Chapter VII

Conclusion
Bharati Mukherjee has earned a unique place among Indian immigrant writers. Hers is a “singular voice in the tradition of immigrant writing.”¹ She has a clear-eyed perception of the expatriate condition and she makes forthright observations about Indians living in America. For her, assimilation is a positive act. She says, “If you have to wonder, if you keep looking for signs, if you wait – surrendering little bits of a reluctant self every year, clutching the souvenirs of an ever-retreating past you’ll never belong, anywhere.”² Mukherjee’s fictional works illustrate this.

The female centred novels of Mukherjee offer a variety of portraits of women in the immigrant tradition. The woman in her novels is an obliging daughter, a frustrated wife, a Kali, and a Devi. The novels delineate the varied experiences women face in alien surroundings and depict the way they try to surmount the obstacles in their path. The recurrent theme in the novels is the quest for identity of the protagonist and the transformations she undergoes. There is a feministic streak in all Mukherjee’s novels. The novels champion the cause of women and implicitly advocate women empowerment.

Mukherjee’s works reveal the imprint of a complex perspective – “a perspective that is simultaneously shaped by her ethnicity, postcoloniality, gender and migrancy.”³ Her novels are a celebration of the spirit of
America. The new world offers the immigrants a chance to remake their lives. Especially for women it offers emancipation from their traditional gender roles. Dimple, the protagonist of *Wife*, attempts to free herself from the role of the traditional Indian wife, but finds no alternative role model which is to her satisfaction. She is still enmeshed in traditional Indian values and is afraid of what people back home – her parents, her mother-in-law – might think. In Dimple, Mukherjee presents a woman who wants to change but is not bold enough to break free. Mukherjee suggests through her novels that a clean break with the past is necessary to make a new beginning. Jasmine is the ideal immigrant. Devoid of all sentiments, she makes an attempt to wipe out her Indian past once she reaches America. She neither writes to her brothers nor receives letters from them. Changing her identity with ease and adapting herself to her changing milieu, Jasmine makes and remakes her life in the New World. "The immigrant experience, Mukherjee firmly believes, may be analogized as a series of reincarnations, deaths of earlier existences followed by rebirths full of promise: this is borne out consistently by the tales of Tara, Dimple and Jasmine even while Mukherjee hails immigrant Indianness 'as a set of fluid identities, to be celebrated.'"4

The young protagonist of Mukherjee’s first novel *The Tiger’s Daughter*, Tara, presents the dilemma of a person caught between two worlds. Tara’s experiences in both the worlds, India and America, are
drawn on Mukherjee’s own experiences in the initial stages of her life. Tara feels alienated in both the worlds. To overcome the feeling of alienation in America she hangs silk scarves in the apartment, burns incense and curries hamburgers desperately. After realizing that “swapping cultures” is not easy, she returns home. She returns feeling nostalgic for the Calcutta of her childhood days. To her dismay Calcutta is no longer the same. The changing scenario of Calcutta frightens her. The resentful remarks of her friends and relatives about her “mlechcha husband” leave Tara feeling bitter. She feels alienated even among her friends whose attitude puzzles her. Sitting like an outcaste among them, Tara thinks she has slipped out of their circle by marrying a foreigner. At the end of the novel, Tara’s search to find her true self is left unfulfilled. Tara, as portrayed by Mukherjee, is in the process of evolving into a full being. Of aristocratic brought up, the protagonist of Mukherjee’s first novel is docile and vulnerable. She is an expatriate in America and an alien in India as well due to her marriage to a foreigner.

The novel is “surely much more than the conventional “return of the expatriate” fiction, structured on the familiar pattern of trembling expectation, shock of unrecognition, episodic disillusionment and final sad acceptance of one’s alien position between two worlds.” The form may be broadly similar, but the substance is more complex and enlightening. The comedy is certainly brought off with economy and understatement.
The protagonist of Mukherjee's second novel hails from a middle class family. She wants to create a new identity for herself in the new world but fails in the attempt. Dimple is a willing immigrant. She imagines that her life in America would be different and eventful but she is disillusioned by what she actually finds there. She is unable to cope with the demands of the life of an Indian expatriate in the American milieu. She does not fit into the Indian ghetto to which she is taken after her arrival in America. Happy at first, she experiences a gradual frustration, as Amit and her life in America do not measure up to her expectations. In Dimple, Mukherjee recreates a frustrated postcolonial Bengali wife. In post-Independence India, young educated women sought emancipation from the traditional Indian gender roles. But the society and their men folk were not willing to oblige them. Amit decides to emigrate to America only to make money. He does not want any change in the gender roles. He feels the company of other Indian women and a baby are enough to keep the wife busy and make her happy. This conventional attitude of Amit causes resentment and builds up deep frustration in Dimple. When shifted to Manhattan, she falls a prey to loneliness and insomnia. Dimple is a frustrated expatriate not equipped with the boldness and ability to break free. She thinks the only way out is getting rid of Amit. Mukherjee meant the novel to be optimistic in that Dimple does not commit suicide and her killing of Amit is an act of self-assertion.
Dimple's neurosis is an expression of her rebellion against the role of a passive Indian wife thrust on her. She moves one step ahead of Tara, by expressing her anger and by trying to assert herself, while Tara remains a silent spectator.

Mukherjee's third heroine, Jasmine, is from a poor family in a remote village in Punjab. Unlike the earlier two protagonists, Jasmine is endowed with courage and a strong will which help her to fashion a new self for herself in the new world. In Jasmine, Mukherjee projects a never-say-die attitude. The novel "contains her (Mukherjee's) most optimistic depiction of the South Asian experience in North America." Jasmine's marginality translates itself as a possibility. Her poverty, her ethnicity, and her gender make her thrice marginalized. With nothing to lose, Jasmine is emboldened to cross the boundaries and attain a new identity. She utilizes every opportunity that comes her way by breaking the chains that confine her. Mukherjee endows her protagonist with power and the free will to exercise it. Jasmine is a survivor in spirit. Undergoing many transformations with ease, she triumphs over gender and ethnic restrictions and re-positions herself in an alien land.

Since it appears that Mukherjee's women do at some points feel obliged to make the choice between ethnicity and womanhood, it is imperative to know what the options represent. "To Tara, Dimple, and Jasmine, continuing to be Indian would necessitate a return to being the
kind of daughter, sister, wife, and widow that tradition demanded of them –
decorous, submissive, and loyal – but it seemed highly incongruous in the
light of their present lives: becoming an American presented the possibility
of power to change their fates.”7 As Brinda Bose points out, it is not the
traditional roles that the women reject, but the fact that they can no longer
reconcile the models to their circumstances.

The protagonist of Mukherjee’s fourth novel Hannah Easton too,
like Jasmine, is endowed with courage. She is “of unyielding passion, of
the obstinate will to survive.”8 Like Jasmine, Hannah too is a willing
immigrant who wants to break free from the constraints of the puritan
world in Salem. Her journey is from West to East. Her search for her true
identity and fulfilment ends in India. Like Jasmine, she too is a survivor, a
brave, adventurous woman quite ahead of her times.

Throughout her life, Hannah displays a remarkable courage,
strength of character, and resilience. Her long stay in a puritan household
does not suppress her innate desire for freedom. Her adventurous spirit and
her curiosity sustain her stay in India. She takes immense pleasure in the
world’s variety. She has “traits even a modern woman can relate to: her
curiosity, the awakening of her mind and her own sense of self and
purpose.”9 Even the story of Sita has modern connotations for Hannah. For
her, Sita was a “woman impatient to test herself, to explore and survive in
an alien world.”10 A passionate woman, Hannah abandons herself to a life
of sheer pleasure with Jadav Singh. When renounced by him, she does not resign herself to a sheltered and reclusive life in the Zenana but takes the bold decision of meeting Aurangzeb and attempts to put an end to the destructive war. Hannah is a remarkable woman who lived three centuries ago.

In Jasmine and Hannah, Mukherjee projects the positive aspect of the immigrant experience. Jasmine makes the best use of her condition as exile and emerges as a triumphant figure. Hannah never feels alienated in the Indian milieu. Her curiosity, coupled with her adventurous spirit, enable her to enjoy her stay in India. Her love for Jadav Singh allows her to cope with the strangeness of the alien culture. Bhagmati becomes a better companion to her rather than the other white women. Mukherjee has said, "the kinds of women who attract me, who intrigue me are those who are adaptable. We've all been trained to please, trained to be adaptable as wives and that adaptability is working to the women's advantage when we come over as immigrants." Jasmine and Hannah are adaptable and are exhilarated by the changes in a different cultural background and hence they succeed in fashioning new selves for themselves.

Mukherjee's fifth protagonist is Devi, the destroyer of evil and the dispenser of justice. An abandoned child adopted by an Italian American family, Debby Di Martino is forced to set out to find her true identity after being abandoned yet again by her Chinese American lover. She does not
let him go easily. She punishes him by setting fire to the palatial house that he cherishes. Like Jasmine, she adopts a new self and becomes Devi. She undertakes a relentless search for her parents. When she discovers that they were lousy and heartless creatures, anger and anguish swell in her heart. Personified as Devi she kills her father who was a devilish serial killer. Devi of *Leave It to Me* is like the Greek avenging spirit.

Through these protagonists Bharati Mukherjee makes an emphatic assertion that change and flux are imperative for the women who are out to find a new identity for themselves. A clean break with the past is needed for survival and for the evolution of the new self. Clinging to the past only hinders them from recreating their lives in the new environs.

The writers of the Indian diaspora have responded in various ways to the diasporic condition though a complex system of historical ties, cultural bonds, spiritual affinities, and unifying racial memories generate a diasporic sensibility. The themes common to the diaspora spread over a wide range of countries like the U.S., Canada, Britain, Trinidad and so on are issues of identity, problems of history, confrontations with racism, intergenerational conflicts, difficulties in building new, supportive communities. Well-known writers in the immigrant tradition besides Bharati Mukherjee, like V.S.Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabwala, Vikram Seth, Ved Mehta have delineated the immigrant experience in their own way.
Kamala Markandaya, settled in Britain, writes about Indian immigrant experience in Britain. Her *Nowhere Man* is a “classic tale of migrant experience and an angry indictment of the pathological racism of the British”\(^1\) and offers a particularly bleak vision of the plight of the diasporic Indians. Markandaya’s social realism sharply contrasts with the fabulist absurdist mode of Salman Rushdie.

While Mukherjee’s journey was from the East to the West, Ruth Prawer Jhabwala’s is from the West to the East. Born of German-Polish parents, Jhabwala married an Indian Parsee and came over to live in India and after about twenty years of stay in India, she returned to the West. Her expatriate novels explore “the sensibility of the western expatriate in India.”\(^1\) Her Booker Prize winner *Heat and Dust* bears resemblance to Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World*. Both have a young narrator who sets out on the path of her ancestor exploring her life. In both the novels the protagonist is from the West who falls in love with an Indian prince. Like Mukherjee’s characters, Jhabwala’s characters “travel in quest of a better knowledge of their own minds and hearts”\(^1\).

Diasporic sensibility has been experienced by each writer in his/her own individual way. As Emmanuel Nelson points out:

There are those, who, like V.S.Naipaul, remain incapacitated in their state of homelessness, insisting on an identity that is shaped by exile,
loss, and the vast betrayal of history. In contrast, there are artists, such as Bharati Mukherjee and Bahadur Tejani, who call for an end to futile nostalgic engagements with the past and a bold affirmation of the adopted land. Assimilation, they assert, would be the answer to the discontents of the diaspora ... And then there are writers, such as Salman Rushdie, who exuberantly celebrate the old and the new, India and the diaspora, thus imaginatively claiming for us a territory of our own.15

The literature of the diaspora indulges in nostalgia and at the same time celebrates the new identity in the adopted land. Alienation and marginalization are no longer a painful experience, as the individual writers of the Indian diaspora have made a rich and varied response to the experience of migration. They have introduced new themes and diverse techniques in their narratives.

Bharati Mukherjee's works project the positive aspects of the immigrant experience. They illustrate her affirmation that it is futile to indulge in nostalgia for the past and the lost homeland and that one ought to grab the possibilities / openings that the New Land offers to make a new beginning. Her third protagonist Jasmine does not hesitate to do so. In the introduction to Darkness, Mukherjee asserts that she has moved away from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration. She regards
"expatriation as a restrictive and self-defeating attitude in a writer. The expatriate writer nurses his grievances, parades his pain of exile and becomes a 'permanent scold.' Mukherjee who had looked on V.S.Naipaul as a literary model, later on shifted to Bernard Malamud. This marks a shift from cynicism to optimism. Like Mukherjee, her protagonists also shift from the self-defeatist expatriate condition to the energetic and enlivening immigrant condition. Her early novels *The Tiger’s Daughter* and *Wife* depict the isolation of the Indian expatriates whereas her later novels *Jasmine* and *The Holder of the World* envision new possibilities that the adopted land offers. Bharati Mukherjee’s novels, while celebrating the exuberance of immigration, foreground the strength and courage that women display in their new environs.

Most critics have taken into consideration Bharati Mukherjee’s eye for detail, her irony and an unpredictability of temper that governs her central characters when their sense of identity is shattered. Mukherjee has been compared to writers like V.S.Naipaul in her studies of cross-cultural life and clashes and Bernard Malamud in her portrayal of minority individuals experiencing difficulty in adapting themselves. These comparisons trace an important element of a literary heritage with reference to the depiction of diasporic experience and identity in a transcultural situation.
In the light of contemporary critical focus on postcoloniality, it is essential to point out that the complexion of America has changed and therefore the writer, whether mainstream or minority, has to, in the worlding of his / her narratives, depict “a two-way metamorphosis.” This problematic with its layers of signification is taken up in Mukherjee’s narratives in the personal, sociological and cultural context.