CHAPTER FIVE: THE CHANGING WEST AND POSTMODERNISM

The West has changed greatly since the Second World War and these changes are not only political but also social and ideological. The first change that comes into prominence is the end of imperialism in the form propagated primarily by Britain. This marks the termination of an epoch in history, where reason in its most twisted form was used to justify colonial expansion. Edward Said defines imperialism as "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" and colonialism as "the implanting of settlements on distant territory" (Said, *Culture* 8) implying that colonialism is almost always a consequence of imperialism. But the British Empire, despite continuously drawing enormous economic benefits from the colonies, often propagated pseudo intellectual theories like civilizing the uncivilized or bringing order in anarchy to justify its aggression. The domino effect of the dissolution of British authority is that the West has relocated itself. The Occident that was identified by Britain and the Continent is now just the immediate West and the trans-Atlantic far-West, the United States, has become the "contemporary West" (Said, *Orientalism* 10). This dislodges the Eurocentric perspective. Even though "Orient" and "Occident" are imaginative constructions and "correspond to no stable reality that exists as a natural fact" (Said, *Orientalism* 331) it is "the extension of post-colonial concerns to the problems of geography" (Said, *Orientalism* 352) that is of interest.

Politically the rise of the US as an undisputed super-power, with the break-up of Communist USSR after the Cold War, followed by globalization has sealed USA's position as the counter-part of the East. The point to note is that the US, as the face of the West, does not raise any question of hegemony. It is because the United States today is,
in the words of Edward W. Said, "an enormous palimpsest of different races and cultures sharing a problematic history of conquests, exterminations, and of course major cultural and political achievement" (Said, *Orientalism* 349). Since America was once under colonial rule and is at present a developed multicultural society, the example of the American nation has helped postcolonial theory to extract itself from the stranglehold of binary dialectics like master / slave or colonizer / colonized and instead encourage cultural studies.

Britain, the premier colonizer, has seen the necessity of a change in its ideology in the postmodern world. But the vestiges of colonialism cannot vanish overnight. The acceptance of Asians and Africans in British society is a gradual process. Peter Kivisto in the "Introduction" to his book *Multiculturalism in a Global Society* states that Britain in the 1950s and 1960s was overrun by non-white immigrants from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent "taking advantage of their status as Commonwealth citizens, and responding to the job prospects that arose in the postwar reconstruction of Britain" (5). But the nation was "unprepared for settlers of colour in their midst" (Kivisto 5) and the result: "Race riots broke out in several cities, while an unofficial political slogan of the Conservative Party in a contested parliamentary election in Smedley was, 'If You Want a Nigger for a Neighbor, Vote Labour'" (Kivisto 5). The only way out of such a sticky situation has been acculturation by the ethnic population, especially the second generation, through imbibing into their ethnic identity the sense of being British. This process was expedited by globalization and Britain has become as multicultural as America. The society has become more accommodating and accepting because the old ideology of cultural superiority no longer holds water.
The revolution in the fields of transport and communication has made the world smaller and facilitates the movement of human populations, especially from the East to the West, in the form of immigrants or exiles or refugees or the new age nomads called the global citizens. Displacement is a common phenomenon in the world today and has effectively changed the face of the West through the influence and symbiotic relationship with the diasporic communities that have become parts of the multicultural Western society. Writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta, and Jhumpa Lahiri, who themselves belong to the diasporic Indian community, have depicted varied pictures of the West in their fiction. Their perspectives of the Occident are definitely different from each other because of their distinctive individual diasporic condition. They provide different coigns of vantage to corroborate the fact of the change in the social and ideological faces of the West.

Anita Desai’s novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is set in England of the 1960s. Desai presents a picture of the Western society that is not yet prepared to accept Asians without any racial bias. Dev, while looking for a suitable employment in London, comes across newspaper advertisements like: “Floorwalker in self service store. Coloureds need not apply” (Desai, *Blackbird* 102). In the quintessential English Common the Indian immigrants Dev and Adit are reclining somnolently on the grass after lunch when “having nearly stepped on them, old Mrs. Simpson in her brown tweed skirt, taking her spaniel for a run, muttered aloud, ‘Littered with Asians! Must get Richard to move out of Clapham, it is impossible now’” (Desai, *Blackbird* 16). It is not only the “old”, the remnants of the Raj days, who cannot accept Asians in their society. Their cynicism is inherited by the new generation as is depicted when a schoolboy at the bus stop calls Dev
and Adit "wogs". The schoolboy cannot be anything different because he is a product of a discriminatory English society and has grown up seeing that "the London docks have three kinds of lavatories – Ladies, Gents and Asiatics" (Desai, *Blackbird* 17).

English society is finding it difficult to come to terms with the idea that being more accepting and accommodating is not stooping. This is because English society generally has a romantic but regressive notion of the Orient. Christine, a typical representative, still associates India exclusively with holy men, tigers, and widow burning. Despite Dev’s refutation, she believes more in her uncle, who was once a governor in India, little knowing that her uncle, to fascinate her with exotic tales, has shaped an inauthentic ideology in her mind. When Adit and his English wife Sarah, along with their friends, visit Sarah’s parents in the countryside, Adit finds that he is not heartily welcomed by his in-laws, the Roscommon-James. Mrs. Roscommon-James prepares the English delicacy watercress sandwiches for her Indian guests. When Adit, feeling at home, decides to make “pakoras” in the Roscommon-James’s kitchen “Mrs. Roscommon-James could not help taking it as an insult to the ladylike tea she had provided for them. She refused to try one of the pakoras offered to her” (Desai, *Blackbird* 140-41). At supper Adit is shocked to find being served the sandwiches left over from tea.

Anita Desai is not necessarily pessimistic in her depiction of the West. Desai’s depiction of Sarah is very positive. Sarah is not prejudiced and is a willing party in cultural intermingling but her progressiveness is hindered by the attitude of her co-workers and her parents. Adit, after his disorienting experience with his in-laws, decides to return to India with his wife. Sarah is the accommodating face of the West who is willing to enter into a different culture without any qualm. She herself is pained at being...
a member of a society that has difficulty in accepting her preferences, but she as a representative of that same society, also presents its changing face. It is the understanding nature of Sarah that kept Adit away from the feeling of being an outsider and that is why she never insisted on their visiting her parents. Sarah cares more about human relationships than the colour of one’s skin or the geographical location of one’s homeland.

Western society is struggling against itself to change. It is in a “period of transition” (Desai, Blackbird 23) and hence it constitutes of a mixture of people, some still carrying and some having already discarded their ideological backlog. Often it is not the colour of the skin that forms the basis for racism but rather the lack of one’s ability to assimilate within the host society that becomes the ground for internal racism. The process of change is neither speedy nor simple as is depicted by the farcical episode where Dev appears for an interview for the post of a salesman of burial plots. Dev is not a Catholic, not even a Christian, and hence it will be virtually impossible for him as a Public Relations Officer of a reputed cemetery to persuade those at the vicarages and funeral parlours to put up advertisement for the idea of burial in the cemetery he represents. Dev’s job opportunity is dented because of a technical reason in this case, though it is quite startling to find that one’s religion can also be a disqualification in a society that is changing its ideology as depicted in this peculiar incident. Religion is seen as an identification of a community and it should not be used to discriminate. Social prospects are no longer dependent on religious identity. This segregation of two forms of identification neither undermines religion nor hampers an individual’s progress, especially relating to employment.
At a similar juncture in time, Bharati Mukherjee depicts American society that is quite unlike its English counterpart. In the novel *Jasmine* the US is seen flooded with immigrants of various origins like Indians, Mexicans, Vietnamese, and so on. But the Americans, the original immigrants from Europe to the New World, are not unwelcoming of the newer immigrants. It is because “to them, alien knowledge means intelligence” and especially the educated among them are “interested in differences” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 33). It is not that there are no problems with the immigrant population but the attitude towards them is not exactly xenophobic though there is some sort of wariness.

A woman in a flowered dress said, “I don’t think they’re bad people, you know. It’s just that there’s so many of them. Yesterday I opened the front door to get the morning papers and there were three of them using my yard as their personal toilet.”

(Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 27)

A pre-globalized world, especially because of the problem of refugees, was not very conducive to easy movement of the human population and hence there was a spurt of illegal immigration. In the current situation such problems have been moderated to some extent. The point to note is that the political issue of immigrants, refugees, exiles, etc. also has a human face represented by the likes of Lillian Gordon and Mother Ripplemeyer.

When Jasmine lands on the American soil with fake papers, as an illegal immigrant, it is Lillian Gordon who helps her to become an American at ease with her American-ness. Jasmine pays tribute to her after Lillian Gordon is busted for harbouring “undocumentededs”: 
She represented to me the best in the American experience and the American character. She went to jail for refusing to name her contacts or disclose the names and addresses of the so-called army of illegal aliens she’d helped “dump” on the welfare rolls of America. (Mukherjee, Jasmine 137)

Lillian Gordon is not a “missionary dispensing new visions and stamping out the old” (Mukherjee, Jasmine 131). For Jasmine she is a “facilitator who made possible the lives of absolute ordinariness that we ached for” (Mukherjee, Jasmine 131). When Jasmine runs away to Iowa from New York she finds another comforter in Mother Ripplemeyer. The kind lady not only takes Jasmine home for lunch but also provides her a job in her son’s bank. Both Lillian Gordon and Mother Ripplemeyer are very different from Mrs. Roscommon-James of Bye-Bye Blackbird. They are people who do not see difference as alienating. The directness of their approach show their minds to be devoid of any impediments towards the oneness of all humanity irrespective of distinctions of race, ethnicity, skin colour, religion, or any other such factor. That is why Jasmine wants to “belong to the tribe” (Mukherjee, Jasmine 197) whose representatives are Lillian Gordon and Mother Ripplemeyer. Having come in contact with their likes, Jasmine cannot have a ghetto-mentality of any secluded diasporic community. Jasmine is ahead of her time and anticipates a globalized world order.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s depiction of the “contemporary West”, that is the US of the late 1960s, in her novel The Namesake, shows through hindsight how a globalized world was anticipated. In Massachusetts when Ashoke and Ashima’s son Gogol is born they are offered full cooperation by the hospital staff of the maternity ward. When they come back to their apartment their landlords, the Montgomerys, extend their helping hand – they
bring broccoli quiche for Ashima and their own children’s baby clothes for Gogol. When Ashima takes Gogol out in a pram Americans, who are complete strangers, stop to appreciate the baby. The hospitable attitude of the Americans towards the Asians is because they do not have any colonial hangover and hence American society is not plagued by any dichotomy that is so evident in the English society of the same period.

The old Western ideology equates difference with hostility whereas the new Western ideology equates difference with acculturation. Acculturation does not mean losing one’s own cultural identity but complying with the host nation’s rules and customs and reaching a middle ground for peaceful intermingling. The Gangulis have to comply with the rule of giving a name to their just-born child before Ashima could be discharged from the hospital. They also have to comply with the letter sent by the principal of Gogol’s school, Mrs. Lapidus, that in school their son will be called Gogol as per his preference and not Nikhil as per the parents’ preference. In the short story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” from Lahiri’s book Interpreter of Maladies, Lilia’s parents complain that in America “doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation” (Lahiri, Interpreter 24), it is not so because of any discrimination. American society is like that and immigrants have to comply accordingly. It is quite natural that Lilia being born in America and studying in a school there will be taught American history and geography irrespective of her ethnicity.

In the 1980s, gradually but surely, there are more people found in England who show less uneasiness about the immigrants, especially Asians, within the English society. Anna’s mother, in Sunetra Gupta’s Memories of Rain, is a kind old lady whom Moni will miss when she returns back to India. Moni will miss “the peculiar grain of her voice, the
gentle hands weighed down by heavy rings, the fragile perfume of a forgotten era” (Gupta, Memories 53). Anna’s mother is akin to the much older American lady in Boston depicted by Jhumpa Lahiri in her short story “The Third and Final Continent” who finds the sari-clad wife of the narrator as a perfect lady. What this indicates is that the resistance to immigrants is not always due to any racial or ethnic matter but more a matter of overt difference in lifestyle. When the older generation finds that the newer generation is as much distanced from them, if not more, in their lifestyle and thinking as are the immigrant population it becomes meaningless to discriminate against the dislocated people on the basis of superficial differences.

The England of the 1990s has even little hindrance to immigrant population in their midst as is seen in the depiction of Niharika in Oxford from Sunetra Gupta’s novel A Sin of Colour. Niharika’s relationships with her Aunt Jennifer and the Faradays, especially Daniel, do not show any fixation on ethnic or cultural differences. Daniel elopes with Niharika because of love and a want to escape from societal constraints into anonymity and perhaps a new identity. There is no overt bearing on the relationship between Niharika and Daniel on the basis of Niharika being Indian. In fact a generation ago when Debendranath comes to Oxford there can be seen signs of gradual change that was taking place in the West. Debendranath’s relationships with his professor Mr. Faraday, his landlady Mrs. Mabel, his landlady’s niece Jennifer, and his professor’s son Daniel show no racial or ethnic tension but they do not exactly have the fluidity that Niharika’s relationships have. Jennifer is attracted to Debendranath because of their difference rather than their similarity. Debendranath marries Jennifer not exclusively because he loved her
but mainly because he wanted to get rid his mind of his forbidden love for his elder brother’s wife, Reba.

For in the three years that he had been at Oxford, he had made no attempt at all to socialize with anyone, had allowed his studies to consume him, had very little contact with humanity other than Jennifer’s mild company, and on the occasional insistence of his fellow countrymen to join them for an evening of spiced food and sitar music, he had not allowed himself the liberty of learning to forget Reba

(Gupta, Colour 28)

Aunt Mabel refers to Debendranath as the “Indian man”, unwittingly stressing on an ethnic and national identifier. Seeing that Debendranath is from Bengal, she also produces “a small plastic tiger to place next to the figures of the bride and groom” (Gupta, Colour 23) on the wedding cake. Aunt Mabel’s sensibilities are like Emma Moffit’s in Bye-Bye Blackbird. The romantic English lady Emma Moffit has an open door for the Indians but it is only the attraction of mysticism and spiritualism that governs her. Emma Moffit shows her appreciation of the Indians by her enthusiasm for organizing preaching sessions by Swamis, thereby stereotyping the Indian diaspora. Aunt Mabel shows her appreciation of Debendranath through the cliched motif of the tiger in a similar sense.

Jennifer is comparable to Sarah as a model of a devoted English wife who is willing to accompany her husband to India as a matter of justifying the decision to marry an Indian. Jennifer and Sarah marry Indians but they are always conscious of the fact and anxious to defend their positions. They know that what they have done is not the norm. Their actions merely add to a changing ideology whose picture is not yet clear and hence their anxiety. On the other hand Daniel and Niharika’s relationship has less cause for
justifying differences. Niharika, living away from India in Oxford for study, is not much different in a sense from Daniel’s wife Alison, living away from England in Los Angeles for professional reason. When Niharika goes to America and meets Morgan it is Morgan who appears more exotic because of his eccentric lifestyle and indulgences than Niharika who is from the quintessentially perceived exotic East. Attraction of foreignness is natural. Morgan tells Niharika that certain people prefer to associate with foreigners because it has “the thrill of something like a new system of mixture taps that keeps all these people alive and contended” (Gupta, Colour 99). What the West has realized is that this attraction need not be seen in a negative light. Foreignness cannot be a discriminating factor because it is a two-way perception.

In Bharati Mukherjee’s novel Desirable Daughters the relationship between migrant Indian Tara and migrant Hungarian Andy, both living in San Francisco, is devoid of any native-foreign dualism. It is not possible to conclude who is the foreigner between the two – Andy or Tara. The likes of Tara’s ex-husband, Bishwapiya Chatterjee, and his partner, Chet Yee, have achieved much success in the West and have climbed the social ladder. They are examples of the dream of the Silicon Valley that America promises. But the West, seeing the benefit of having upwardly mobile immigrants in their society and so relaxing immigration norms, also has to be vigilant against the likes of Abbas Sattar Hai, the terrorist who is a master of identity theft. Therefore, there are “Ethnic Squads” in the police departments to keep tabs on the diasporic communities. Apparently such policies seem divisive and discriminatory, but it has to be understood that there is not much wrong in the thought that it is better to be scrupulous now than to repent later. There might be differences in foresight but since there is no benefit of hindsight such
differences cannot be a cause for non-cooperation between the East and the West. The question of mutual well being is too precious to be sacrificed at the altar of pointless temporary differences and rhetorical anomalies. Sergeant Jasbir “Jack” Sidhu, of SFPD’s Ethnic Squad, makes a valid point that justifies his position: “The successful members of any community are the special prey of petty criminals who make their way under the radar, who live generally hidden lives, who are all roughly organized either here or in a distant homeland” (Mukherjee, *Daughters* 144). Ultimately the cost at which the Occident accepts the Orient often profits the Orient in return.

The Orient has to be prepared to accept the change in the Occident. The changing Occident does not always act as a balm for human relationships challenged by diasporic life. Often it so happens that it is the Orient that cannot adjust to the accepting face of the West. If in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* it was Adit who could not understand why his English mother-in-law hates and despises him, the condition of Gogol from Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* appears in stark contrast to it. Here it is Gogol who cannot understand why his parents cannot accept Ruth, his American girlfriend, as her family accepts him. Later, when Gogol is dating Maxine Ratliff, he “feels effortlessly incorporated” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 136) into the Ratliff family. The social and ideological faces of the West have changed quite beyond recognition over the years.

Gogol’s dating of American girls causes a strain in his relationship with his parents. When Gogol’s father dies and the family plans to go to India to scatter Ashoke’s ashes in the Ganges, Gogol’s girlfriend, Maxine, cannot understand why she is being excluded from their plans. She argues with Gogol leading to a sad end to their relationship. The changed West demands to be included but often not realizing the point at which it is
verging on intrusion. The globalized West is a land of economic, social, academic, and sexual freedom. The opportunity afforded by sexual freedom can often make people coming from the cloistered atmosphere of the diasporic community reckless in their relationships as is shown by Lahiri in her characters like Moushumi from the novel *The Namesake* or Dev from the short story "Sexy". Hence changes in the West appear to impact human relationships both positively and negatively.

The liberal aspects of Western society are to be accepted not as opportunities to exploit but as a way of life. In a similar manner the restrictions of Western society, for example, pertaining to traffic rules or garbage disposal or taking out processions, etc., are to be followed with a sense of responsibility. The answer to the question whether Western society is inherently more free than Eastern society is contingent because it is subject to differences in perceptions. As the sociologist Bhikhu Parekh argued in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* in the early nineties, no society is inherently "freer" than another: each locates its freedoms and its constraints in different areas of social intercourse. In many respects — the need to queue up for things, to maintain silence in public spaces, to accept the labeled prices of things without being able to bargain, to cite but a few instances — Western society may appear, to the recent immigrant or visitor from Asia, one of the most regimented ones in the world, while a Hindu has, in the words of Parekh, "the fantastic freedom to choose his own god" (eg. Shiva or Vishnu or Kali). Sexuality and sexual morality in Western society do of course leave considerable room for individual choices, but an immigrant who wants an extra degree of religious freedom will not be satisfied with the alternative of the liberal attitude of Western society in matters pertaining to sexuality. In this sense the nature of the host society constrains to
some extent the self-identification of the immigrants; but it still leaves fairly wide limits within which they can identify. The West is developing a multi-ethnic understanding of national identity that is more inclusive. Thinkers like Bhikhu Parekh have advocated the development of a multicultural society, especially with regard to Britain, both as a “community of citizens” and as a “community of communities” (Parekh 15). Such development will encourage ready identification of the diasporic communities with the host society.

The changing West equally influences the quality of immigrant diasporic life. Adit’s social circle in England consists mainly of other Indian immigrants like him. Sarah, Bella, and Emma Moffit are some exceptions in the group of Dev, Samar, Jasbir, Mala, and those at India Tea Centre. Similarly, the Gangulis’ social circle in America consists exclusively of Indians from in and around Boston. In contrast the friend circle of Gogol, since his high school days, is made of Americans: Colin, Jason, Marc, Brandon, Ruth, and even a Korean-American Jonathan. Moushumi’s social circle is even more multicultural. Jasmine effortlessly enters into American life, society, and family. Niharika is not as secluded socially as Debendranath. Even Padma Mehta, from Desirable Daughters, despite being involved with the Bengali New Jersey Society, has a widening social circle. This widening social circle does put challenges in diasporic life but it also provides opportunity to share thoughts and ideas and help to bring the diasporic community from isolation into the mainstream society. The exchange of views and communication through a multi-ethnic sector makes diasporic life more meaningful and educating. The last party that Ashima gives for her Bengali friends in America has also
Sonia’s husband-to-be, Ben, who is half-Jewish, half-Chinese American and his ready acceptance by the guests proves that the quality of diasporic life has improved.

These changes have impacted human relationships and the quality of diasporic life so rapidly that sometimes the Orient finds it difficult to take reconnaissance of the situation brought about thereby. Although certain Westerners have preconceived notions of Indians, like Judy assuming that the Gangulis are vegetarians, so also certain Indians have preconceived notions of Westerners, like Ashima assuming that the Montgomerys are Christians. In Anita Desai’s novel *Fasting, Feasting* Mr. Patton assumes that Arun will relish the barbecue that he prepares whereas Mrs. Patton assumes that Arun will like the vegetables that she prepares for him. Both are well intentioned in their assumptions but as an individual Arun has his specific preferences and all overbearing concerns for him by his American hosts make him recoil from their invitations. These perceptive biases have no discriminatory motive and even a little bit of skepticism can allay such misunderstanding. What is to be understood is that no group definition is necessarily appropriate for defining an individual. The globalized world gives opportunities for all individuals to define themselves uniquely in their diasporic settings. As long as the process of self-definition goes on the individuals can identify themselves variously and overcome the rigidity of preconceived notions and assumptions.

As the world is becoming globalized the stereotypes are getting broken – at least national stereotypes are getting diluted. Adit and Dev in the 1960s London are called “wogs” because they resemble instances of the class characterized by their Indian-ness. But in the 1990s New York Gogol’s national identity is diluted – he is recognized in various situations as an Indian and as an American without any objection to the
genuineness of such assertions. Adit and Dev are Indians. Here the predicate “are Indians” indicate that “Indian” is a property associated with both Adit and Dev. Adit and Dev resemble each other in respect of their nationality. The realists’ model of universals explains the condition of Adit and Dev. But in a postmodernist world, Gogol does not resemble any universal Indian-ness or American-ness. Since resemblance is a matter of degree, Indian-ness or American-ness is also a matter of degree.

The idea of particulars and universals is an old one and has been in debate at least since the time of Plato. Plato, who was a realist, believed in essence and supported the existence of universals. Nominalists (also called Sophists during Plato’s time) deny substantive ontology to universals and qualities (such as greenness, chair-ness, humanness etc.) seeing them as mere, and often unprofitable, abstractions from concrete particulars. In Islamic philosophy, Avicenn or Ibn Sina (980-1037) argued that essence precedes existence, and was hence a realist, Averroes or Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) argued that existence precedes essence, and was hence a nominalist. Nominalism valorizes, celebrates, and assigns existential genuineness to particulars; not surprisingly its literary and cultural manifestation, postmodernism, is ideologically committed to celebrating social and cultural particulars (though in practice it ends up celebrating minority, marginal, and subaltern cultures) and abhors the notion of universal values. Over time nominalism is gaining in importance because postmodernism is gaining in importance. The postmodern condition by reviving the concept of nominalism has helped to break down stereotypes – the typecasting of Adit and Dev is no longer present in Gogol.

It is not only national stereotypes that is being diluted. Even gender stereotype is being challenged. Moushumi, Gogol’s female counterpart in more sense than one, is an
Moushumi had a restricted lifestyle since her childhood not only because she belonged to an Indian family but more so because of being female. From her childhood her parents and relatives had suffocated her with the idea that she will have to marry a Bengali man. During her adolescence she had been subjected to unsuccessful schemes of marriage. As a teenager she had been forbidden to date. When Moushumi reveals these details to Gogol, he realizes the acuteness of her condition vis-à-vis his own: “She had always been admonished not to marry an American, as had he, but he gathers that in her case these warnings had been relentless, and had therefore plagued her far more than they had him” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 213). So when she breaks free in Paris from the stereotype of a “female Indian” she does so vehemently: “She was exactly the same person, looked and behaved the same way and yet suddenly, in that new city, she was transformed into the kind of girl she had once envied, had believed she would never become” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 215). But surprisingly Moushumi, who had vowed as a girl never to marry a Bengali man, decides to have a traditional marriage with Gogol. She does so after breaking up with Graham (whom she herself had proposed to marry thereby breaking another gender stereotype) because she realized that she was succumbing to a different stereotype that of a “female Westerner.”

Moushumi, even during her marriage with Gogol, is cautious of not falling into typicality and so “along with the Sanskrit vows she’d repeated at her wedding, she’d privately vowed that she’d never grow fully dependent on her husband as her mother has” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 247). When Moushumi realizes that her life is taking a dreary pattern, the prospect of making a clean start in a new place becomes appealing to her. It is this that drives her to her lover Dimitri. Moushumi’s case might be an extreme one but
Niharika in *A Sin of Colour* also makes an unconventional choice. When faced with the choice between marrying Rahul Mitra, a bachelor and a doctor in Calcutta, and eloping with Daniel Faraday, her married lover in Oxford, she takes the latter option. Niharika’s choice is guided to a great extent by her idea of life with Rahul, especially after her uncle Debendranath describes her land of birth to her to inspire her to return to India. Niharika is inspired to make the opposite choice to lead an atypical life — like those of Debendranath and Morgan — a life that she has started to appreciate. So she replies to Debendranath: “These are good reasons as any, but they are not enough to make me return” (Gupta, *Colour* 201). Niharika’s resistance to type is not only related to her nationality or gender. It is her condition of life to resist anything that has the possibility to typecast her. By marrying Rahul Mitra it is not necessary that she will succumb to the universal of “an Indian wife.” Rahul himself has many facets to his personality — he is a city-bred doctor who acts in plays and also dispenses medicine in the village. The choice of Daniel Faraday, in comparison with Rahul Mitra, offers Niharika a greater variety of identification — especially in order to break convention. Hence her choice, which is not a crime but a sin of colour — a transgression that is not fully but dubiously so.

Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* is equally adept at breaking conventions. Her marriage itself, with Prakash, was breaking of tradition because it was a “no-dowry, no-guests Registry Office wedding” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 75). Jasmine was determined not to become a stereotypical housewife. So even after Prakash’s accidental death, Jasmine did the ultimate to come out of the Indian stereotype of widowhood: “A village girl, going alone to America, without job, husband, or papers?” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 97). In America, as a migrant, she is not just any other migrant. She is virtually accepted in the
American society – as child minder of Duff she almost becomes a part of Hayes family – but she runs away to Iowa and makes her escape from such a set life. In Iowa, when she is pregnant with Bud’s child, she again makes her escape, this time with Taylor and Duff. It is this constant shuttling between identities that prevents her from being categorized. Every time she seems to acquire a definition she qualifies herself further, thereby, resisting any universal stereotype. She is no universal migrant; she is a particular.

The migrant Indian women break the stereotype of being Indian or being Western. Both Tara and Padma in *Desirable Daughters* have carved a niche for themselves in America in their own ways. Tara is divorced from her husband, Bishwapriya, lives with her Hungarian lover, Andy, and raises alone her son, Rabi, who happens to be a gay. Among all these diversities she has to encounter as an American, she also has a place for her native land, India. She visits India often, to her sister Parvati and her old parents, and maintains an un-Western lifestyle in front of them. As a parent to her American-born son Tara has adjusted herself well: “*When have I ever interfered with your life? When have I ever behaved like a Bengali mother, sucking the life out of you?*” (Mukherjee, *Daughters* 162). Tara cannot be a typical mother – Bengali or Indian – because she realizes that Rabi is an individual and if his individuality is to flower she has to adjust herself vis-à-vis her son. The relationship between mother and son needs to be fashioned anew constantly. Ashima, from *The Namesake*, also learns to make that adjustment when raising Gogol and Sonia. When parents do try to impose their thinking on their children they face rebellion. Moushumi’s case stands as an example:

At Brown her rebellion had been academic. At her parents’ insistence, she’d majored in chemistry, for they were hopeful she would follow in her father’s
footsteps. Without telling them, she’d pursued a double major in French. Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge – she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or exception of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever.

(Lahiri, *Namesake* 214)

It was prudent of Ashoke and Ashima that they did not object to Gogol’s and Sonia’s choices of subjects of study. They do not succumb to the stereotype of overbearing parents like Moushumi’s parents.

The breaking of stereotypes prevents an individual from being caricatured as an instance of any class that is being regarded as “universal.” Mrs. Sen, from Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “Mrs. Sen’s”, learns to drive so that she cannot be caricatured as a typical Indian migrant housewife, who does not know to drive. Thus is her existence as a “particular.” Moni, from the novel *Memories of Rain*, is an Indian, a migrant, a betrayed wife, a mother, a lover of English literature, a singer of Tagore songs, and so on. Moni is not an instance of any universal class like “the Indian” or “the betrayed wife.” Something more than mere universals define Moni.

Plato and Aristotle’s theory of forms was based on the idea that the essence of a thing is its substance that “substands” or stands under change and was recognized as universal. Many modern philosophers are not in favour of the idea of essences. Existentialist thinkers, like Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, have rejected the idea of essences by the famous dictum: Existence precedes essence. Sartre writes in *Existentialism and Humanism* that “there is at least one being whose existence comes before his essence, a
being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man” (Sartre 28). Essence as universal is an artificial construct. According to Plato and Aristotle universals constitute the transcendental universe and this leads their theory into unnecessary metaphysical posits that cannot be observed. Feminist philosophers, especially, see essences as confining and oppressive. The defining of what is essential for womanhood has for long been exclusionary and subordinating. In fact more recently essence is seen as context dependent – what is essential for one thing may not be essential for another. Nationality is not an essential attribute of an individual who goes to a restaurant but it is an essential attribute of an individual who goes to get a visa (Ref. Sen 25). The workings of the world does not depend on universals, so if being human is essence then essence itself has to be particular and thus to remain human is a particular.

By not representing any universal, individuals, as particulars, overcome differences and integrate. In a globalized world the stress on nominalism in the form of postmodernism helps ready assimilation of migrants with the natives. The meta-narratives, like religion, race, gender, and others, are gradually losing their importance as is evident from the examples of Sanjeev (“This Blessed House”), Mrs. Croft (“The Third and Final Continent”), the Roscommon-James (Bye-Bye Blackbird), and Mr. Patton (Fasting, Feasting), who feel quite left behind as the world progresses. These changes do not take place without resistance, and often the resistance takes a militant form like the activities of terrorists Sukhi (Jasmine) and Abbas Sattar Hai (Desirable Daughters). The root cause of such resistance arises out of the misunderstanding that what is “meta” is also “proto”. For example religions and races are not originary but have emanated only
from human existence. All justifications for the terrorist act lie on this misplaced notion, which is cunningly and craftily used to satisfy nefarious ends.

In the postmodern world personal identity has been allied with other forms of identity like cultural, ethnic, national, social identities, and so on. This does not necessarily produce a more comprehensive definition of identity but helps enormously in its construction. According to Stuart Hall identity has been re-conceptualized in terms of identification. A person can identify oneself with one’s origin, with a community, with a society, with a culture, with the postcolonial “Other”, or even with the characteristics of another individual. Tara, from Desirable Daughters, is in search of her origin and thus her delving into history and her interest in the story of the “tree-bride”, whereas her elder sister Padma identifies herself with the society of Americans and diasporic Indians she caters to as a television presenter. Adit, from Bye-Bye Blackbird, identifies himself with the expatriate Indian community of the 1960s London, whereas Dev is more comfortable defining himself as the postcolonial “Other”. Ashok and Ashima, from The Namesake, live a very Indian life within America because of their adherence to their culture, whereas Niharika, from A Sin of Colour, finds herself attracted not to cultures but to individuals like Morgan and Daniel who are not Indian. Defining oneself in a vacuum is a difficult thing but defining oneself against certain things and concrete ideas gives oneself a sense of belonging.

Most people living in today’s world have a sense of displacement because either they have migrated from one culture to another or through the highways of globalization cultures have migrated into their lives from different parts of the world. Thus the need to construct one’s identity and it becomes an ongoing process because a person is constantly
defining oneself as the relation between present and past is constantly changing. Theorists, like Stuart Hall, say that it is this complex relationship between past and present that helps to construct identity. When Bharati Mukherjee’s character Jasmine first arrives in America she had a different relationship with her past and she had her own justification in her intention to end her life. But on landing in the Gulf Coast she is raped by Half-Face and it dramatically changes her relationship with her past. She has to define herself anew and as time goes by, the process of self-definition goes on. For her identity is many and not one, heterogeneous not homogeneous, melange not purity. Therefore in cases of multiple identities, identities are said to be in a crisis rather than in a critical state for “crisis” indicates dynamism and “critical state” a stasis.

Identity is no longer recognized as static but is seen to be an ever-changing process of self-definition. Taking identity as an ever-changing process satisfies many philosophical considerations too. Heraclitus’s claim that “one cannot step into the same river twice because the water is always changing, and so the river cannot remain the same” (Lyon 443) can be refuted by Aristotelian distinction between form and matter. “One steps into a different mass of water but the same river. To remain the same river it has to have new water in it [. . .] if the water didn’t change then it wouldn’t be a river at all” (Lyon 443). Just as change itself becomes the identity of the river so also, instead of something that does not change, change can become integral to the definition of a person’s identity.

Human identity “is not final and natural, but ‘processual’ and made up of social fields and narratives, suggests the power to change, even to change economic hegemonies through cultural awareness, and through the communication of heightened awareness of possibilities” (Wheeler 18). This is precisely what Arun realizes in Fasting, Feasting.
Arun as a newcomer in America is at first very apprehensive about the lifestyle of the people of the developed rich nation. But as he observes he realizes that the basic problems that the advantaged and the disadvantaged – here Uma in India and Melanie in USA – face are the same. It is Arun’s cultural awareness that gives him this insight and enables him to overcome his awe of the first world hegemony. Once this is done Arun can have a better understanding of his identity as not objective but subjective.

That is why increasingly both philosophical and literary texts are dealing subjectively with the construction of identity rather than take an objective view on identity as an idea. Kathleen M. Wheeler writes that the “self, portrayed as a network of values, attitudes, or acts – with no substrate (or soul) behind it, no essence – had been a familiar representation since the beginning of literature” (Wheeler 15) but what she more importantly points out is that:

The self as a rhetorical position, a site from which to exercise power or be victimized, a sociological construct, together with other portrayals, politicized the concept of the self, since it was no longer natural and substantive, but constructed and changeable [Italics mine]. Consequently, knowledge and values of all kinds were also politicized; for they were seen as results of self-positionings and consequently never neutral or objective, but expressive of social relations and structures. (Wheeler 16)

Karl Marx gave the self, as a sociological construct, a detailed explanation through his idea of commodification. Marx in his theory of alienation argues how capitalism alienates the workers from the product of their labour. Post globalization there is an influx of capitalism and to counter the alienating effect of the phenomenon the self is also treated
as a commodity, however artificial that might be, so that it can equally be fashioned. Once individuals start constructing their identities, and that too multiple identities, there is little chance for others, especially the privileged class, to typecast the said individuals through confining definitions in order to gain unfair advantages. The type of capitalism that prevailed during the colonial rule was based on how the colonial masters labeled their subjects as "uncivilized", "blacks", "backward", "slaves", etc. By being able to construct their own identities individuals cannot fall prey to such traps of external categorization and escape the oppression of identities thrust upon them.

The postmodernist approach is more or less this – it resists definitions. The creation of identities, that is self-fashioning, lacks depth because it is basically an artificial phenomenon. And postmodernism is the theory of depthlessness as opposed to psychoanalysis or semiotics, which are theories on depth model. Postmodernism studies the surface and what is beneath the surface is not essentially its concern. Postmodernism purports undecidability, dissemination, simulation, pastiche, decentring, and hybridization. It is acknowledgement of the existence of multiple identities that produces the purported postmodernist vocabulary. Moreover, the creation of multiple identities makes identities – even those ones individuals have grown up with – dilute: religious, national, and even cultural identities become a matter of personal choice. Gogol, in The Namesake, can make a choice between being an American and an Indian or between celebrating Christmas and Durga puja at different points of time. Interestingly he does not have to make a mutually exclusive choice for his is a hybrid existence as both American and Indian cultures reside in him. He has the qualia of both his American self and his Indian self. He has maintained the bodily identity in both his existence and the
relationship between his two selves has remained the same over the period of time. If he has to define himself anew he has to take both his identities into account and form an amalgamation of both of them.

But a mixture of his cultural identities is not the end all of self-definition for he still has a gamut of identities left to deal with. Gogol is a son, a brother, a lover, a husband, a student, an architect, and so on. Amartya Sen in the Prologue to his book *Identity and Violence* writes:

> The same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a school teacher, a novelist, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theater lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a jazz musician, [. . .] Each of these collectivities, to all of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular identity. None of them can be taken to be the person’s only identity or singular membership category. (Sen xii-xiii)

If Gogol self-fashions his personal identity he does so in relationship to his professional identity, familial identity, social identity, national identity, cultural identity, etc. Gogol’s self no longer remains as personal as thought to be. Gogol’s identity becomes a relationship between his inside and his outside. Gogol’s consciousness becomes a manifestation of the various relationships, especially human relationships, he is involved in that crucially helps him to fashion himself. Human relationships affect human beings both internally as well as externally. Gogol fashions himself as Nikhil not outside any relationship but when he is in relationship with Kim, Ruth, and Maxine. He re-fashions
himself as Gogol to be close to his family after his father's death. Identity is flexible and even personal identity is so — at least can be constructed to be tangible and fluid. Once identity is linked with human relationships it gets the leverage — as human relationships change so changes the identity over time. An abstract philosophical concept becomes concrete albeit in fluidity. The themes of exile, personal identity, ambivalence, human relationships, alienation — spiritual or psychological — and individual, social and cultural aspects of self-fashioning address all three meanings of diaspora "as social form", "as type of consciousness", and "as mode of cultural production" (Vertovec 142). Thereby, it also adds something to the canon of diaspora study.