Chapter 2

Identity Formation of Mukherjee’s Immigrant Women

The present chapter attempts to provide an insight into the socio-cultural and psychological factors that have shaped the lives of immigrant women and constructed their identity in the country of their birth as portrayed in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels. Most of Mukherjee’s novels centre on the experiences of Indian immigrant women in the US. The protagonists of Mukherjee’s novels—Tara Banerjee Cartwright in The Tiger’s Daughter, Dimple in Wife, Jasmine in the eponymous novel Jasmine, Tara Bhattacharjee Chatterjee in Desirable Daughters, Hannah Easton in The Holder of the World, and Debby Di Martino in Leave it to Me—come from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Tara Banerjee Cartwright and Tara Bhattacharjee Chatterjee are westernised, upper middle class Bengali Brahmins. Dimple Basu is a middle class Bengali. Jasmine is from the feudal rural heartland of Punjab in north India. Hannah Easton is a Puritan White American; and Debby di Martino, the adopted Indian child of American parents.

An insight into psycho-social and cultural forces that construct the identity of immigrant women in the birth country enables a better understanding of diasporic cultural conflicts. This complex psychosocial legacy precipitates a crisis of identity in the adopted country. An analysis of the following factors in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels would enable us to comprehend the protagonists’ displacement as immigrants: relationships between father and daughter; mother and daughter; gendered socialisation and traditional notions of womanhood; the
negative capability of education; the beauty myth; attitudes towards marriage; and psychological vulnerability.

This chapter attempts to identify and analyse factors that construct the identity of Mukherjee’s immigrant women in the country of their birth. Through a gender perspective, the chapter examines notions of femininity and feminine identity in India, the influence of patriarchy in the lives of women in India, and the link between gender and other aspects of caste and class as reflected in Mukherjee’s novels.

The Father as Patriarchal Arbiter

In Bharati Mukherjee’s novels, the significant male presence in the lives of the protagonists is the father. He exerts absolute patriarchal control over the women in his life. As a husband, he elicits unquestioning compliance and subservience from his wife. This attitude later extends to his daughter(s) as a natural corollary. This quintessential patriarch scripts the lives of his daughters with tyrannical will. In doing so, he ensures that his daughters are “desirable daughters” who later with “natural” ease will fit into the given pattern of “desirable” wives.

According to Gerda Lerner, patriarchy refers to institutionalisation of male dominance over women in the family, and by a logical corollary in society in general. It implies differential access to power that is skewed towards men. Gerda Lerner in The Creation of Patriarchy comments on the asymmetrical relationship between men and women posited by patriarchy:
Men and women live on a stage, on which they act out their assigned roles, equal in importance. The play cannot go on without both kinds of performers. Neither of them “contributes” more or less to the whole; neither is marginal or dispensable. But the stage is set, conceived, painted, defined and controlled by men. Men have written the play have directed the show, and interpreted the meanings of action. They have assigned themselves the most interesting, most heroic parts, giving women the supporting roles.\(^{(217)}\)

One can broadly group the fathers in Mukherjee’s novels into the following categories: pseudo liberals, conservative traditionalists, and feudalists. The “Bengal Tiger” Dr. Sudhir Banerjee in *The Tiger’s Daughter* and Motilal Bhattacharjee in *Desirable Daughters* exemplify pseudo liberal fathers. Mr. Dasgupta in *Wife* is a conservative traditionalist father. “Pitaji” in *Jasmine* epitomises feudalism, and Robert Fitch in *The Holder of the World*, Puritanism. Despite different mindsets, they share a commonality as architects and arbiters of their daughters’ destinies. They are intolerant of any form of defiance from their daughters. Even the westernised sophistication and so-called modern values of Dr. Sudhir Banerjee and Motilal Bhattacharjee are a façade. Beneath their apparent espousal of egalitarian values and self-confessed progressive outlook, they are traditional and conventional in their attitude and treatment of women. Their proprietorial attitude and authoritarianism in the public sphere also transfers to the private sphere.

In *The Tiger’s Daughter*, the handsome “Bengal Tiger” Dr. Sudhir Banerjee, is an industrial magnate and proprietor of Banerjee Thomas & Co. Educated abroad, he describes himself as a “progressive modern person” \(^{(TD 127)}\). Even the sobriquet “Bengal Tiger” has connotative implications. It evokes
images of sheer power, and magnificence of the Lord of the Jungle. Like the
tiger, Sudhir Banerjee’s megalomania and power crushes and nullifies the will
and choices of people, especially the women in his life—the Others.

Sylvia Walby in *Theorizing Patriarchy* defines patriarchy as “as system of
social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit
women” (20). The ideology of patriarchy as systemic annuls the popular notion
of biological determinism that justifies every man to be dominant and every
woman to be subordinate on the basis of their biology.

The process of patriarchal control that operates in Mukherjee’s women’s
lives has an insidious beginning. It begins under the apparently benign guise of
providing them with every material comfort. Tara Banerjee grows up surrounded
by a “retinue of servants” and lulled by the comforting hypnosis of her parental
home. The overprotective fathers do not permit their daughters to step out of the
home without a male escort. “The Bengal Tiger,” for instance ensures that his
daughter Tara has an over protected upbringing. He permits Tara to move out of
the house only when accompanied by a chauffeur. He, however, makes all
comforts available to his daughter. Such an ivory tower existence insulates Tara
from realities. While this may appear innocuous, it also masks a disempowering
culture of dependency and subservience. For instance, it deprives Tara of
decision making and leadership skills. When Tara’s student advisor in New York
asks her if she knows how to type, the fifteen-year-old Tara is incredulous. She
replies:

No. My father’s secretary goes out of his way to help us. When Rajah, our
cocker spaniel died and we were so heartbroken, he even arranged a secret
Burial for him without waiting for our permission. He’s always done everything, all our typing et cetera. That’s why I’ve never had to learn, you see (TD 14).

Theresa’s response reveals the impact of her dependency when she first encounters a culture that valourises independence of thought and action.

Like the “Bengal Tiger,” Motilal Bhattacharjee in Desirable Daughters is also educated abroad. Yet this engineer turned successful entrepreneur also displays authoritarianism and control over his daughters. The Bhattacharjee mansion is a “nineteenth century Raj style fortress, the scene of fabulous parties in the winter social season” (DD 33). Motilal Bhattacharjee, however, circumscribes his daughters’ lives by exercising patriarchal control over their mobility. Tara Bhattacharjee poignantly remarks on the strictures imposed by her father on his daughters. “Our father wouldn’t let either of my sisters out in the street. Our car was equipped with window shades. We had a driver and the driver had a guard” (DD 29). Such limitations reinforce a dependency syndrome on the father as the male authority figure. It later “naturally” transfers to the husband as authority figure.

A trait common to both the “Bengal Tiger” Banerjee and Motilal Bhattacharjee is their xenocentricism—preference for ideas and elements that belong to cultural communities different from one’s own. Unabashed xenophiles, they overvalue and glorify Western culture and tradition over their native culture and tradition. Motilal Bhattacharjee flagrantly flaunts his xenocentricism and upholds it as a family value. Tara Bhattacharjee observes her father’s preference for Hollywood values, Hollywood films and their stars, and the English
language. To Motilal Bhattacharjee, such slavish imitation of a dominant culture bestows a false sense of security. Tara Bhattacharjee comments thus on her father’s preference for Hollywood films and the English language:

Daddy believed in Hollywood. Hollywood values were Bhattacharjee family values as opposed to the standards of Europe and, especially those of Bombay. He told us tales of Metro cinema in its golden years, after he returned from England, and the English language still pounded in his veins. Metro cinema had a seven-foot usher, the tallest man in West Bengal. Every week it unveiled a new Hollywood wonder, a musical or a drama. The rajahs of the silver screen were Cary Grant and Gregory Peck, the presiding genius was Alfred Hitchcock, and the most beautiful woman in the world was Grace Kelly. No woman, however, competed for his favors like Doris Day, whose very name pulsated with the promise of sunshine and optimism. Essentially, Daddy approved of any Technicolor movie in English featuring familiar stars in glamorous settings. Their names engendered security (DD 113).

Beneath such superficial concession to modernity however, lurked deep-rooted conservatism in his attitudes, outlook, and values regarding women, especially his daughters.

Paradoxically, such apparent egalitarianism as exemplified in Westernised sophistication and lifestyle renders invisible patriarchal values and mindset. Tara Bhattacherjee recalls her delight when permitted to wear “English frocks” for the lavish parties hosted by her father. Tara says:

We sisters performed, for old Britishers from the last days of the Raj returned in ever-dwindling numbers for the round of parties, and I have never been happier than the nights Parvati and I would dress in our
specially tailored “English frocks” and carry hors d’oeuvre trays from
drunken cluster to tipsy cluster, listening to their praise, I say,
Bhattacharjee, you’ve got a charming little girl there”, or “I don’t envy
you, old man, keeping the boys away” (DD 33).

Motilal Bhattacharjee thus perceives his daughters’ good looks as an indicator of
his patriarchal pride and prestige. For his daughters, such compliments reinforce
physical attractiveness as a feminine ideal. For the father, it is a moral obligation
to check his daughters’ blossoming sexuality.

In The Tiger’s Daughter and Desirable Daughters, the fathers are a
benevolent presence in the formative years of their daughters. They exult in their
societally scripted roles as providers of material comforts and wealth. Their
control on their daughters’ lives is latent, masked by the apparently harmless
control on their social mobility. The transition to overt forms of social control,
however, begins with the father’s role as decision maker in their daughters’
education, choice of career, and marriage.

In The Tiger’s Daughter, the “Bengal Tiger” makes the unilateral decision
to send fifteen-year-old Tara to New York for higher studies. Mukherjee’s
authorial remarks reveal the impact on a vulnerable adolescent: “The motives for
that decision remained a secret, but its consequences were terrifying. It put a
rather fragile young woman on the jet to Poughkeepsie, and left out of account
the limits of her courage and commonsense” (TD 10). Tara meekly acquiesces.

Motilal Bhattacharjee exercises a similar control over his daughter
Padma’s career aspirations. He effectively annuls his daughter Padma’s silver
screen aspirations. Tara Bhattacharjee recalls how her father ruthlessly dismisses
acclaimed Indian film director Satyajit Ray’s offer of a lead role for Padma in one of his forthcoming films:

Padma confided a career ambition to be, somehow, a performer, to act or dance. She was beautiful enough, and perhaps even talented enough, although of course, our father would not have permitted any form of exhibitionism (DD 29).

Despite an elitist background and seemingly egalitarian values, Motilal Bhattacharjee espouses traditional gender roles and values. Lerner uses the term “paternalistic dominance” to describe the hierarchical relationship between the dominant group (men) considered superior and the subordinate (women) group considered inferior. Lerner comments that in the manner in which the dominance is masked and thereby ensures its perpetuation as “natural”: “The basis of paternalism is an unwritten contract for exchange: economic support and protection given by the male for subordination in all matters, sexual service and unpaid domestic service given by the female” (240). Patriarchy thus distorts reality and maintains status quo through ideology-driven control in the economic, political, and social spheres. Paradoxically, the basis for such an ideology often mystifying to the subordinate group. Like any unequal system, patriarchy perpetuates itself by ensuring the complicity of the subordinate group who are often unaware of their role. As evident in The Tiger’s Daughter and Desirable Daughters, Mukherjee’s women participate and perpetuate patriarchy through gendered socialisation and internalisation of its values.
Paternalistic dominance thus denies Tara Banerjee and Tara Bhattacharjee many freedoms. These include life skills such as decision making, a positive self-image, social mobility, and emotional intimacy with their father. Manisha Roy in *The Bengali Woman* comments on the indulgence, control, and the absence of emotional intimacy characteristic of the father-daughter relationship in a Bengali family:

The daughter must also obey the father and father figures who give her instruction in schoolwork, in music, and in introducing her to the world of literature, music, imagination, and introspection. In this case she is permitted to ask for indulgence through their affection and she demands overt demonstration of their affection ... the cultural ideal in this case is supported by the religious ideal based on the Hindu myth of Durga who, as a little girl Uma, was loved and adored by her father, the king, and his subjects. Every girl in her father's home should be treated as Uma, soon to leave for her husband's home (157).

Most of Mukherjee's protagonists, however, do not share an emotional intimacy with their fathers. This trait has an impact on the quality of relationship in their marital life.

Absence of emotional intimacy and an authoritarian parenting style characterise the relationship between Tara and her father. There are instances, however, of displays of filial affection in *The Tiger's Daughter*. The "Bengal Tiger" endearingly addresses Tara as "Taramoni." Yet an invisible, growing emotional distance exists between the father and daughter. Emotional intimacy did not figure in their interaction. As Tara grows up, marriage and sex are taboo topics between the father and daughter. As Tara wryly acknowledges later, her
father "had been embarrassed when Rajah, the Cocker Spaniel mated" (TD 13). Thus despite the Bengal Tiger's liberal background, he is conservative. Bharati Mukherjee comments on Tara's relationship with her father thus: Both Tara and her father "had never really talked about important things [like sex and marriage]. They had covered up misgivings with loyalty and trust" (TD 29).

In Mukherjee's novel Wife, the relationship between the protagonist Dimple and her father is unusual. Mr. Dasgupta is a remote authority figure who never directly interacts with his daughter Dimple. His expectations of dutiful behaviour from his daughter are duly conveyed by the mother who acts as a conveyor between the father and daughter. Mr. Dasgupta is indifferent to her education. He is only keen that his daughter gets a degree that would be her passport to marriage. In Jasmine, "pitaji," Jasmine's father is a teacher. Although he is appreciative of his daughter's passion for learning, he has reservations about his daughter's aspirations to become a doctor.

All the four fathers—The Bengal Tiger, Motilal Bhattacharjee, Mr. Dasgupta, and "pitaji"—evidence a high patriarchal quotient in their imposition of strictures on their daughters' mobility. These include restrictions on leaving the domestic space, curtailed interactions with men, and control on their social mobility and freedom. In doing so, the fathers reiterate the ideology of patriarchy that men are more powerful and have the wherewithal to control women. Such an asymmetrical relationship also reinforces a girl's identity of feminine passivity and dependence that she internalises with unquestioning compliance.
Mukherjee’s protagonists share an ambivalent relationship with their fathers. Their fathers indulge them with sufficient love and affection, and even sometimes encourage them to study abroad. As they grow, however, their fathers control in their lives becomes oppressive. The women acutely feel the dictatorial control in decision-making regarding their marriage. The fathers arrogate the right to find a “suitable boy” and do not consult their daughters. This precipitates a conflict. The conflict stems from a dilemma authored by the father whose authority is unquestioned.

The father exercises strict control over the most intimate, personal rights of his daughter—her sexuality and marriage. In controlling the daughter’s sexuality and orchestrating her marriage, the father emerges as an exemplar of patriarchy. The Bengal Tiger’s injunction to Tara when she left for New York was ominous. He drew sacrosanct boundaries that forbid his daughter from overstepping. The Tiger’s diktat to Tara regarding sexual propriety and sexual conduct is unambiguous: “Don’t do anything foolish or rash. Caste, class, and province are more important than giddiness” (TD 13).

In such a patriarchal ambience, a daughter’s courage to exercise personal choice in marriage is anathema. It tantamounts to violation of patriarchal norms and injunctions. Motilal Bhattacharjee ruthlessly squashes the blossoming romance between his daughter Padma and a brilliant young doctor, Ron Dey. He regards his daughters as personal property to be managed and controlled effectively. Tara Bhattacharjee comments perceptively on her father’s eagle-eyed control of his daughters’ sexuality thus:
Ron Dey was not possible. Daddy had not yet sanctioned someone for didi to marry. And whenever that time did come, it would not be with a Christian, no matter what his social status and brilliant prospects. Therefore Ron Dey slipped under the most effective radar system in the world! Hindu Virgin Protection. So many eyes were watching, so many precautions were taken, and so much of value was at stake—the marriageability of Motilal Bhattacharjee’s older daughter, which unless properly managed, controlled the prospects of his second and third daughters as well—that any violation of the codes, any breach of scandal, was unthinkable (DD 32).

According to Tara, her father believed that his timely intervention scandal-proofed the family’s reputation and secured the future of his younger daughters.

The fathers of the Indian women in Mukherjee’s novels perceive personal choice in selecting a marriage partner (“love marriage”) as an indictment of their failure to control their daughters. Tara remarks about her sister Parvati’s selection of a marriage partner: “Aurobindo Banerjee had not been selected by my father. He could have embodied every strain of Bengali beauty, wit, culture, athleticism, and intelligence, but if any father had not selected him, he would have been forever seen as wanting and pathetic” (DD 51). Thus even if the daughter chooses a partner who measures up to the father’s criteria of suitability, a bridegroom not personally screened and selected by the father is branded as “second best.”

Such a disempowering environment impairs women’s choices. It fosters a feminine identity that is passive and dependent on male authority for approval. In the process of a long girlhood under a hawk-eyed patriarchal father, her ability to make informed choices atrophies and dies through disuse. Not surprisingly, when
the “brains-and beauty” Parvati marries a man of her choice, she creates turmoil in the Bhattacharjee household. Recollecting the situation, Parvati’s sister, Tara remarks, “Family values and propriety, and a sense of decorum were instilled early into the Bhattacharjee girls. A love marriage was a breach of trust and a serious transgression and an indictment of failure of the father to exercise proprietorial control and authority over his daughters” (DP 51). To make matters worse, Parvati, the middle daughter, breaches custom by marrying first. Such an act is another indicator of the father’s inability to “control” his daughter. Tara Bhattacharjee comments on her sister’s intransigence thus:

A love marriage was tragic enough, but even worse, Parvati was jumping the queue. We had an older sister, and custom dictated that the first-born had to be first-married, even if she had not expressed an interest. Otherwise, we were sending a message to all families in Calcutta with eligible sons that Dr. Bhattacharjee could not control his daughters. One of them, maybe two of them had stepped out of line (DD 51).

Thus a daughter’s defiant behaviour is perceived as a frontal challenge to the authority of the father who considers his judgment and decision making infallible.

The Father as Matchmaker

In Mukherjee’s novels, the fathers launch into matrimonial hunts for their daughters. It vindicates their patriarchal authority rather than affirm filial love and affection. In The Tiger’s Daughter, Wife, and Desirable Daughters, the fathers expect their daughters to acquiesce to the security of an “arranged” marriage. The daughters, in turn, fall in line without protest. The fathers cast
their matrimonial net for prospective bridegrooms whose presence is discovered by a series of stratagems. Their guidelines are impeccable bloodline, family lineage, and exceptional educational qualifications.

In marriage negotiations in a typical Bengali family, social and economic considerations are of prime significance. The prospective families are expected to be compatible in wealth and reputation. For the “Bengal Tiger” and his wife Arti, the image of a prospective son-in-law was “foreign returned, earning a four-figure salary” (TD 123). Family connections and social status of the same caste and affluence were indispensable. Negotiable lacunae such as affluence however, could be compensated by the bride’s family. The “Bengal Tiger’s” prize catch is Dr. Amaya Chakravorthy, with a doctorate in chemistry, who in the “Tiger’s” estimate is a “very fine boy.” This prospective bridegroom is promised future control of Banerjee Thomas & Co., gift-wrapped along with the boss’s daughter.

Similarly, in Desirable Daughters, Motilal Bhattacharjee’s choice for his daughter Tara was Bishwanath Chatterjee, the “poster boy of Indian entrepreneurship” in the US. He embodies the formidable combination of exceptional academic qualification, foreign validity and status and hence is the winner. In Wife, Mr. Dasgupta chooses Amit Kumar Basu, a mechanical engineer, and a prospective immigrant to the US.

Manisha Roy comments thus on marriage negotiations in a Bengali family:
Sociocultural and economic backgrounds are considered important in marriage negotiations. Families of the bride and groom are expected to be of the same social status. Equality is sought in wealth (men and women having higher university degrees especially from foreign universities) and general reputation (what neighbours, distant relatives, friends and servants think about the families). Once such matters are satisfactorily established, the bridegroom’s job, conduct, and personal appearance are considered. As for the bride, personal appearance, education, conduct, manners, reputation in housework, needlework and so on are of importance. All these conditions are to some extent negotiable (12).

Such an attitude reflects the packaging and commodification of women as products to be “sold” in the marriage market.

Tara Bhattacharjee wryly comments on the sudden materialisation of her marriage orchestrated by her father. “I married a man I had never met, whose picture, and biography and bloodlines I approved of because my father told me it was the time to get married and this was the best husband in the market” (DD 26). In eschewing a woman’s choice in marriage, it effaces and gradually obliterates her self in the evolution of her identity as a person.

In Mukherjee’s novels, one finds an incisive understanding of how patriarchy gives the father absolute control over the lives of his children. In Wife, Dimple’s marriage is “arranged” by her dictatorial father who exercises absolute control over her life. Like her other fictional counterparts, Dimple is a passive actor. Bharati Mukherjee portrays Mr. Dasgupta’s matrimonial hunt—from matching horoscopes, to preliminary checking of the family and expectations of dowry, he ensured that all potential loopholes were plugged. Mr. Dasgupta’s
"ideal candidate" for his daughter was Amit Kumar Basu, electronics engineer and prospective immigrant to the US. Mukherjee wryly comments thus:

Mr. Dasgupta had the horoscope checked, made preliminary inquiries about dowry requirements (he said he was prepared to give the usual gold ornaments, saris, watch, and fountain pen, some furniture, perhaps, but absolutely not a scooter or a refrigerator) and arranged an informal tea at home so the candidate and his mother and sister could meet Dimple (Wife 14).

One sees Dimple’s uncritical acceptance and unquestioning compliance of her role as male/father defined. Her father brushes aside with disdain his daughter’s prospective in-laws negative appraisal of his daughter as “too dark”. According to Mr. Dasgupta, his daughter’s disposition—“she’s so sweet and docile, she’ll never give you a moment’s trouble” (Wife 15) compensate for the flaws in her physical attribute—the “too dark” pronouncement of her prospective in-laws. Ironically, Dimple’s conferred helplessness becomes her prized possession.

Mukherjee delineates the Indian woman’s uncritical acceptance of the phallocentric scripting of their identity. Vrinda Nabar underscores this in Caste as Woman:

For women in India at any rate, gender has become a curious equalizer … From beggar to bai to housewife, the one common denominator linking all women in India together is their more or less unquestioned acceptance of their role as male/father/husband defined. They exist in relation to a particular male principle and it is their attempt to cement that principle (39-50).
Thus in the early years of a woman's life in India, the father is the master sculptor of her identity. With ruthless patriarchal will and control, he stunts her identity and personal growth. He circumscribes her life with strictures and injunctions that deny her choices and mute her. In doing so, he creates a bonsai of a plant born with the potential of maximal growth and fulfillment. Interestingly, it is only after marriage that we see the first stirrings of protest in Mukherjee’s women against such patriarchal strictures.

Mothers as Promoters and Collaborators in the Socialisation of Daughters

The mothers of the Indian women in Mukherjee’s novels are conventional women. They conform strictly to the role behaviour and expectations scripted for Indian women. Deprived of formal schooling, the mothers unquestioningly confine themselves to activities in the private domestic sphere: cooking, cleaning, and caring. They are tacit supporters of the enactment of patriarchal control and authority of the father. Unconscious of their own subordination, these mothers are willing promoters and collaborators in structuring a self-effacing identity in their daughters.

The daughters in turn are always anxious to win their mother’s approval. What is common to the intergenerational women is a shared legacy of gendered or feminine socialisation. In the transition from daughterhood to womanhood it is as if intergenerationally women have been handed an heirloom or a legacy of feminine traits. In India, interactions between mother and daughter rest on the premise that it is the mother’s duty to train her daughter for her future role of a married woman. Manisha Roy in The Bengali Woman comments on the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship in India, especially in Bengal:
One of the dyadic roles in the life of a Bengali woman is the daughter-mother role. She must respect and obey the mother and mother figures while listening to what they instruct her about her future life—her role as a married woman. The mother figures on the other hand should give her such instruction through direct verbal communications and by subjecting her to observation of ritual and religious rites, by talking to her about ideal women in myths and epics, and of course, by letting her observe and participate in the operation of the family. They should offer affection and care, but not overt indulgence so that the appropriate seriousness of the message will be lost (156).

The effect of feminised socialisation in Mukherjee’s women is passivity and powerlessness—the two sides of self-effacement in any person. The mothers of Mukherjee’s Indian women faithfully try to inscribe non-identity in their daughters as an insignia of womanhood. As agents of socialisation, the mothers are expected to train their daughters to be perfect wives and daughters-in-law whose primary aim is to please their husbands and in-laws. The Indian mothers in Mukherjee’s novels consider their daughters to be extensions of themselves. In fact, the concept of individuation or the establishment of distinct ego boundaries between the mother and daughter is alien.

Tara Banerjee’s mother, Arti was socialised into developing such a self-effacing feminine identity of ornamental womanhood. Mukherjee remarks, “She had been trained in the minor decorative arts, to sing well, play the sitar, supervise cooks, and above all, to please her husband and in-laws” (TD 32). Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that she inculcates these very traits in her daughter.
It is significant that only Arti Banerjee, Tara’s mother, is referred to by name. The other mothers are conspicuous by not being named. The mother of the Bhattacharjee sisters is referred to as “My mother”; Dimple’s mother is referred to as Mrs. Dasgupta; Hannah Easton does not address her mother in relational terms, while Jasmine’s mother is “mataji.” The nameless mothers in Mukherjee’s novels are mere appendages to their husbands. The process of socialisation of their daughters is strongly reinforced by these female surrogates of patriarchy.

Naming confers identity and visibility to a person. The absence of a name therefore is a significant pointer to the obliteration of personhood and identity of a woman. It is as if she has subsumed and dissolved her identity in her marital family, in her central role as a nurturer of the next generation. Naming is an affirmation; an acknowledgement. It is also an expression of the power of the bestower of the name. Historically, men have been privileged to define words and shape the contexts of human realities. Gerda Lerner and Mary Daly have reanalysed the creation story in the Bible as a metaphor to justify the subordination of women. Mary Daly in Beyond God the Father, writes, “Women have had the power of naming stolen from us. We have not been free to use our own power to name ourselves, our world, our God” (8). Thus the act of depriving women of the power to name and the absence of a name is a means of rendering women invisible and powerless.

The only instance of a naming of a mother in Mukherjee’s novels is Arti, Tara Banerjee’s mother. This is symbolic of latent independence and assertiveness. The only discordant note in Arti Banerjee’s life was defiance of her traditional in-laws. She opts to live in a nuclear family, and voices her
demand for her husband’s share of the family insurance policies—“those things”—over ties of kinship and bloodline. Through such an act of assertion, she demonstrates a flash of independence and spirit. Once she achieves her objectives, however, she slips into the comfort of conformity and tradition.

Women in India are custodians of religious principles and practices that enshrine ideal womanhood as its core. They are lauded as safety vaults and keepers of Indian tradition. Though men are permitted to transgress religious norms, women have to be primarily religious. They offer prayers, perform poojas, (worship), and observe vratas (fasts) for the longevity and well-being of their husbands.

Tara’s early memories of her mother were that of “her mother on a tiny Mirzapur rug, voluminous hips outspread praying to rows of gods and goddesses” (TD 49). She recalls her mother cleaning with cotton balls the silver icons decked in 22 karat gold ornaments. In keeping with the norms of a traditional Brahmin wife, Arti Banerjee had a ritual purificatory bath three times a day. Arti, a “saintly woman”, is predisposed to prophetic religious dreams. Tara comments on her mother’s precognition that included her ability to “foresee” events through divine mediation:

She could tell for instance, through Kali or Mother Durga, which pregnant relative would be blessed with a male child, which niece or nephew would pass the final matriculation examination or which out-of-town acquaintance, would suddenly arrive unannounced for a month’s visit (TD 47).

Such a feminised piety was an ideal that daughters had to emulate.
Ironically, when it comes to matrimonial matters, the mothers in Mukherjee’s novels are more pragmatic and less sentimental than their husbands. For instance, Tara’s marriage was a source of frequent altercations between her parents. Her overanxious mother accuses her father “of not trying hard enough” despite his assertion that “finding a suitable match was a man’s job” (TD 124). She chides her husband, “You are supposed to wear out fourteen pairs of shoes looking for a jamaï (son-in-law). I’m afraid you’re taking your responsibilities too lightly. You’ll live to regret it,” she complained (TD 124). Such a role reversal and accusatory tone seems unusual in a relationship built on inequalities. The “Bengal Tiger” admits that parting with his daughter endearingly referred to as “Taramoni” would be painful. Arti Banerjee has a readymade solution—find a husband who would agree to live with them. She says, “Some poor but honest boy, very brilliant of course. We could teach him about business and Tara would not have to go away” (TD 125). Thus the father seems unable to relinquish proprietary control over his daughter and would like to remain a significant lifelong presence in her life.

The mother-daughter relationship in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels is characterised by conflict and imbalance of power. Tara Banerjee’s mother Arti has a fairly equitable relationship with her daughter. She supports her daughter’s education and derives vicarious satisfaction from reading Tara’s books and even “spent hours choosing and cooking carp’s brain and spinach so that Tara might improve her intelligence” (TD 43). Unlike Tara, the relationship between Dimple and her authoritarian mother, Mrs. Dasgupta, is more complex and festers with unresolved conflicts. Like Tara’s mother, but with authority and overt
oppression, Dimple’s mother hedges her into maximising her feminine advantages to ensnare the most suitable boy! Mrs. Dasgupta allays Dimple’s anxiety about being unable to find a suitable boy at 20 thus: “Just wait and see, your father will find you an outstanding husband” (Wife 4). Thus the concerns the mothers lavish on their daughters are directed towards maximising their feminine identity to enhance their chances of a suitable marriage.

The mothers impart instructions on feminine norms enshrined in beauty and accentuate them in adolescence as a preparation for marriage. In Wife, Mrs. Dasgupta’s maternal injunctions to her daughter are to desist from worry. For it would crease her face with worry lines and more importantly, shrink her breasts. “Stop worrying!” Mrs. Dasgupta consoled. “Worrying makes them shrink!” (Wife 4). Such dos and don’ts with the threat of catastrophic consequences foster a fragile sense of self-esteem and negative body image in the vulnerable Dimple. Arti Banerjee frequently chastises Tara and cautions her not to over study as it might “ruin her perfect wrinkle free complexion” (TD 125). Thus even though Arti supports Tara’s educational aspirations, it is only a means to an end—the best husband in the marriage market!

An archetypal image ideal for women in India is Sita, the female protagonist of the Indian epic, Ramayana, and other mythic characters like Savithri and Behula. As a composite, these women epitomise wifely devotion, self-effacement, and abnegation. Their appeal is transcendental and Hindus irrespective of caste, class, region, age, sex, education, or modernisation succumb to its influence in shaping their values, and norms of ideal womanhood. The normative Hindu ideology of pativrata (loyal wife)—glorifies the womanly
virtues of self-effacement and self-sacrifice. It forms the core of ideal womanhood for an Indian. Thus tolerance and adjustment are enshrined as feminine virtues and an ideal to strive for in a marriage.

Hence for Indian women, the acme of the evolution of their feminine identity is to emulate the feminine qualities symbolised by Sita. Prabhati Mukherjee in Hindu Woman: Normative Models remarks on the impossibility of measuring up to such idolisation and deification. Consequently failure to live up to such benchmarks generates feelings of shame and guilt in the woman.

The life of an idolised woman seems rather unreal and too perfect to be true ... with the exception of Sita, they seldom shared emotional reciprocity with others, let alone an exhibition of human folly or weakness. But then an ideal is always hard to achieve and maximal efforts are needed so that one can reach somewhere near it (49).

One of the most enduring of these is the ego ideal of Sita, the heroine of the Indian epic Ramayana. She is the epitome of wifely devotion, self-effacement, and abnegation. The Indian girl grows up imbibing the Sita myth recounted on innumerable sacred and secular occasions. The womanly ideal are conveyed thorough the Sita analogy. Everyday expressions such as “She is as pure as Sita” are reflective of chastity in a woman, while “She is a second Sita” commend her self-negation.

Among Mukherjee’s women, Tara Bhattacharjee and Dimple imbibe the Sita ideal as representative of Indian womanhood. Tara Bhattacharjee’s mother and aunt’s exhort her to accept imperfections in her marriage. They motivate her to aspire for impeccable personal standards modeled on Sita, Savithri, and
Behula. Tara recalls their frequent advice, “Things are never perfect in our marriage, a woman must be prepared to accept less than perfection this lifetime—and to model herself on Sita, Savithri, and Behula, the virtuous wives of Hindu myths” (DD 134). Thus Sita is an intimate presence in the inner consciousness of the Indian woman and Indian man.

Similarly, Dimple dreams about Sita, “the ideal wife of Hindu legends, who had walked through fire at her husband’s request” (Wife 6). She fantasises about sacrificing her life for the sake of her prospective husband. While reading *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance* for her exams, Dimple is inspired with the vision of conquering her husband with coyness and docility. She even contemplates suicide as an alternative to her impending single status. The stress of such impossible feminine ideals to emulate, the psychological and physical changes of adolescence, the young girl’s growing sexuality and the taboo surrounding it and a repressive society further complicate the Indian girl’s growth to adulthood and psychological maturity.

Sudhir Kakar remarks thus on the internalisation of mythological models of womanhood on the Indian woman’s psyche:

“This intimate familiarity does not mean historical knowledge, but rather a sense of the mythical figure as a benevolent presence, located in the individual’s highly personal and always actual space time. This intimate familiarity does not mean historical knowledge, but rather a sense of the mythical figure as a benevolent presence, located in the individual’s highly personal and always actual space time” (64).
Thus Sita is an intimate presence in the inner consciousness of the Indian woman and Indian man. The former measures herself against \( \text{Sita} \), while the latter expects women to measure up to the mythological ideal. Such expectations are an ideological corset that circumscribes the inner life of women in India. It has far reaching implications in immigration.

In India, women’s roles in society and images of women are not simple offshoots of biology and socio-cultural situations. Rather, tradition, religion, and myths have greatly shaped the identity of women. Rehana Gadhially in *Women in Indian Society* comments on the influence of such traditional ideals in the gendered socialisation of the sexes.

Such a traditional ideal has been operationalised in the differential socialisation of the two sexes. Through the use of a variety of techniques of socialisation such as imitation, role modelling, and selective reinforcement, children’s behaviour is channelised to take a particular shape and form. This differential treatment is meted out by a variety of social agents such as parents, peers, teachers, and symbolic agents such as television and books. The end product is a package of personality traits attributed to women and men: what psychologists label femininity and masculinity[17].

Thus the principal aim of the Indian mothers in Mukherjee’s novels is to train their daughters to be good wives and better mothers. In this process, the mothers as principal agents of socialisation and the prime actors, the daughters as willing participants in their own subordination, orchestrated by patriarchal fathers as scripters and directors of this pantomime.
Feminine passivity and acceptance have been culturally programmed and the mothers are both carriers of the trait and agents of transmission. A combination of female powerlessness and gendered socialisation colonise women's minds into passivity that is ever willing to "adjust" to the often unreasonable demands and expectations of a marriage in a traditional patriarchal society. Mukherjee's Indian women are always anxious to win the approval of the mothers. Such dependency on the mother and mirroring values imparted by her poses no conflicts in the country of birth. The transition of immigration, however, entails a paradigm shift. Mukherjee's Indian women immigrants are forced to confront certain aspects of their psychosocial legacy that are anachronistic in the altered geography of their country of adoption. This calls for an imminent restructuring of their identity.

Life transitions such as marriage and immigration raise several dilemmas that Indian women are either unwilling or disempowered to confront. Ironically, education and social transitions like immigration threaten such premises and precipitate an identity crisis in the Indian woman. "Who is the real me?" she wonders in muted anguish.

In the case of Mukherjee's immigrant women from non-Indian backgrounds, one sees a restrictive upbringing in Hannah Easton in The Holder of the World. She is the only surviving child of Rebecca and Edward Easton of Massachusetts Bay Colony, a colonial outpost in the seventeenth century. Following Edward Easton's premature death and Rebecca's elopement with a Nipmuc lover, Hannah is abandoned by an old Indian woman at the doorstep of Susannah and Robert Fitch who bring her up. At the Fitch's, Hannah is subject to
a Puritan upbringing. Susannah Fitch initiated her into the decorative arts and was concerned about the pagan iridescence inherent in Hannah's embroidery.

In *Leave it to Me*, Debby di Martino is the adopted Indian child of hard-working, religious Italian Americans, Manfred and Serena di Martino. Growing up in post-Vietnam America in the 1970s, Debby enjoys freedom of choice and expression. When she experiences her need to track her biological parents, she merely informs her adoptive parents of her decision.

**Education, a Negative Capability**

For Mukherjee's Indian women, education is a means to an end. It is a transit point for women before their entry into marriage; albeit one that would enhance their credentials in marriage—the ultimate destiny and fulfillment of their identity. Education thus does not empower them or increase their self-esteem. Vrinda Nabar comments thus on the purely cosmetic role of education for women: “Middle class girls in India are educated largely as a concession to a superficial social change. Given the new executive culture, a personable wife has become a necessary appendage” (68). Thus an “educated” wife is perceived as a coveted acquisition of phallic power.

Mukherjee's women have minimal educational aspirations. They emerge as rather passive recipients of education. For them, education is an interim stage in their lives and an enhancer of their matrimonial prospects. Even Tara Banerjee's liberal education abroad is her father's decision—a shrewdly calculated move to increase her matrimonial prospects, and not based on a genuine desire to empower her. Dimple regards education as a passport for
marriage and reacts with disappointment to her postponement of exams. Because “without a BA she would never get a decent degree … all the handsome young engineers would be married by the time she got her degree” (Wife 9-10). Thus she perceives education as a necessary evil to be endured for otherwise it would mar her chances of a suitable boy. The only exception is Jasmine who demonstrates a passion for education and perceives it as need-based—a harbinger of hope and a source of liberation from her deprivation.

Among Mukherjee’s protagonists, Tara Banerjee and the Bhattacharjee sisters receive a postcolonial, education in elite convent schools. Convent education, a passport to matrimony, is a coveted asset that enhances the girl’s matrimonial prospects. Ironically it reinforces the ideal femininity initiated at home, and enforced through intricately knit patriarchal forces. Tara Banerjee’s structuring of womanhood receives a further impetus at St. Blaise, the exclusive postcolonial all-girls school run by Irish-Belgian missionaries. Mukherjee’s authorial comments on the centrality of feminine qualities such as being “ladylike” inculcated by the nuns are telling. According to Mukherjee, “She (Tara) had been trained by the good nuns at St. Blaise’s to remain composed and ladylike in all emergencies” (TD 10). Thus the home and the school emerge as dual agents of gendered socialisation.

Besides, Tara’s mind is being gradually colonised by Eurocentric attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Mukherjee’s authorial remarks reflect the taboo regarding sex fostered by the nuns. “Tara’s imagination, in the custody of St. Blaise’s nuns since the age of three, while not willingly touching on sex, quite often centered on love … “At St. Blaise, she had not been permitted to think
about sex; love was alright if it could be linked to the poetry of Francis Thompson or Alice Meynell" (TD 11, 12). Such an attitude highlights the artificial mind-body dichotomy (corresponding to love/sex) imposed on a natural biological instinct. It imparts a negative connotation and fosters repressive attitudes to sex in the adolescent Tara.

Tara Bhattacharjee narrates a similar psychological repression, restricted social mobility, and compulsions to conform to stereotypical notions of femininity as a result of postcolonial education. In Desirable Daughters, Tara Bhattacharjee says:

For girls of our class, only a convent-school education would do. This meant that until we reached the age of marital consent, we would be certified (of course) as virgins, but also as never having occupied unchaperoned confined space of any kind with a boy of our own age who was not a close relative. For Hindu girls, entry into an exclusive Catholic convent school depended upon exhibiting flair without flash, class without pretension, a society name without notoriety. In return, convent education guaranteed poise, English proficiency, high-level contacts, French language skills and confident survival in whatever future the gods or the Communists may dole out (DD 28).

Thus such finishing schools succeed in successfully “finishing” the identity of young girls. They counter their nature to emerge as strong, independent women of self-worth and capabilities. The ostensible reason for upper class Indian girls to enroll in such elitist institutions is to acquire a veneer of sophistication. This would work to their advantage as trophy wives who speak English in a near-perfect imitation of native speakers. Tara Bhattacharjee remarks that the only
skill she acquires through such elitist postcolonial education is to lisp like a native speaker of English. Tara recalls:

... thinking back to our elocution lessons in Calcutta, the prime directive for convent education being Cambridge-standard English, and the memory still fresh in the minds of the older nuns of Language Inspectors coming out of London every year to grade Loreto Girls’ degree of acceptable Englishness (DD 157-158).

Thus education disempowers Mukherjee’s women by muting their self-assertiveness in love and marriage. It is a negative capability, because the only capability it confers on the recipients is to increase their sexual worth as “ideal brides’ in the marriage market.

For Mukherjee’s women, even higher education is only a means to marriage. As a newly wed bride, still in her bridal finery, Tara Chatterjee is taken by her mother-in-law to pay her respects to her bed-ridden uncle-in-law with Parkinson’s disease. The following lines reflect the stranglehold of traditional values despite modernisation and Tara Bhattacharjee’s higher education:

Paying accolades to his wife who looked after him with unswerving wifely devotion, Tara’s mother-in-law remarks, “You are providing all of us married women a shining example of wifely service.” Turning to me, she added, “She holds the bedpan under him. She cleans him with her own hands. And she has a master’s degree from the Delhi School of Economics. How many modern girls are prepared to do that? (DD 83).
Thus Tara Bhattacharjee with her Master’s degree in Fine Arts is expected to subscribe to the feminine ideals of self-effacement and wifely devotion—an ideal “modern girls” were expected to embrace despite their education.

Of all Mukherjee’s women, it is only Jyoti alias Jasmine, who is capacitated by education. Jyoti belongs to a feudal, patriarchal society where the status of women is low. Discrimination against the girl child is ingrained in cultural practices and norms. But despite such deprivations, Jyoti aspires to “be a doctor and set up my own clinic in a big town” (Jasmine 51). Such aspirations are perceived by her family as insane and rebellious. Jyoti’s numeric and literacy skills make her a favourite with her brothers to “translate instruction manuals and write job applications” (Jas 46) and with the village women helping them transact business with the village vendors. Endowed with the rare combination of brains and good looks, Jyoti is sensitive about the denial of educational opportunities due to gendered practices. Mukherjee portrays Jyoti’s excitement of education with its transformative potential in the lives of ordinary people. The advent of electricity fascinates Jyoti—“With her palm on the switch, she felt totally in control” (Jas 44). Thus even early in life it is apparent that Jyoti is a rebel who refuses to be cowed down into a passive acceptance of status quoism. Her social perceptiveness, evident even then, works to her advantage as an Indian immigrant in the US.

To conclude, for Mukherjee’s protagonists, education is not an instrument of empowerment. In fact, in most instances, it reinforces their feminine identity. With the possible exception of Jyoti, education is a negative capability for Mukherjee’s women.
The Beauty Myth

Normative standards of beauty affect the lives of women. Beauty is a uniquely feminine value and therefore women are subject to tremendous pressures to measure up to beauty standards. A consumerist society objectifies, commodifies, and packages women as beauty objects with a finite shelf life. Attractiveness in men is captured evocatively by the word handsome. Etymologically, handsome is derived from the Middle English "handsom" that refers to the ability to manipulate or do. Thus linguistically handsome while referring to the male body connotes qualities of achievement and strength—qualities that are not compatible with the term beauty. Thus handsome is primarily a word about action and only secondarily about appearance. Such attributes, however, do not accompany "pretty" or "beautiful" that refer only to an ornamental quality. Such gendered assumptions disadvantage and trivialise women.

Germaine Greer in The Female Eunuch comments on the inextricable link between women and beauty:

To her belongs all that is beautiful, even the very word beauty itself. All that exists to beautify her. The sun shines only to burnish her skin and gild her hair; the wind blows only to whip the colour in her cheeks; the sea strives to bathe her; flowers die gladly so that her skin may luxuriate in their essence. She is the crown of creation, the masterpiece. The depths of the sea are ransacked for pearl and coral to deck her; the bowels of the earth are laid open that she might wear gold, sapphires, diamonds, and rubies. Baby seals are battered with staves, unborn lambs ripped from their mothers' wombs, millions of moles, muskrats, squirrels, minks, ermines,
foxes, beavers and other small and lovely creatures die untimely deaths that she might have fur. Egrets, ostriches, and peacocks, butterflies and beetles yield her their plumage. Men risk their lives hunting leopards for her coats and crocodiles for her handbags and shoes. Millions of silkworms offer her their yellow labours; even the seamstresses roll seams and whip lace by hand so that she can be clad in the best that money can buy (63-64).

In Mukherjee’s novels, beauty is held as an ideal towards which women must aspire. Its talismanic properties guarantee them a coveted husband, fame, wealth, and freedom. In Wife, Mukherjee’s authorial comments reveal Dimple’s preoccupation with her body and the (matrimonial) value of the female anatomy. “Dimple thought of breasts as having destinies of their own, ruining marriages or making fortunes” (Wife 4). Such an obsessive preoccupation with body image has serious implications on Dimple’s sense of self-worth and mental health.

Women are burdened with appearance as an indicator of personal value and personal worth. Superficially, the beauty myth claims to affirm womanhood and its special attributes. Naomi Wolf in The Beauty Myth, however, argues that the politics of power is the core of the beauty myth. She avers, “The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power. It is actually composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression” (13). Physical attractiveness is a culturally prescribed sine qua non for femininity, although not a prerequisite for masculinity.

The highest accolade for a female child is to be judged “pretty” or “beautiful.” Such evaluative terms tied to physical attractiveness are rarely if ever applied to boys. In Desirable Daughters, the Bhattacharjee sisters, in the
words of Tara, are perceived as “pretty virgins” and “unfurling buds”—both of which signify a fragile sense of physical beauty for the male gaze. Tara describes the Bhattacharjee sisters as “three pretty virgins in pastel saris, three unfurling buds on a massive tropical tree” (DD 53). Even as young girls, the Bhattacharjee sisters realised the effect of their good looks in enhancing the image of their father. As young girls they dressed in “pretty English frocks,” and performed at the lavish parties hosted by their father. Tara recalls the sense of pride they and the father experienced when complimented by her father’s friends:

I have never been happier than the nights Parvati and I would dress in our specially tailored “English frocks” and carry hors d’oeuvre trays from drunken cluster to tipsy cluster, listening to their praise,” I say, Bhattacharjee, you’ve got a charming little girl there,” or “I don’t envy you, old man, keeping the boys away” (DD 33).

Such approval and approbation not only builds the self-esteem of the girls but also that of their parents.

Body image forms an intimate core of one’s persona and is bound with feelings of self-esteem. In Wife, Mukherjee portrays Dimple’s morbid obsession with her body image—notably, her appearance and body. Dimple is preoccupied with her feelings of dissatisfaction with her body. To address this, she resorts to various maladaptive strategies to achieve the physical ideal. More importantly, all her thoughts and beliefs centre on her appearance. From a feminist perspective, socio-cultural factors are implicated, because the socialisation of girls more than boys, places a premium on physical aspects such as appearance.
Dimple Dasgupta is a classic portrayal of entrapment in a negative body image. Dimple feels deeply dissatisfied about her body. Mukherjee writes, "She was worried she was ugly, worried about her sitar-shaped body and rudimentary breasts" (Wife 10). Although just 20, she attributes her inability to find a suitable match to her less than satisfactory physical endowments. Dimple’s poor body image manifests itself in many ways: excessive self-criticality of overall body parts and specific parts of her anatomy such as her breasts, insomnia, restlessness; poor psychological well-being; and psychosomatic symptoms such as coughs, colds, and headaches. She is a nervous wreck because she is haunted by the fear of being unmarried. Dimple is convinced that “no one would marry an ugly girl like her; no one would treat her with respect” (Wife 10). Mukherjee’s authorial comments on Dimple’s excessive preoccupation with her body are revealing:

Years of waiting had already made her nervous, unnaturally prone to colds, coughs and headaches. Wasted years—she was twenty—lay like a chill weight in her body, giving her eyes a watchful squint and her spine a slight curve .... Would the now inevitable engineer—she visualized him in dark glasses, still mustached, on a half-built bridge directing laborers—be disappointed that she wasn’t as bosomy and fair like a Bombay starlet? (Wife 3, 4).

Such an attitude reveals Dimple’s obsession with her negative body image. By aspiring to such unrealistic beauty norms, Dimple experiences deep feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. Therefore as an antidote to the body blame Dimple experiences, she resorts to various remedies such as exercises and whitening
creams to address the problem, and by accessing women’s magazines—a prime vehicle for disseminating normative standards of physical attractiveness.

Women’s magazines are a window to women’s mass culture and a female sensibility. In a predominantly androcentric world, women’s issues are trivialised, misrepresented, or underrepresented. Women’s magazines therefore provide space for women to dialogue. Naomi Wolf comments on the solidarity women’s magazines foster:

The images in women’s magazines constitute the only cultural female experience that can begin to gesture at the breadth of solidarity possible among women, a solidarity as wide as half the human race. It is a meager Esperanto, but in the absence of a better language of their own they must make do with one that is man-made and market driven, and which hurts them (77).

Bharati Mukherjee captures Dimple’s obsession with her dysmorphic body image through several revealing instances. Dimple turns to women’s magazines as a source of comfort and support. Her body insecurity, dissatisfaction, and her battle with her body are expressed through various strategic efforts in pursuit of the perfect body. These include magazine ads, home remedies, and agony aunt columns in magazines. The “aspirational ideology” of women’s magazines tantalises Dimple with its promise of panacea.

Advertisements in popular magazines are Dimple’s vehicle for physical transformation. Battling with a battered self-esteem, Dimple finds the aspirational promise of such advertisements a balm for her bruised self. Belittled by an insensitive and non-empathetic mother, Dimple is surprised that she can
rise above her shortcomings through her personal efforts. An advertisement for skin whiteners exhorts consumers with its language of meritocracy—“Be the color you were meant to be” (Wife 3). Another for an isometric exerciser uses the authentic appeal of open admissions and user testimonial—“In two weeks my figure developed to 10 cms” (Wife 3). The inclusive tone of the advertisement that Dimple was not alone in her predicament, but shared it with several others like her, is the most persuasive punch. Dimple feels reassured because “the girls in the ads were her friends. Like her, they suffered and wept, even if they were fair and busty” (Wife 4). Dimple’s conversion from disbelief to total allegiance in the hard sell of advertising is complete. She succumbs to such false and misleading advertisements with a “willing suspension” of discretion, and judgment.

In another instance, Dimple is seduced by the following persuasive magazine advertisement for a concrete bra that posits large breasts as a feminine sexual sell. The following scenario from Wife exhort young girls not to despair if they are not naturally endowed. For there are man-made remedies such as the concrete bra that can transform a “molehill into a mountain”

**Scene in College Common Room (Ladies Only)**

OLD-FASHIONED GIRL with long hair:
I love Ganesh so much but how can I tell him about my physical defect?
How can I make things right? Help me! Please! You're my best friend.

CUTE MODERN GIRL with short hair:
Don’t be so blue, Vimla! Anyone can turn a molehill into a mountain!
OLD-FASHIONED:
You are so cruel to tease me. Just because you have big...

CUTE MODERN: I am your best friend. Would I tease you? Why don’t you be like me? Wear the CONCRET BRA—I do.

OLD-FASHIONED: (Shaken) You? But I couldn’t … I mean, they don’t …. (Frowns) But Ganesh and I are getting married in a fortnight. He’ll be furious when he finds out I was fooling him.

CUTE MODERN: (Hugging Vimla) Silly, you don’t have to tell him. Love is blind and what do men know about our secrets? (Winks at reader) After all, isn’t it what your Dreamboat wants? Satisfaction or money back (Wife 4-5).

Such advertising myths reflect the role of the media in imprisoning women in their bodies through retrogressive portrayals that merely reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes. These media-defined limiting stereotypes of beauty adversely affect Dimple’s self-esteem and self-image and alienate her from her body. Dimple’s confusion and vulnerability are exacerbated by what she perceives as the unsympathetic attitude of her mother who tears up her order (from) for the concrete bra. On the contrary, Dimple’s “far too bosomy mother” exhorts her to maximise her physical assets—not through modern inventions such as the concrete bra but through home remedies. “She prescribed prebath mustard oil massages, ground almond and honey packs, Ping-Pong, homeopathic pills, and prayers to Lord Shiva, the Divine Husband” (Wife 5). Despite adhering to her mother’s home remedies, Dimple is dismayed to find that “her intractable body reported no change” (Wife 5). Such experiences with a hypercritical mother who
castigates her for her physical imperfections causes Dimple to devalue her appearance and herself.

Another repercussion of morbid obsession with body image is that it precipitates acute psychological distress. This is evident in Dimple, for which she needs appropriate professional psychological therapy. As a distressed media consumer, however, Dimple naively resorts to agony aunt columns in a popular women's magazine, *Eve's Era*. Dimple’s plea for help reveals the magnitude of dissatisfaction over her body image and the psychological distress as evidenced by her anxiety, depressive thoughts, and suicidal intent. Bharati Mukherjee captures this complexity in *Wife*:

DEAR MISS PROBLEMWALLA, c/o EVE'S BEAUTY-BASKET, BOMBAY 1: I’m a young woman of 20 with wheatish complexion. In addition, I’m well versed in Rabindra singing, free-style dancing to Tagore’s music, sitar playing, knitting, and fancy cooking. I weigh 48 kilos and am considered slim. My hair is jet black, hip-length and agreeably wavy. If you were to say to me that with such endowments I’m a fortunate person, you would be almost correct. There is just one annoying flea in my ointment. The flea is my flat chest. As I am sure you would realize, this defect will adversely affect my chances of securing an ideal husband and will sorely vex the prowess of even the shrewdest matchmaker in this great nation. Therefore am sure you will agree it is imperative that I do something about my problem and enhance my figure to the best of my ability. Please do not, I beg you, advocate chicken soup, homeopathic pills, exercises, and massages. The icing on my cake was drinking two lemons squeezed in water first thing in the morning for ten days, with the result that I lost three-quarters of a centimeter from you know where. Need I say that am desperate, almost suicidal? I see life
slamming its doors on my face! I want to live! I look to you now, dear MISS PROBLEMWALLA, dear prophet and savior of us suffering women, to pull a magical remedy from your proverbial beauty basket. Help me! YOURS ETC; HOPELESS BUSTLESS (Wife 10).

The anonymity of the advisor and the concealment of identity of the responder permit Dimple to ventilate her obsession with body image in the hope of a quick-fix solution. Dimple looks up to Miss Problemwalla, the invisible female figure, as a repository of superior knowledge. She is a four-in-one combination of a mother surrogate, friend, confidante, and therapist who will be her life line. She is certain to offer sage counsel and a magical remedy for her problem without castigating—qualities that she abhors in her mother. Dimple, however, does not realise that such gimmicks masquerading in the guise of empathy, trust, and professional services, are just advertiser-driven messages of the beauty myth.

Naomi Wolf comments on the power of women’s magazines in forging an umbilical, emotional connection with women:

The voice of the magazine gives women an invisible female authority figure to admire and obey, parallel to the mentor-protégé relationship that many men are encouraged to forge in their educations and on the job, but which women are rarely offered anywhere else but in their glossy magazines (74).

Ironically, Dimple’s fears that her letter would neither be published nor answered turned out true. After writing the letter, Dimple agonises over its contents—fretting that it was “too sincere, too passionate; it exposed too much” (Wife 11). Dimple rationalises it by attributing it to the inability of the ideally proportioned
Miss Problemwalla to empathise with her pain. “She visualized Miss Problemwalla in her air-conditioned Bombay office, sitting regally on rubbery thighs, with painted nails and legendary breasts. Could such a woman be expected to feel, to actually share her anguish?” (Wife 11). In desperation, Dimple is obsessed with mutilating her breasts, and even thinks of cosmetic surgery or breast implants to resculpt her body—“transplant nearly human cones on offensively flat flesh” (Wife 11). Dimple sees the cosmetic surgeon as an “Artist-Priest” who has the power to shape her destiny.

Naomi Wolf comments on this twentieth century phallic power exemplified by the cosmetic surgeon:

The Rites of beauty designate the surgeon as Artist-Priest, a more expert Creator than the maternal body or Mother Nature … The cosmetic surgeon is the modern woman’s divine sex symbol, claiming for himself the worship that nineteenth century women offered the man of God (95).

Such abortive attempts to find a formulaic quick fix solution to her beauty drawbacks intensify Dimple’s vulnerability. It weighs her down with the sole moral responsibility for her failing to be less than perfect, far from desirable.

For women, being beautiful is a source of power as defined and bestowed by patriarchy. Women are indoctrinated that being beautiful is the key for material and emotional gains. Therefore Dimple’s mother launches a matrimonial hunt with a Machiavellian ploy—the stratagem of a coquettish bridal photograph. Mrs. Dasgupta confidently proclaims to her daughter, “I’ll get you an outstanding boy. I’ll make you a real woman” (Wife 12). The photograph transformed Dimple from a gawkish young girl to a grown up woman, her hair
“arranged in soft waves and bell-shaped earrings peeking, as if by accident, through the hair” (Wife 12). The photograph boosted Dimple’s self-esteem that was intimately bound to her prospects in the marriage market.

The following lines reveal the transformative power of the photograph on Dimple:

Dimple liked the photograph; it was a marriageable face. Erotic fancies began to sneak into her mind. Male faces: cricket stars, young cabinet ministers, heroes from novels. Her heart grew vulnerable and paper thin, transparent as butterflies’ wings. On sunny mornings the sight of boxer shorts hanging out to dry in a neighbor’s balcony made her blush. At night she hallucinated. Sometimes when she entered the bathroom in the dark, the toilet seat twitched like a coiled snake. Tight twisted shapes lunged at her from behind cupboards or tired to wrestle her into bed (Wife 12-13).

The phallic visual imagery of the snake is suggestive of erotic fantasies. The hypnotic effect of the photograph led Dimple to fantasise a short engagement and a “honeymoon at the Grand Hotel. She took to sewing, made her own choli blouses, scooping the neck and lifting the waist to honeymoon dimensions. Marriage, she was sure, would free her, fill her with passion. Discreet and virgin, she waited for real life to begin” (Wife 13).

Thus for Dimple, beauty is the gospel of a new religion that would guarantee them a passage to the Promised Land of marriage to the man of her dreams, wealth, and affluence. Dimple’s preoccupation with beauty as a means to an end is more a reflection of societal pressures rather than individual psychopathology per se.
Bharati Mukherjee’s Indian women have been socialised into accepting that marriage is the sine qua non of a woman’s existence. They are complacent and never question the idea of a traditional arranged marriage. For they have remote possibilities of choosing a partner on their own under the iron curtain of patriarchal will, authority, and control. The cloistered overprotected upbringing of Mukherjee’s women offers them little opportunities to interact with the opposite sex, unless supervised and chaperoned. Hence it does not permit them to explore genuine feelings related to love and marriage. Instead they subscribe to an idealised glorified image of romantic love based on stereotypes popularised by the media and reinforced by their mothers. So complete is their internalisation of the norms of feminine attractiveness that they direct all their energy towards this tantalising goal.

Tara Banerjee’s mother admonishes her not to over study as it might ruin her “perfect wrinkle-free complexion” (TD 125). Her parents, fearing its impact on her good looks, want her to “give up her studies for at least two months before marriage.” Besides, Tara’s mother cautions her about the need to be temperate in emotions as “extreme emotion was injurious to beauty” (TD 28). The frequent altercations and acrimonious exchanges between her parents regarding her marriage perplexes Tara and makes her feel “greatly embarrassed. She was anxious to fall in love, good heavens! There was nothing wrong with her. But marriage meant certain physical mysteries, centering as best as she could determine, on or near the navel” (TD 124). Thus even the educated Tara feels
confused at the cloak of secrecy and silence regarding marriage and physical intimacy.

Tara Bhattacharjee expresses a similar predicament regarding sexual confusion and denial of sexual literacy during her “absent” adolescence.

Tara says, Love in my childhood and adolescence (although we didn’t have adolescence and we were never teenagers) was indistinguishable from duty and obedience. Our bodies changed, but our behaviour never did. Rebellion sounded like a lot of fun, but in Calcutta there was nothing to rebel against. Where would it get you? My life was one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage. Such psycho-sexual poverty deprives Tara of the ability to develop realistic notions of marriage.

Among Mukherjee’s women, Dimple regards romantic fantasies based on popular stereotypes as sacrosanct. For her, marriage is a passport to material wealth and prosperity. She considers marriage to a neurosurgeon as a means towards this end. Mukherjee’s authorial comments highlight the absence of a reality check in Dimple’s concept of marriage based on banalities such as material acquisitions. “Dimple wanted a different kind of life—an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris—so she placed her faith in neurosurgeons and architects” (Wife 1). Dimple believes that marriage is a girl’s destiny and assiduously prepares for this moment of reckoning in her life. “Believing marriage to be a harbinger of freedom and love” Dimple regards “pre-marital life as a dress rehearsal for actual living” (Wife 1). As Mukherjee’s authorial comments reveal, “Learning to
tie the Windsor knot was her final maidenly act of accomplishment” (Wife 96). Such unrealistic expectations based on the myth of romantic love are a poor prognosticator of a mature, fulfilling marriage.

Media images fuel romantic fantasies. Dimple’s man of her dreams is a collage of a “forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes, and chin from a bodybuilder and shoulders ad, the stomach and shoulders from a trousers ad and put the ideal man and herself in a restaurant on Park Street or by the side of a pool at a five-star hotel” (Wife 23). She believes that her abstract notion of love eludes a precise definition and would concretise itself on her wedding day. “She was sure love would become magically lucid on her wedding day” (Wife 9). Thus Dimple, like most women and men, succumbs to one of the greatest myths of our times—the myth of romantic love.

M. Scott Peck in The Road Less Travelled remarks on the hypnotic spell of romantic love:

The commonly held myth of romantic love has its origins in our favourite childhood fairy, wherein the prince and the princess, once united, lived happily forever after…. Millions of people waste vast amounts of energy desperately and futilely attempting to make the reality of their lives conform to the unreality of the myth…. Of all the misconceptions about love, the most powerful and pervasive is the belief that ‘falling in love’ is love or one of the manifestations of love…. But the feeling of ecstatic lovingness that characterises the experience of falling in love always passes. The honeymoon ends; the bloom of romance always fades (89, 96, and 97).
Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex (15) talks about the distinction between female and feminine as one of that between biological fact (female) and a socially imposed construct (feminine). However, as in Dimple, the two become intermeshed that it becomes difficult to demarcate them. In fact the feminine has come to signify the prescriptive codes of conduct for women that have come to signify womanhood and determine a woman's self-worth. In such a repressive society, which is conservative in its attitudes towards sex and sexuality, Mukherjee's women harbour romantic and stereotypical notions of marriage based on unrealistic expectations. It is only in retrospect they realise that myth and reality are two disparate worlds for which they are ill-prepared. This further heightens their vulnerability and ferments a crisis of identity after they marry.

Conclusion

A composite of socio-cultural and psychological factors construct and shape the identity of Mukherjee's immigrant women in the country of their birth. Mukherjee's Indian women are prisoners of tradition that 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 through feminised socialisation. Being feminine is thus a defining characteristic of womanhood and an arbiter of social codes of conduct for women.

In the lives of Mukherjee's women, the father is a significant male presence. He exerts absolute control over the women in his life. The "Bengal
Tiger” Dr. Sudhir Banerjee in and Motilal Bhattacharjee exemplify pseudo liberal fathers. Mr. Dasgupta is a conservative traditionalist father. “Pitaji” epitomises feudalism, and Robert Fitch, Puritanism. Despite differences, they share a commonality as architects and arbiters of their daughters’ destinies. Their control on their daughters’ lives is latent, masked by the apparently harmless control on their social mobility. The transition to overt forms of social control, however, begins with the father’s role as decision maker in their daughters’ education, choice of career, and marriage. Through such acts, they vindicate their patriarchal authority and control.

Another significant factor in constructing the identity of Mukherjee’s Indian immigrant women is the mother. The mothers of Mukherjee’s women faithfully try to inscribe non-identity in their daughters as insignia of womanhood. Tara Banerjee’s mother Arti’s piety and piousness is a model for her daughter to emulate. Mrs. Bhattacharjee valorises archetypal feminine qualities of self-sacrifice and self-effacement as the feminine ideal. Mrs. Dasgupta places a premium on physical attractiveness as an indicator of personal worth. Jasmine’s non-literate mother is thrilled with the rare combination of her daughter’s beauty and brains. Thus the principal aim of the mothers in Mukherjee’s novels is to train their daughters to be good wives and better mothers.

For Mukherjee’s women, education is a means to an end. It is a transit point for women before their entry into marriage; albeit one that would enhance their credentials in marriage—the ultimate destiny and fulfillment of their identity. Tara Banerjee and Tara Bhattacharjee are educated in elite convent
schools and later study abroad. Yet these are means to enhance their matrimonial prospects. Dimple considers graduation basic qualifications to make her eligible for marriage. The only exception is Jasmine who views education as a liberator from her subjugation.

Mukherjee’s women are indoctrinated into the beauty cult with its promise of material and emotional gains. The mothers of Mukherjee’s women impart instructions in feminine norms enshrined in beauty as a preparation for marriage. At one extreme, one sees the relatively mild exhortations of Arti Banerjee and Mrs. Bhattacharjee about the importance of physical attractiveness for girls. An extreme manifestation is the aggressive Mrs. Dasgupta whose excessive emphasis on the beauty ideal traps Dimple in a negative body image.

In conclusion, the identity of Mukherjee’s immigrant women is rooted in the traditions and culture of their country of birth. For Mukherjee’s Indian women, feminine socialisation and patriarchy combine to generate female powerlessness and passivity. Life transitions such as marriage and immigration, however, throw up several dilemmas that the Indian woman is disempowered to confront. Such transitions threaten her fragile sense of identity. The following chapter explores the identity crisis of Mukherjee’s women when they cross geographical boundaries.