms, she remained confused about her gender role in the new socio-cultural reality. It is important to see how two factors – marriage and immigration as two forms of disruptions – progressively told upon her mind. The institution of marriage, which she had earlier envisaged as a gateway to freedom and happiness, turned out to be one big prison-house from which she could not break out because of Amit’s patriarchal control over her. As a result, from her insulated life in the apartment she viewed America indirectly through television programmes where violence predominated. She thus essentialised America as a land of violence, and naturally
misconstrued violence as an American norm which she would appropriate to herself in the end.

Dimple is presented as a weak-willed, sometimes puerile, woman. Her flights of imagination in her pre-marital days centred on her marriage. She pictured for herself an ideal conjugal life. She invested marriage with romantic love, eroticism and freedom. From her own cultural location where arranged marriage was the norm, she imagined an “ideal boy” as her husband. Her predicament lay in her desire for pursuing western idea of freedom while still committed to the Indian idea of an arranged marriage. She imagined Sita as her ideal, and she nourished the idea of chastity as the epitome of Indian womanhood.

The irony of the Sita image is evident here. Sita, “the ideal wife of Hindu legends”, had to walk through fire at her husband’s request. The emulation of Sita’s example would require a life-long dedication and loyalty to her husband. She had been in fact brought up in this tradition which accepted the central, dominating role of the husband in the marital space. In the post-immigration period Dimple, however, came in touch with a wife like Ina Mullick who defied all the norms of a traditional society. Being weak-willed and submissive, she could not properly assess her own situation when confronted with an alternative mode of marital relationship. Dimple’s roots were obviously in the past, and her preparation for a conventional wifehood was reinforced by the emphasis laid on her pre-marital virginity. This is needed to affirm her strong traditional mindset and to stress the psychical change she underwent towards the end of the novel when she had an extra-marital sexual relationship with Milt Glasser, a white American boy friend of Ina Mullick. This act of sexual transgression went against the tenet of her moral upbringing. It indicates a
loosening of psychical hold of the old cultural tradition on Dimple and suggests a rebellion against her husband's domination.

Bharati Mukherjee demonstrates how the passage from maidenhood to wifehood is full of tension. Marriage for a woman requires adjustment to the environment in the husband's family. It also requires, in most Indian families, a submission to the dictates of the elders. Dimple needed her husband's emotional support to tide over the tension inherent in this phase. The support, however, never came.

Secondly, Dimple required new efforts to condition herself in the new cultural environment of the USA. Dimple failed to size up her situation both as an immigrant and as a wife. In her rare visits outside, she was uncomfortable in shopping, in dealing with new gadgets. Her traditional upbringing made her resist new habits like wearing pants which, as Ina Mullick observed, would make her "look normal and anonymous" in streets (Wife 155). She stuck to her old routine of cooking, embroidering and watching TV. She in fact confronted the American reality indirectly mainly through media projections. In the isolation of her apartment life she discovered in Amit a patriarch and a tormentor. Amit's insistence on wifely duties in terms of traditional Indian norms shows his reluctance to adjustment and his resistance to new ideas of social norms. Dimple's confused mental state arises out of this situation.

Mukherjee uses a social gathering at Ina Mallick's house to show Amit's traditional mindset and his patriarchal tendency to control his wife's conduct in public. Dimple's exasperation is also quite notable. While there was an apparent air of freedom at the party, Dimple cringed inwardly. She felt the patriarch watching
every movement of hers. Ina Mullick offered her gin and lime, but Amit intervened to assert that his wife did not like alcoholic drinks. This is a typical Indian reaction because drinking alcohols in public is a taboo in India, specially for women. Drinks shake off social inhibitions, and frighten patriarchal husbands. Of course one is free not to drink but the choice must not be imposed. Such restricting attitudes are obstacles to the process of integration to the western society where drinking is a part of socialising. The imposition of a patriarchal will on women, who are socially constructed as persons incapable of taking decisions independently, is also an obstacle on feminine freedom.

The same overprotective attitude was conspicuous when in another party Amit came forward to dismiss Vinod Khanna's offer of a sales girl's job for Dimple in his boutique shop. Dimple did not get any scope for response to the proposal. Amit would not allow her to take up any such job.

Amit told Vinod Khanna that Dimple was unable to add two and two, and therefore would not be fit for the job. In the process he was publicity denigrating Dimple's capabilities. He treated her as one incapable of protecting herself from Vinod Khanna whom he thought to be as 'lecherous, dirty and uncultured as Punjabis are (Wife 138). She was thus stereotyping the Punjabi community as a whole. Moreover, he told Mr. Khanna that one breadwinner in the family was enough (Wife 61). She excluded wives from the public spheres of activities and instead limited their activities to the domestic sphere. Although Dimple herself was "brought up to think of women only as beautiful, pretty, or good mothers" (Wife 80), she could not help suffering from an inferiority complex. This is evident from her interior monologue in response to Marsha's (the white American wife of
Prodosh Mookerji) query to Dimple about whether she was engaged in any job. Amit’s treatment of his wife naturally had a negative effect on her.

Ina Mallick is presented in the novel as an example of an immigrant wife who had achieved acculturation in the USA but perhaps a little too ostentatiously. She is placed in opposition to another immigrant wife Meena Sen who represents the traditional Indian wife attuned to domestication. Ina Mallick’s ease with drinks and her pursuit of women’s causes are in keeping with her Americanised awareness. Her preaching of feminist ideas hurled Dimple into confusion. Dimple could not determine where she herself should stand as an immigrant wife. Ina was a breaker of taboos. About drinking, for instance, she said that she did not like gin until she tried it and then she knew “Why the men at these parties were always a damn sight happier than their goody-goody wives” (Wife 78). Ina also acted as a catalyst to Dimple’s fervent desire for psychological change. When she offered the drinks, Dimple’s mind was agitated with several thoughts:

She felt that Amit was waiting for just the right answer, and that it was up to her to uphold Bengali womanhood, marriage and male pride. The right answer, “I do not need stimulants to feel happy in my husband’s presence ... my obligation is to my husband,” seemed to dance before her eyes as though it were printed on a card. All she had to do was read it, but she feared Ina’s laughter, or anger, more than anything in the world. If she took a drink she knew Amit would write it to his mother and his mother would call the Dasguptas and accuse them of raising an immoral, drunken daughter. The Calcutta rumour mill operated as effectively from New York as it did from Park Street. (Wife 78)

The extract reveals the psyche of the Indian woman who feels that even in the distant land her native culture and relatives keep her confined. This incapacitates her to enjoy the cultural freedom of the new environment. The presence of husband or mother-in-law even in the immigration space often affects her freedom of choice.
The "little India" never leaves her the freedom to attain a selfhood. Thus Dimple remained a prisoner of this 'little India' in America. Dimple failed to assert herself against Amit's imposition of the 'right' social behaviour that is practised in India but which is not relevant to the American situation. Dimple inwardly reacted against Amit's consideration of herself just as an accessory to his own self. Amit's overprotective behaviour stems from his conviction in the centrality of his position in the marital relationship. The denial of a selfhood to Dimple deeply affected her psyche. She internalised the violation of her individuality, implied in Amit's imposition of his own will on her, which gradually generated a deep distrust of, and hate against, Amit and burst forth in a violent form.

Dimple's romantic ideas of love and marriage, which she nurtured in her earlier years, now gave way to bitterness. She felt that even in America Amit would rob her of independence. One finds a mocking tone when Dimple says that Amit, in his "ill-fitting suits" was acting as "her conscience and common sense" (Wife 127). Dimple categorized Amit as a household object and ranked him in the hierarchy of goods as follows: "husband, blender, color TV, cassette tape recorder, stereo, in their order of preference" (Wife 127). The husband ceases to be an emotional attraction in such a situation and becomes an object one has to live with. Her sense of frustration is underscored when she said that her marriage with Amit had "cut off glittering alternatives" (Wife 127). She found that all possibilities for a personal space for herself in the land of promise were shut off, and a sense of claustrophobia gradually overtook her.

An Indian immigrant in the USA has to negotiate with two aspects of reality. One is the presence of the images of the past embodied in the form of Indian family
within the USA, the other being the culture of the newfound land. Dimple’s consciousness was constantly bombarded by the images of her past, and she discovered in her husband a repressive patriarch who would not let her understand the new reality. Her domesticated existence within the four walls of their flat represented an extreme form of insularity. She could not participate in the flow of life outside.

Dimple’s confused understanding of the Indian immigrant society was reinforced by her inability to decipher the norms of the American life. She began to consider different forms of suicide. As she slid to schizophrenia, she defied the norms of a traditional Indian wife by committing adultery with Milt Glasser. The ideals of Sita of whom she spoke earlier receded to the background. In the end she also vented her anger against her husband by violently stabbing Amit to death. Dimple finally succeeded to act but in a most perverse way.

In an interview Mukherjee gives the following assessment of her protagonist:

Dimple’s decision to murder her husband is her misguided act of self-assertion. If she had remained a housewife living with her extended family in India, she probably would not have asked herself questions, such as am I unhappy, do I deserve to be unhappy? And if by chance she had asked herself these questions, she might have settled her problems by committing suicide. So turning to violence outward rather than inward is part of her slow and misguided Americanization.43

In *Wife* thus Bharati Mukherjee has tried to show that the problems of Indian immigrant community in the USA is mostly psychological. It does not have much to do with racial tension or conflict. The traditional cultural norms that guide the social life of the community still restrict feminine aspirations. Unless the old mindset is overcome, the schizophrenic mentality will persist.


4. Mukherjee, Darkness xv.

5. Mukherjee, Darkness xv.


9. Mukherjee, "Beyond Multiculturalism" 461.

10. Meer 27.

11. Mukherjee, "Beyond Multiculturalism" 460.


13. Bharati Mukherjee, The Tiger’s Daughter (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1971) 13. Henceforth the title of this novel will be referred to as TD and all references will be given within brackets.


17. Jhumpa Lahiri’s story “Mrs. Sen’s” demonstrates how memory of India works on the consciousness of Mrs. Sen who has recently arrived in the USA. She is obsessed with fish, a favourite dish for Bengalees, and cooks it in Bengali ways. In her imagination she constantly goes back to Calcutta where she was brought up. She romantically recollects the cultural and social life she used to live there. This memory makes her incapable of integration to the mainstream life. Her unwillingness and inability to drive her car properly is a symptom of her resistance to adaptation to the new situation.

In two personal narratives Uma Mazumder, a ‘house wife’ and a social worker, and Rochelle Almeida, an academician, recount their own experience of loneliness. But they struggled hard for adjustment to the new situation. Both Almeida and Mazumder have mentioned linguistic, social and cultural problems of acculturation. The former, for instance observes that she had to ‘alter’ her English, and learned to refer to ‘bio-data’ as ‘resume’ or CV (Curriculum Vitae), to say that the phone is ‘busy’ (and not ‘engaged’). The Secretary in the corporate sector is called Administrative Assistant. Mazumder also speaks of the tickling effect of some American expressions like “going bananas”, “chicken out” and “neat and cool”. Almeida was frightened and immobilised by the “frenetic pace” of New York City. Emigrating to the USA, she says, means learning to drive a vehicle. Using a battery of strange machines like computer, laser jet printer, fax machine, microwave oven are all “daunting for the first-time user” (11). Mazumder perceives her own experience in the USA as full of expectations, frustrations, struggle for adjustment and possibilities of freedom. For her, cooking hamburgers and making soups and steaks the American way were a novel experience. To know about holidays like Easter, Christmas and Thanksgiving was really an initiation into the American life. One has to
confront a series of differences in climate, food, dress and even in the size of newspapers. Initially these created a sense of alienation which was reinforced by her nostalgia for the Hindu festivals, extended family system and so on. Mazumder was in the beginning struck by the absence of people on the roads which was a sharp contrast to the Calcutta scene.


22. Rushdie 19.


26. Gurleen Grewal, "Born Again American: the Immigrant Consciousness in 
Jasmine," Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives, ed. Emmanuel Nelson

27. Bruce Robbins, "Upward Mobility in the Postcolonial Era: Kincaid, Mukherjee, 
and the Cosmopolitan Au Pair." Modernism / Modernity 1.2 (April 1994) 140.


33. Meena Alexander, "Language and Shame," The Shock of Arrival: Reflections 

34. Bharati Mukherjee, "Love Me or Leave Me," Visions of America: Personal 
Narratives from the Promised Land, ed. Wesley Brown and Amy Ling (New 

35. Michael Connel, Jessie Grearsen and Tom Grimes, "An Interview with Bharati 


37. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, "We the Indian Women in America," Contours of 
the Heart: South Asians Map North America, eds. Sunaina Maira and Rajini 

Swan, 1997) 33.

39. Bharati Mukherjee, “A Wife’s Story,” The Middleman and Other Stories 25- 
40.


42. Bharati Mukherjee, *Wife* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1975) 10. Subsequent references to the novel has been given in the text of the chapter.