PREFACE

The thesis titled “Reinventing the Self: Contextualising the Female Migration in Bharati Mukherjee’s Fiction” predestined to discuss the significance of the past to the present situation of Indian migrant women in Mukherjee’s texts. It aims at challenging Mukherjee’s statement about discarding the past in the process of forming new diasporic identities. I argue that the past in fact is important in determining diasporic identities and relates to the question of the individual’s loss of communal identity and their effort to find another in the new society.

The thesis also traces the developing relationship between individual and nation through the selected four novels. The first chapter entitled Introduction, I made sincere efforts to retrieve the literature of Asian American women writings and validity drawn in their works with special reference to Bharati Mukherjee and her selected works. Her literary works deal with variety of themes like ‘alienation, ‘immigrant experiences’, ‘expatriate feelings’, or ‘diasporic’ elements. It also paid attention to various reasons responsible for the emergence of women writings. The most important and pertinent issue that I have discussed in the first chapter is the evolution of the personalities women in an alien country.
The Second Chapter entitled *Wife* (1975) with subtitle *Spectrum of Self-Removal* deals with the portrayal of an Indian woman’s migration to the United States, and how she suffered from a sense of homelessness without relief. The chapter explains the story of a young Bengali Indian woman, Dimple Dasgupta, who moves from Calcutta to New York with her husband shortly after their marriage. After yearning for a chance to leave behind what she sees as a stolid, suffocating middle-class life in Calcutta, Dimple, in the end, experiences migration only as a series of paralyzing social and psychological displacements, a deepening loss of control over her identity that finally leads to mental instability and her killing of her husband. In examining this story of never arriving, never completing the transition from one cultural, class and familial location to another, I focus on the novel’s portrayal of the female protagonist’s physical, social and psychological isolation both from the surrounding American society and the immigrant community. Mukherjee represents the various forms if isolation as, on the one hand, traumatic alienation from the minority group which at times overrides the individual’s experiences, but, on the other hand, as a survival mechanism that allows for familial and social identities that sustain the individual’s self-image. Furthermore, in representing the different forms of isolation on the overlapping margins of the host society and the immigrant peer group, Mukherjee not only criticizes but also ironizes and thereby attempts to demystify culture and class-specific gender norms. The aim of wife is to narrate, not only Indian migrant women’s presence in the private and the public space, but
also the social, cultural and economic subtext for this presence, or lack of it. It also re-examines the story of a young Indian immigrant named dimple, a woman traumatized by the incongruities between her expectations of America and the actual process of Americanization. The first of Mukherjee’s novel set in the United States, Wife offers the author’s first sustained portrait of America as a whole, a culture defined by a crippling multiculturalism that emphasizes ethnic difference and permits segregation, thereby preventing hybridity. The enforced difference and isolation of the Indian community in Wife ultimately destroys Dimple. Despite the impediment that multiculturalism presents the immigrant, Wife still justifies leaving tradition-bound India for America, a place with the possibility of transformation and change.

The third chapter, Jasmine (1989) with subtitle Recreating the Self explores how Jasmine traces the positive internal and external influence of a maximalist perspective. The character of jasmine exemplifies the ideal, “New American” maximalist, and her wifely ranging cross continental experience serve as a fable for the becoming process of a New American. My analysis of this novel traces Mukherjee’s use of intertextual elements as well as tropes that center on the concept of the continual recreation of self. Jasmine serves an introduction to several concepts in Mukherjee’s concept of agency, mainly the hybridized self that extends beyond the lines of social categorization. This Novel explores the process of becoming a maximalist instead of providing a focus on this perspective’s wider
implications. It also exposes the inconsistencies and problems of a multicultural America but suggests a remained and accommodating American mythology that recognizes the importance of its immigrants and its immigrant’s foundations. Chapter two argues that Jasmine (1989), Mukherjee’s third and most famous novel, still reacts against multiculturalism as a localized practice in America, but Mukherjee goes to great lengths to show how globalization informs the practice. She focuses more closely on individual protagonist Jasmine, who smuggles herself into America from India and constantly reforms herself in order to escape the paralyzing association with ethnic difference created by multiculturalism. Jasmine explicitly inserts herself into American mythology, inverting it and infusing it with her Indian origins to legitimize her place in the nation history. She retraces the path of European immigration and frontier immigration and redefines the terms of individualism and Hollywood’s cowboy and Indian rhetoric. In so doing, she shows not difference but similarity with the American Dream and mythos, melding with it in an act of transformative hybridity that reinvigorates the natural American citizens and redefines the nation as movement and negotiation instead of fixity and stagnation. The rise of globalization studies in the 1990s prompted Mukherjee to revaluate the individual’s influence on the national culture in the context of the shifting relationship between the nation and the rise of a global society.

The Fourth Chapter *Tiger’s Daughter* (1971) with subtitle *Diasporic Individuality* deals how on the last few decades have witnessed a remarkable
change in the perspective of women in Indian English fiction. One of the reasons for this altered point of view has been the mass exodus of Indians to the West and the East. The expatriate writers or their writings have been able to transform the stereotypical sufferings of a woman to an aggressive or independence person trying to seek an identity of her own through her various relationships within the family and society. As a natural consequence their writings, reflect what we consider an expatriate sensibility generated due to cultural disparity and emotional disintegration. In this process it is the woman who suffers the most because of her multiple dislocations. She gets involved in an act of sustained self-removal from her native culture, balanced by a conscious resistance to total inclusion in the new host society. She carries the burden of cultural values of her native land with her to her new country, thus making it more difficult and problematic for her to adjust. She is caught between cultures and this feeling of in between’s or being juxtaposed poses before her the problem of trying to maintain a balance between her dual affiliations. Nevertheless, along with the trauma of displacement she is fired by the will to bound herself to a new community, to a new narrative of identity. As Chowdhury asserts, “For a critical evaluation of Bharati Mukherjee’s female characters, one must understand that all her women characters are people on the periphery of all society in which they have chosen to spend their lives; they are all immigrants and new ones at that”(93). In this context we may review the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, whose writings are largely honed by her personal experience as a woman caught in-between clutches of diverse attitudes.
The Fifth Chapter *Desirable Daughters* with subtitle *Multiple Alienations* I made an attempt to explore how Mukherjee’s description of characters is exiles caught between two cultures, Indian and American, as well as between tradition and the pull of modern life. There is no better example of this than Tara Chatterjee, the central character in Mukherjee’s novel, *Desirable Daughters*. In this spellbinding and suspenseful tale, Tara is one of the three sisters who came of age in Kolkata, the daughters of a well-off tea merchant. The only sister to succumb to an arranged marriage, she moved her husband, Bish, to California, where he became the boy wonder of Silicon Valley and the head of a powerful technology company. Tara smoothly assimilated into American culture, but constantly cast glances over her shoulder at her deeply rooted family history in India. Tired of Bish’s constant absence, she filed for divorce and eventually moved to San Francisco with her son Rabi, where she is just another single working mom albeit one with an exotic history.

The Sixth Chapter *Summation* I tried to arrive to a conclusion where women of this type can find clever solutions the global forces that not only preceded the 1776 Revolutionary War but actually created the American nation. She also presents America and history in general as subject to different perceptions and therefore always needing re-evaluation and revision, both made possible by acknowledging and incorporating global discourses. Because of Mukherjee’s concern with the nation in the changing global context despite (or, rather, because of) her narrow focus on one immigrant protagonist, her scope is
broad but distinct. One critic, Rajini Srikanth, repeats the world-bold to excess when discussing Mukherjee as she boldly inserts into the American literary canon to both positive and negative effect. Mukherjee’s boldness, according to Cynthia Sauling Wong, showed innovation and new perspective: “Mukherjee is perhaps the first Asian American writer to exhibit a full awareness of the global context of contemporary Asian immigration. She deconstructs cultural clichés, looks beyond the push-pull between two nations to acknowledge the reality of the world economic system, and sets her tales against a background of intertwined transnational economic activities and mass uprooting” (54). Mukherjee brings the intertwined transnational setting into the foreground of her fiction, and provides a key force that reshapes the relationship between the individual and the nation and provides new outlets for globalization in the spaces of the remained American literary canon.