Chapter 5
Conclusion

The earlier chapters analyse how Bharati Mukherjee explores the identity crisis of immigrant women through her narratives. Mukherjee’s narratives reflect the psychological crisis and unique personal and cultural contexts of displacement characteristic of immigration. In them, the geographical dislocation of immigration is not a mere backdrop. On the contrary, it is organic to the process of psychological conflicts and identity crisis of the women as they restructure their identity. Mukherjee portrays immigrant women as strong and resourceful; as acting rather than acted upon; as subjects rather than objects; as the Self, not the Other. Thus Mukherjee challenges the common stereotypes of immigrant women as passive and dependant; as supportive or secondary actors in the immigrant story.

In Mukherjee’s novels, immigrants contend with several losses: their former country (physical loss), language (linguistic loss), family and friends (primary network loss). Besides they also suffer the crucial impairment of identity (identity crisis). Such vicissitudes signpost the immigrant trajectory and women tend to experience immigration—each in their own way. The voices of Mukherjee’s immigrant women highlight many such factors—both shared and idiosyncratic that texture their immigrant experience.

Bharati Mukherjee’s lived experience of immigration enables her to articulate “diasporic subjectivities” with sensitivity and insight. As highlighted in the first chapter, Mukherjee’s personal history offers the reader several insights
into how geography has influenced her fiction and biography. Her trajectory as an immigrant can be traced through exilic preoccupation in the initial phase, the biculturalism and expatriate nostalgia of the next phase, and finally the triumph of assimilation as an American. She declares with passion and boldness of an “American Dreamer,”—“I’m one of you.” Such preoccupations are reflected in Mukherjee’s novels that are considered representative of her immigrant trajectory.

In American Dreamer, Mukherjee admits that she was preoccupied with divided loyalties and biculturalism. She says, “My first novel, The Tiger’s Daughter (1972) 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 an expression of the expatriate consciousness” (4). According to Mukherjee, it took her ten painful years to relinquish nostalgia and reinvent herself as an “exuberant immigrant.”

The shift is particularly striking in Mukherjee’s most recent novel, The Tree Bride (2004). Mukherjee rejects the “melting pot” ideology of multiculturalism. Instead she subscribes to the inclusive model of cultural pluralism that respects, recognises and accepts differences. In an interview with Russell Schoch, Bharati Mukherjee spells out her faith that immigration is a two-way process:

My point is that all Americans—not just us newer immigrants are being forced to recognize the reality of this de-Europeanization. The original
heirs to the American Dream encounter us on a daily basis. We are their doctors, housekeepers, accountants ... We and they have fused into us. There’s a healthy mongrelization of heritage and values going on in today’s America. That’s the two-way transformation I try to dramatize in my fiction, especially in novels like Jasmine and Desirable Daughters (4).

Bharati Mukherjee’s abiding concern with the sociopolitical aspects of immigration qualify her as an immigrant writer-activist engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the heritage of her past and the ethos of her adopted country.

According to Anne Brewster, Mukherjee’s immigrant narratives do not position immigrants to the US as oppositional or peripheral to mainstream. Brewster describes Mukherjee’s revitalised and reinvented American nationalism as “neonationalism.” As “exemplars of a hegemonic nationalism,” Mukherjee’s immigrants are representative of the voice of the new America” (SPAN, 34-35). This aspect is evident in Mukherjee’s fiction as well as her autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical writings.

This thesis views immigration through a gender-sensitive lens. This enables us to acquire a perspective of how immigration is shaped by gendered concepts, practices, and institutions and its impact on women. Of particular relevance is the role of patriarchal institutions, values and mindsets in constructing the psycho-social identity of women in India and its implications in immigration.

The fictional narratives of Mukherjee’s women reflect the socio-cultural context of immigration and their unique individual biographies. Contrary to being regarded as “invisible”, the “Other”, or as secondary to the main story,
Bharati Mukherjee accords them a central role as “subjects” of her fiction. She explores the theme of identity crisis and the search for identity of Indian women immigrants through the metaphor of immigration. Most of Mukherjee’s novels centre on the immigrant experiences of women from India who immigrate to the US. Only two of Mukherjee’s women are non-Indian, one of whom immigrates to India. The seven novels of Bharati Mukherjee are analysed within the framework of immigration as a source of identity conflict and the immigrant woman immigrant’s search for identity.

When we explore the universe of Mukherjee’s immigrant women, we find that the motivating circumstances that led to their immigration include the following: education (Tara Banerjee), marriage (Dimple Basu, Tara Bhattacharjee Chatterjee), desire for a new life (Jasmine, and Hannah Easton) and search for one’s biological parents (Debby di Martino). Immigration, however, is not a voluntary or conscious choice for Mukherjee’s women. The decision to immigrate is often made by the significant men in the lives of Mukherjee’s women. For instance, 15-year-old Tara Banerjee’s domineering father, “The Bengal Tiger,” unilaterally decides to send her to the US. Tara Bhattacharjee immigrates to the US because she marries Bish Chatterjee who lives there. Dimple Basu accompanies her husband Amit Basu who decides to immigrate in search of better career prospects. Jasmine, against all odds, makes an independent decision to immigrate. Her underlying motives, however, are to fulfill her late husband’s dream of immigration; although in doing so, she hopes to structure a new life for herself. Hannah Easton immigrates to India because her husband Gabriel Legge is in the maritime trade.
The identity of Mukherjee’s immigrant women is rooted in the traditions and culture of their country of birth. A composite of sociocultural and psychological factors construct and shape their identity. Mukherjee’s Indian women are prisoners of tradition. It directs and controls several aspects of their lives. In the years preceding marriage, the Indian woman’s identity is shaped by her relationship with the significant others in her birth family—especially her father and mother. She is primarily a daughter to her parents and internalises traditional notions of femininity, powerlessness, and acquires a derivative identity as a daughter/wife through feminised socialisation. Femininity is thus a defining characteristic of womanhood and an arbiter of social codes of conduct for women. Life transitions such as marriage and immigration, however, precipitate several dilemmas that the Indian woman is disempowered to confront. Such transitions threaten their fragile sense of identity.

For Mukherjee’s Indian women, marriage is an inter-family migration. They are uprooted from their natal homes and transplanted in their marital homes. Thereafter, they are compelled to play the new roles of dutiful wife and daughter-in-law in the new family which they are unconditionally expected to identify with. Mukherjee’s married Indian women discover to their dismay that the claustrophobia of their natal homes is replicated in their marital homes with greater rigidity.

Marriage, whether arranged or volitional, is a traumatic transition for Indian immigrant women. Tara Banerjee and Jasmine make independent choices with regard to marriage. They show courage and individuality in transgressing the sacrosanct boundaries of caste and class that are crucial determinants in
marriage negotiations in Indian families. Dimple and Tara Chatterjee accede to a marriage where the fathers select a “suitable boy.” For all of them, however, marriage is fraught with conflicts, dilemmas, and unilateral adjustment. As the marriages of Tara Chatterjee, Dimple Basu, and even Jasmine exemplify, patriarchal norms and values, absence of choices, and a culture of subordination circumscribe the lives of married women in India.

Feminine socialisation and patriarchy generate female powerlessness and passivity. In the marriages of Mukherjee’s protagonists, one finds their identities muted and effaced through various strategies that act as instruments of patriarchal will and control. Thus Mukherjee’s immigrant women are trapped in inegalitarian marriages that stratify and reinforce traditional gender roles. Under such oppressive circumstances, they view immigration as liberation from tradition and masculinist control and definition of their identity.

Bharati Mukherjee’s immigrant women migrate from a strongly patriarchal society to an adopted country whose values and ethos are diametrically opposed to that of their country of birth. Their psycho-social legacy consists of traditional notions of womanhood, internalised negative myths about female inferiority, and patriarchal construction of identity. This is the baggage that these women carry with them as they transit from the birth country to the country of adoption. Their identities are scripted by patriarchal values and ideology and are entrenched in traditional gender roles and expectations. This psycho-social baggage is an albatross for Mukherjee’s immigrant women. Thus the burden of patriarchal heritage and values and the displacement of immigration precipitate acute crisis of identity when they immigrate.
As seen in the previous chapters, immigration is not a voluntary or conscious choice for Mukherjee’s protagonists. The decision to migrate is often made by the significant men in their lives—the father or husband. The adolescent Tara Banerjee’s immigration to the US is decided by her father. Tara’s immigration is traumatic because of the absence of her immediate family. Besides she has not yet achieved intrapsychic capacity for separateness. Tara struggles to retain her personal identity by idealising and valorising the culture of the birth country. Dimple Basu and Tara Chatterjee who immigrate to the US, and Hannah Easton, who immigrates to India, do so as wives who accompany their husbands. Jasmine, a single immigrant, makes an independent decision to emigrate. Ironically, even she immigrates to the US to fulfill her late husband’s immigrant dream. The absence of choice in deciding to emigrate and their status as married women has a causal effect on the intense displacement and identity crisis of immigrant women. Mukherjee’s married immigrant women view immigration as an escape from the claustrophobia of their birth country.

Bharati Mukherjee portrays the identity conflict that is central to the immigrant experience. Mukherjee’s immigrant women are trapped between two worlds—the home (birth) country and the host (immigrant) country. In Mukherjee’s novels, women immigrants experience acute dislocation and displacement at several levels—geographical, social, cultural, and psychological. The transitional dilemmas and bicultural conflicts constitute the diasporic burden that ferment a crisis of identity for immigrant women. As they cross geographical boundaries, new identities and roles gradually begin to restructure their identities.
Mukherjee’s women immigrants experience acculturative stress resulting from clash of cultures; the difference is one of degree. The incidence can be attributed to the trauma of immigration, loss of primary networks of family and friends through migration and non-participation in the decision to emigrate. In this light, Tara Bannerjee (adolescent immigrant) finds immigration most traumatic. The absence of the oppression of traditional gender roles implicit in a traditional Indian marriage, however, enables her to acculturate faster. Married women immigrants like Dimple and Tara Chatterjee find immigration most stressful. Jasmine, a single immigrant, experiences the least levels of acculturative stress due to the absence of oppressive gender roles and her immigrant sensibility.

It is interesting to note the various transformative phases of Mukherjee’s immigrant women as they reassess their lives and evolve a new future. Exilic preoccupation and expatriate nostalgia characterise the early phase of immigration. Mukherjee’s protagonists go through a phase of unsettlement and confusion when they arrive in the US. One sees an expatriate sensibility distinguished by alienation, and loss of identity. For all of them, immigration is an ambivalent experience as they struggle to negotiate the two worlds of their past and present. As an adolescent, Tara Banerjee responds to the identity loss by idealising her home country. Later as an adult, her cross national marriage to an American is an indicator of Tara’s acculturation. Paradoxically, Tara’s immigrant loss is exacerbated by marriage. To achieve a sense of reconciliation with her divided self, Tara undertakes a search for her roots by a trip to India after seven years. Dimple Basu, Tara Bhattacharjee Chatterjee, and Hannah
Easton immigrate as married women who accompany their husbands. In contrast, married immigrant women like Tara Bhattacharjee and Dimple Basu acculturate slower as they are often torn between the conflicting demands of the traditions and cultures of the home and host countries.

For Mukherjee’s married immigrant women, culturally ingrained roles and values from their birth country is a source of identity conflict. In the process of uncertainty and unpredictability of immigration, Mukherjee’s immigrant women are expected to serve as custodians of culture. Such traditional role expectations are particularly evident in the lives of Tara Bhattcharjee and Dimple Basu. As an immigrant wife, Tara Bhattacharjee discovers that her husband Bish is the quintessential Indian husband. While speeding on the fast track of American individualism and entrepreneurial success, he is rigidly conservative in the private sphere. Tara is thus forced to conform to the calendar image of Indian womanhood in the private sphere. Similarly, Dimple discovers that she is expected to measure up to oppressive gender roles in an effort to create and preserve the stability of a “lost homeland” for Amit.

The entrapment in traditional gender roles is a major stumbling block for immigrant women. As transmitters of tradition and culture, they are expected to retain their fidelity to traditional norms and values. The new demands imposed by immigration and retention of dysfunctional traditional gender roles contribute to the identity crisis of the married immigrant woman. The married immigrant woman’s dilemma arises in such enforced roles and the need to find her identity in the more liberal atmosphere of the adopted country.
In the lives of Mukherjee’s women, institutional structures, norms, and values of the adopted country interact with the psycho-social baggage of the birth country. The identity of Mukherjee’s immigrant women is circumscribed and defined by internalised cultural and family norms. Immigrant women are perceived as custodians of tradition, transmitters of culture, and expected to maintain status quoism in their birth country. Such gender-based cultural prescriptions complicate immigration as a lived experience for women. Paradoxically, immigrant women are expected to retain fidelity to these patriarchal stereotypes in the country of immigration. Forced to embody stability and predictability amidst “cultural dislocation,” Mukherjee’s immigrant women are in a dilemma. Compounding the problem is their lack of awareness of their own complicity in ensuring the perpetuation of inequity. Such a combination of the opposing pulls of tradition and the nature of the immigrant experience is stressful and a source of conflict. Metaphorically, these forces clip their feathers and ground their soaring impulses to discover their true selves.

As Mukherjee’s women realise rather painfully and slowly, it is not easy to let go of such internalised injunctions. As long as they hold on to them, however, they are in the vortex of an acute crisis of identity. Hence they find themselves at a point of no return—forced as they are to confront the immigrant reality head on. It is thus imperative for them to be resourceful and inventive to explore new alternatives and reconstruct their self. Immigrant women thus encounter explicit and implicit demands to replot and rebuild their lives. They encounter a life in the adopted country that is dramatically different from their imagined worlds construed in their need-based expectation. Besides, they do not
anticipate leviathan diasporic burdens such as identity crisis. Hence it is imminent for them to evolve new paradigms or frames of reference to accommodate their revisions of identity and their emergent needs, aspirations, and hopes.

For immigrant women, the process of restructuring their identity is fraught with uncertainty and incomprehension. Mukherjee’s Indian immigrant women are unfamiliar with the concept of identity crisis in their country of birth. Hence for them, even confronting terms such as identity crisis is a paradigm shift. The women go through a painful process of trial and error. Such “trafficking in possibilities” is an ongoing process that draws immigrant women into its vortex, either consciously or unconsciously. Thus Tara Banerjee Cartwright realises the futility of clinging on to idealised memories of her birth country. Tara Bhattacherjee experiences the overwhelming urge to amalgamate her past with her present. Dimple realises the need to expunge anachronistic values and evolve new paradigms based on the altered sociocultural environment she lives in. Jasmine and Hannah reinvent themselves through repudiating the effete traditions and values of their birth country.

Mukherjee’s immigrant women explore various alternatives to structure their identity in response to diasporic realities and challenges. As immigrants, they are Janus-faced: trapped between two opposing social universes. Such a bifocal vision alienates and estranges the immigrant from her self and the adopted country. Her greatest challenge is to reclaim her self; to excavate her authentic self.
Immigrant women, however, are disempowered to address such diasporic realities. This causes them to critically examine themselves in the diasporic setting. Thus immigrant women are confronted with the challenge of striking a balance between freedom and responsibility; between effete tradition and emerging new paradigms in the changed context. Their moment of awakening occurs when they realise it is a negative capability to be a co-passenger. As immigrants, they must pilot and chart the course of their lives. Mukherjee’s women therefore are creatively engaged in seeking a stable sense of personal identity.

Bharati Mukherjee’s thematic focus in her novels is on the immigrant woman’s adaptation to the new environment and the emergence of a new identity. Mukherjee’s immigrant women acculturate rapidly, but they are also fearful of the outcome of their initiatives. As sensitive and perceptive women, whose voices need to be heard, they find the existing immigrant language too inadequate to convey their unique needs. In the absence of a supportive environment, their immigrant journey is trial and error, the outcome unsure and uncertain. Hence immigrant women attempt to understand, interpret, and explain their lives. As they seek to plot the course of their lives, they seek to impose order and semblance into the seemingly disconnected and random happenings in their lives. Hence one could say that Mukherjee’s immigrant women are engaged in redesigning their lives through an inner urge triggered by revising their autobiographical narratives. They reinterpret their lives, their goals, and directions, as they explore and understand their identity as immigrants.
The personal narratives of Mukherjee’s immigrant women reflect various strategies in accommodation and assimilation. In Mukherjee’s novels, the physical journey of immigration is the backdrop for a transformative journey. For Mukherjee’s immigrant women, immigration is a metaphor for psychological growth and transformation in response to complex cross-cultural realities. In their journey, they step beyond the sheltered environments and thereby cross several boundaries—geographical and psychological. For them, immigration is an interior, inward journey in response to the demands and challenges of the immigrant experience.

In their immigrant odyssey, Mukherjee’s women adopt various strategies and demonstrate varying degrees of self-will in achieving their objective. For Tara Banerjee Cartwright and Tara Chatterjee, the immigrant journey is a search for a lost paradise. They undertake a journey to the country of their birth to trace their roots and integrate their divided selves. Tara Banerjee Cartwright returns to India to retrieve her roots. As her journey reveals, the inability to dissociate oneself from nostalgia is the Achilles heel for immigrants. At the end of her journey, Tara Cartwright realises that she must repudiate the traditions and heritage of her birth country to find her identity and sense of wholeness as an immigrant.

On the other hand, Tara Chatterjee’s journey to India is in search for her roots. Unlike Tara Cartwright, Tara’s journey symbolises her quest to reconcile and achieve a symbiosis of her Indian heritage with her present and move towards wholeness and integration. For Dimple Basu, immigration is an obliteration of her roots. As Dimple’s journey tragically exemplifies, successful
assimilation does not imply ruthless rejection of anachronistic values. In the case of Dimple, her nemesis is her inability to evolve need based alternatives in response to the challenges of immigration. For Jasmine and Hannah Easton, immigration is a metamorphosis in which they emerge as exemplar immigrants.

Among Mukherjee’s women protagonists, Jasmine and Hannah Easton emerge as exemplar immigrants. Their ability to be open to change, to constantly reinvent oneself in response to the demands of a new, often changing context is a predictor of adaptability to the new country. With their openness and receptivity to change, they successfully negotiate the displacement and identity crisis consequent to immigration.

Analysis of Bharati Mukherjee’s novels reveal that negotiating sexuality and gender roles is problematic and stressful for immigrant women. Paradoxically, the development of the immigrant women’s identity takes place against a backdrop of acculturative and psychological demands of immigration. Immigrant women from a culture of patriarchy face an impasse. Their challenge is to successfully negotiate the double burden imposed by their patriarchal legacy and the acculturative demands.

A noticeable feature in Mukherjee’s women’s immigrant journey is their dissociation from their captors. These include patriarchal authority figures such as parents and husbands, and rejection of negative myths about female inferiority. The result is an intellectual and sexual awakening crucial to their move towards reconciliation and synthesis of their divided and splintered selves. Tara Banerjee Cartwright’s transnational marriage enables her to resolve her bicultural conflicts. For Dimple, her hedonistic sexual adventures as an
immigrant are an indicator of her personal transformation. Tara Chatterjee is courageous to embark on life as a divorced, single parent, and acknowledge her sexuality with her guilt-free live-in relationship with Andy. For Jasmine and Hannah Easton, openness to a life of experiences and emotion, in the absence of morality and judgement, is facilitative. Undoubtedly, the process is painful. One is however, inclined to agree with Jasmine’s perceptive remark that the immigrant woman’s journey from self-denial towards self-affirmation is not possible in a “harmless or compassionate way.”

The centrality of the immigrant experience in Mukherjee’s novels is identity loss, transformation, and its gradual recovery. Paradoxically, the geographical move away from their birth country is a significant point of departure for Mukherjee’s immigrant women. For the first time, they apprehend the oppression systemic in the institutional structures of the birth country and their own insidious internalisation of such prescriptive gender stereotypes. For Mukherjee’s immigrant women, their gendered socialisation and internalisation confines them in a restrictive cage that effectively acts as a social control against transgressions—real or imagined.

Mukherjee’s immigrant women fight a war of attrition against several forces. They are warriors engaged in slaying “dragons”—internalised patriarchal myths, institutions, and authority figures. They break free of such captors in their journey. Such captors circumscribe their lives in the country of adoption. Their journey is a reaction to this status quoism that hinders their growth. Refusing to be a victim to false definitions of identity, they step beyond the restricting confines of a male-defined garden to discover themselves. They realise they need
to transcend limiting sex-role definitions of identity to achieve an integrated sense of identity. In the process, they exorcise the women they are to become the women they want to be.

Fritjof Capra in *The Turning Point* comments thus on the stranglehold of patriarchy:

*It is one system which, until recently, had never in recorded history, been openly challenged, and whose doctrines were so universally accepted that they seemed to be laws of nature; indeed, they were usually presented as such. Today, however, the disintegration of patriarchy is in sight. The feminist movement is one of the strongest cultural currents of our times and will have a profound effect on our further evolution (11).*

Capra signposts the slow and imperceptible but definite decline of patriarchy as one of the three momentous turning points or transitions of the modern age. The disintegration and dissolution of patriarchy would indeed be a turning point in immigrant women’s personal narratives.

Bharati Mukherjee’s immigrant discourse vindicates her literary and aesthetic manifesto in *American Dreamer*. She declares, “As a writer, my literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show that I (along with the hundreds of thousands of immigrants like me) am transforming America. The transformation is a two-way process: It affects both the individual and national-cultural identity (6)”. It reflects a participatory process in which distinctions such as “us” and “them” give way to interdependence. Such a perspective has profound implications in the development of a global consciousness.
The contradictory legacy of their birth country is an albatross for Mukherjee’s immigrant women. This conflicts with the values of the adopted country. Therefore women need to be empowered with life skills and capacity building to address such diasporic challenges. A wider perspective that views immigration from an integrated gender perspective (that includes the experiences of male immigrants) rather than a women-only perspective is necessary for a mature understanding of diasporic realities in the age of globalisation. Indeed such a perspective would enable one to look beyond immigration through immigration.

In conclusion, immigration is a transformative journey for Bharati Mukherjee’s immigrant women and the writer herself. The essence of their immigrant journey is their developmental paradigm achieved through transformations in gender roles and sexuality. They realise it is imperative to abdicate effete paradigms. Instead, it is imperative to adopt new paradigms that reflect the realities of the immigrant experience. This awareness of their basic paradigms; and their intense psychological exploration is central to their move towards synthesis of their splintered identity. While it is tempting to speculate if their lives would have changed had they not emigrated, the fact remains that immigration is a point of departure for Mukherjee’s immigrant women. Such attitudinal and behavioural shifts prognosticate the emergence of a new-found self. From hyphenation to synthesis, both Bharati Mukherjee and her fictional characters come full circle.