Chapter 3

Displacement and Identity Crisis

Introduction

Immigration is a major life transition. Like any such transition, it is stressful. One of the main stressors is dissonance between the host and incoming cultures. Immigrants are displaced between two conflicting cultures. Resettlement is often traumatic. Immigrant women transit complex geographical, cultural, and emotional spaces. Trapped between bicultural demands and values, they navigate socio-cultural realities of the adopted country in the absence of the familiar and the known. Thus immigrants experience geographical, cultural, linguistic, and psychological displacement and consequent identity crisis.

The focus of this chapter is on the psychological experiences of women immigrants and the impact on their identity. Bharati Mukherjee creatively portrays the dislocation and displacement as experienced and negotiated by immigrant women. In Mukherjee’s novels, marriage is a major displacement and a source of identity crisis for the protagonists. With the exception of Tara Banerjee Cartwright (who incidentally migrates to the US as an adolescent), Mukherjee’s women immigrate as wives who accompany their husbands. For these women, marriage and their subsequent immigration demand that they restructure their identity and self.

Using immigration and displacement as leitmotif, this chapter specifically analyses a rubric of factors that generate psychological stress due to
displacement. Immigration is a cross-cultural encounter fraught with uncertainty and confusion. Such diasporic burdens exert tremendous psychological pressure on women immigrants. As expatriates in the early stages of immigration, their identities are uprooted. They are challenged by transitional dilemmas and bicultural conflicts against a backdrop of complex cultural plurality. The identity crisis of the woman immigrant results from a combination of the following factors: marriage/marital status, gender roles, attitude towards immigration, nostalgia and expatriate sensibility, age at migration, and acculturative stress.

According to T.S. Elliot, culture is a way of life. It is an interactive process in which culture influences people and in turn is influenced by human activities. Elliot views culture from an organic interdependent perspective, rather than an atomistic perspective. T.S. Elliot in Notes Towards Definition of Culture says, “It is only by overlapping and sharing of interests, by participation and mutual appreciation that the cohesion necessary for culture can obtain” (24). Culture refers to shared cognitive (mental) maps that provide us with guideposts and guidelines for social life. It provides shared definitions of given kinds of situations.

The Oxford English Reference Dictionary defines displacement as the act or instance of shifting from an accustomed place. The 3D’s of displacement are discontinuity, disjunction, and dislocation. Immigrants experience geographical, cultural, economic, linguistic, and psychological changes when displaced from their original homes. When people migrate, they also carry with them a psychosociocultural baggage. Raymond Williams describes emigration as a
“crisis of epistemology that focuses people’s attention on their traditions or narrative to establish a known world” (131).

Like any other aspect of life, immigration is gendered. Immigrant women are caught between two worlds—the home country and the host country. They are weighed down by the burden of two conflicting cultures. They thus struggle to reconcile and balance between the old parts of their lives with the best of the new—a process which results in displaced identities. According to Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, immigrant women carry multiple mountains on their backs. Of these, “the heritage of tradition and the oppression from outside”, reinforce each other (103).

Several researchers have observed a more tenacious clinging to the past in women immigrants than in non immigrant women. According to Espín (9-20), retention of the structures and values of the original home confers a semblance of security for displaced women and their families. Hence for immigrant women the process of acculturation is seldom smooth and painless, caught as they are in a maelstrom of ever-changing role expectations for women. Besides what constitutes appropriate sex role behaviours is culture-specific. This makes immigration ambivalent for women.

As transmitters of tradition and culture, women are expected to retain their fidelity to traditional norms and values. Bharati Mukherjee’s immigrant women thus find it particularly stressful to negotiate “acceptable behaviour.” They experience distressing ambivalence as they acculturate. And at the same time, repudiation of the values of the birth country is perceived as disloyalty. The identity of immigrant women and girls is often shaped in such a cauldron of
contradictions. Fakrul Alam in Bharati Mukherjee comments on the pain inherent in immigration: “Passages to and out of India, Mukherjee appears to be saying, will cause pain and bewilderment” (23). Thus immigrant women are Janus-faced, torn between two distinct worlds, each of which exerts opposing pulls on their consciousness.

Therefore the predicament of the diasporic individual is the search for predictability. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the very idea of searching for one’s roots is paradoxical. “We carry our roots with us,” argues Spivak (74-75). According to her, culture and heritage are portable. The portability is a pointer to the immigrant’s tendency to cling to the familiar. Thus immigrants seek a sense of security and predictability in heir lives. Marie-Paule Ha in “Displacement, Home and Gender Relations” remarks on the immigrant’s search for stability:

When home as a permanent physical site recedes as a reality of diasporic life, then home as a symbolic notion gains force: i.e., home becomes a memory, a longing, a need. In the climate of anxiety about and hope for the future, there is a need for some element of stability, some area of predictability (3).

Similarly, Avtar Brah’s observation underscores the role of memory as a signifier for the diasporic individual.

Where is home? On the one hand, “home” is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of “origin.” On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of the locality (192).
Immigration results in displacement of identity. Oliva Espín comments that few immigrants anticipate the emotional boundaries they must cross when they transit geographical spaces:

As migrants cross borders, they also cross emotional and behavioural boundaries. Becoming a member of a new society stretches what is possible in several ways. It also curtails what might have been possible in the country of origin. One's life and roles change. With them, identities change as well. The identities expected and permitted in the host culture are frequently no longer expected or permitted in the host society (19-20).

Thus as immigrants cross geographical boundaries, new identities and roles gradually begin to restructure their identities.

Marriage, a Traumatic Transition

Marriage is an upheaval in the lives of women in India. For Indian women, marriage is a rite of passage from the birth family into the marital family—a process that is seldom smooth and painless. Indian marriage customs such as the bride stepping into the marital home with her right foot forward are symbolic of the crossing of the threshold, a major transition in the lives of women. In marriages in India, the onus of adjustment is on the woman. She is expected to adapt to her new surroundings unquestioningly. There are, however, no such expectations for men.

The “arranged” marriage is the norm in India. It operates through endogamy that stipulates and sanctions marriages only within a specific caste group. Uma Chakravarti comments on the sacrosanct regard for arranged marriages in India:
While there is an ideology in marriage practices in India, these are couched in notions of proper ways of matching families through the bringing together of a bride and a groom ... Because the status of the entire extended family is contingent upon a proper marriage, it is deemed too important a decision to leave to the persons actually getting married. Instead, the decision is entrusted to the heads of families (33).

Thus marriages where individuals choose their partners are non-normative and therefore regarded as deviant.

Ironically, for Indian women, marriage, whether arranged, or by exercising free will, is a traumatic transition. It is fraught with conflicts, dilemmas, and unilateral adjustment. Marriage compounded with immigration is a double uprooting of women—from their natal homes and birth country. For them, marriage is a traumatic transition, a precursor to their immigration as wives who accompany their husbands.

Bharati Mukherjee’s novels depict the identity crisis of Indian women because of the mystification of Indian marriages, whether volitional or arranged. Among Mukherjee’s protagonists, Tara Banerjee Cartwright, Jasmine, and Hannah Easton who is a White American make independent choices with regard to marriage. Tara Cartwright and Jasmine, in particular, exhibit courage and individuality in transgressing boundaries of caste and class that determine marriage negotiations in Indian families. The other women—Dimple and Tara Bhattacharjee—accede to an endogamous arranged marriage. Mukherjee’s women, however, view the husband as redeemer. They regard marriage as a promise of liberation from the claustrophobic confines of tradition.
Tara Banerjee Cartwright in *The Tiger’s Daughter* flouts marriage conventions in India with her marriage to an American colleague, David Cartwright. Paradoxically, Tara’s sense of loss as an immigrant is augmented by her inter-cultural marriage. Her relatives disregard him as a “mleccha” (low caste) husband; to her friends he is a “foreigner” and a curiosity. Tara thus feels burdened by this “otherness.” Mukherjee remarks on Tara’s conflict in being perceived as the Other: “Therefore she (Tara) felt she was not married to a person but a foreigner, and this foreignness was a burden ... it was hard for her to talk about marriage responsibilities in Camac Street: her friends were curious only about the adjustments she had made” (*TD* 62). To Tara, however, her marriage to a “foreigner” is symbolic of her liberation won through defying traditions and parental diktat. Hence Tara remarks about her friends’ disconcerting perceptions about her marriage thus:

“They were racial purists, thought Tara desperately. They liked foreigners in movie magazines—Nat Wood and Bob Wagner in faded *Photoplays*. They loved Englishmen like Worthington at the British Council. But they did not approve of foreign marriage partners. So much for the glamour of her own marriage. She had wanted them to consider her marriage as an emancipated gesture. But emancipation was suspicious—it presupposed bondage (*TD* 86).”

Thus the romanticised view of marriage to a foreigner that colours the perceptions of significant others alienates Tara from her friends.

Displacement is central to immigration. Immigrants are displaced between cultures. Salman Rushdie captures this ambivalent immigrant identity in his observation: “Our identity is at once plural and partial. We straddle two cultures”
Mukherjee’s autobiographical overtones enable her to empathise with Tara’s ambivalence exacerbated by her marriage. Tara is unable to transcreate for David, the nuances of her Indian past and tradition—a past to which he had no emotional allegiance. She is exasperated that “there was no end to David’s naïve questions” (TD 48). Tara is frustrated at David’s inability to comprehend Indian customs and traditions such as her mother’s ritual three times-a-day purificatory bath. This significantly heightens her sense of not belonging.

The absence of a shared heritage and a common language to convey experiences is a barrier between Tara and David. Tara is unable to “explain” to David that her emotional bonding with her ancestors and her family is an indicator of strong family ties. Tara, is perturbed to discover that “David was hostile to genealogies and had often misconstrued her affection for the family as overdependence” (TD 64). When David buys books on India, she mistakes it as her inability to articulate the essence of India. Tara thinks that “he was really trying to tell her that he had not understood her country through her. That probably he had not understood her either” (TD 50). The conflict thus accentuates their disparate frames of reference and their distinct social universes. The separation is obvious in their polarised attitudes to life. Tara poignantly comments on the gulf that separates her from David: “David thought she spent too much time talking to bigots, why didn’t she write him of things that really mattered ... David was painfully Western; he still complained of her placidity. Things happened only when they began and ended” (TD 112). Such polarised attitudes reflect the double burden Tara negotiates—the displacement
of immigration exacerbated by a cross-cultural marriage, despite the intellectual and emotional compatibility of the partners.

Ambivalence and conflict are contentious issues for immigrants. Paradoxically, the geographical distancing from the birth country reminds immigrants of their relative ignorance of their culture and traditions. Tara candidly acknowledges the futility of expecting David to identify with her Indian past as at times she herself fails to comprehend her cultural ancestry. The following lines convey Tara’s dilemma:

David knew nothing of Calcutta, Camac Street, the rows of gods, the power and goodness of the Bengal Tiger. She could not trust herself to explain; some things could not be explained. The security of a traditional Bengali marriage could not be explained, not to David Cartwright by Tara Banerjee (TD 125-126).

Memory is a signifier. For an immigrant, the atrophy of memories is a pointer to the cultural and emotional distancing from the birth country. The following incident of worship where Tara forgets the sequential ritual worship in her parental home in Calcutta highlights Tara’s irrevocable distancing from her roots:

When the sandalwood paste had been ground Tara scraped it off the slimy stone tablet with her fingers and poured it into a small silver bowl. But she could not remember the next step of the ritual. It was not a simple loss, Tara feared, this forgetting of prescribed actions; it was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of the axis and the center (TD 51).

Through the use of evocative visual imagery, the “cracking of the axis and center,” Bharati Mukherjee conveys Tara’s destabilisation and loss. The
magnitude of Tara’s loss involves more than a cognitive lapse. It implies the death of Tara’s link to her Indian heritage.

In another similar incident, Tara’s is unable to sing the songs of her childhood. The following lines capture the atrophy of childhood memories in the immigrant Tara when she returns to her birth country:

And sad, Tara thought, in spite of the promised bhajan. As a child, Tara remembered, she had sung bhajans in that house. She had sat on a love seat, beside a very holy man with a lump and had sung Raghupati Raghava Rajaram. But that had been a very long time ago before an invisible spirit of darkness had covered her like a skin (TD 56).

Bharati Mukherjee uses the metaphor of darkness and skin to convey the insidious process of distancing from the birth country. The imagery of the skin suggests that Tara’s altered socio-cultural environment gradually permeates into her persona. It also suggests the intimacy of these influences, just as one’s skin is the most indivisible part of one’s body. Tara’s native tradition seems obsolete.

Immigration creates fault lines in the immigrant’s psyche. Ananda Prabha Barat in “Bharati Mukherjee and the Indian Psyche: The Tiger’s Daughter,” comments on the schism in the immigrant psyche: “The psyche of an immigrant is always tragic as a result of the tension created in the mind between two socio-cultural environments, between the feelings of rootlessness and nostalgia” (53-54). Like the mythical Indian character Trisanku, Tara feels suspended between two worlds, neither of which she can claim as hers. Although Tara’s marriage rests on equality and mutual respect, her peculiar crisis of identity stems from the cultural disparity of the partners. Her identity crisis is acute
because she is neither able to ruthlessly repudiate her past nor wholeheartedly embrace the present and anchor herself in her adopted country.

In contrast to Tara Banerjee Cartwright, the marriages of Mukherjee’s protagonists Dimple and Tara Bhattacharjee are arranged by their fathers in complete accordance with tradition. Such marriages are circumscribed by rigid patriarchal conventions and demand unquestioning adjustment of the wives. This is a prime source of conflict that fragments and splinters their identity and self-worth. Rigid patriarchal norms and values, absence of choices, and a culture of subordination circumscribe the lives of most women in India. Unquestioning adjustment is a moral value instilled in Indian girls. Thus in a patrilocal, patrifocal marriage, as in India, a girl is expected to uproot herself from her birth family and reroot in her husband’s family.

In *Wife*, the protagonist Dimple acquiesces to marriage with engineer Amit Kumar Basu. Her friends approvingly describe him as “Amitabh Bachchan II,” the Indian movie icon. The shift to the Basu family is a traumatic transition for Dimple. Dimple is dismayed that the claustrophobia of her natal home is replicated in her marital home through strictures that stipulate codes of conduct for a married woman. Contrary to her expectations, Dimple finds living in a joint family stressful. Dimple’s predicament arises from the conflict between the need to play the role of a dutiful Bengali wife and obedient daughter-in-law and her need for self-expression. Dimple’s experiences as a new bride highlight her outsider status where her needs, aspirations, hopes and concerns are squashed under notions of tradition and propriety. She is denied small but significant freedoms such as choosing curtains for her bedroom. The task is implemented by
her officious mother-in-law—a locus of power, and a structure of subordination in the domestic sphere. To Dimple this seems to be an infraction of one of the “best part of getting married: being free and expressing yourself” (Wife 20). Thus Dimple’s latent sensibility and sensitivity stirs her into incipient rebellion against such a pigeon-holed existence as a middle class Bengali wife.

In a traditional Indian marriage, power imbalance is systemic in the relationship between partners. Dimple’s perceptiveness of this aspect, is a source of identity conflict. Early in her marriage, she discovers that marital relations are not even remotely egalitarian and democratic. Rather, it serves to reinforce asymmetrical power relationships. Its constraints and prescriptive roles were stressful and difficult to negotiate without acrimony and recriminations. For instance, “rules” were arbitrary and Amit demanded unquestioning servility and compliance from Dimple. Amit shows his displeasure when back home from office he finds that Dimple has not concocted his customary fresh lime and water by his piqued remark, “This little thing that means a lot to me” (Wife 26). Instead Dimple discovers that her new roles as a devoted wife and dutiful daughter-in-law in the “new” family demand unilateral adjustment and undivided loyalties.

Bharati Mukherjee recalls in Days and Nights in Calcutta (10) that the thematics of Wife suggested itself when a visiting Columbia University professor asked her what Bengali girls did between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. Clark Blaise explains in his section of Days and Nights, “the young girl may end up—for she cannot refuse to marry—with a lout who will not tolerate the slightest deviation from expectancy, or the most pathetic gestures towards self-
expression” (141). And Mukherjee says in her section of Days and Nights. “Wife is about a young Bengali wife who is sensitive enough to feel the pain but not intelligent enough to make sense of her situation and break out” (268). This fatal flaw has significant implications in Dimple’s life as an immigrant in the US.

**The Feminine Ideal of the Wife**

In India, women’s subordination is effected through control over female sexuality through powerful patriarchal ideology that sanctions and legitmises such control. One such ideology is *pativratadharma* or the ideology of wifely devotion and chastity. The Indian sensibility has been largely shaped through the stranglehold of tradition and mythology. In the case of Indian woman, they are deeply rooted in her subconscious as ideals of female perfection or purity. The normative models for Hindu Indian women down the ages have been the mythological women Sita and Savithri—exemplars of sacrifice and self-effacement.

The marriages of Dimple Basu and Tara Chatterjee enshrine this feminine ideal of female perfection and self-effacement. In *Wife*, gendered socialisation and internalisation of this feminine ideal transform Dimple into an unconditional giver and people pleaser. Such propensity for generic pleasing is heightened into a lifelong quest to please the husband and win his approval. Dimple adopts several innovative strategies to please her husband Amit. She consciously works on the superficial physical aspects of beauty such as “wearing bright colours: reds, oranges and purples. She even wears her hair in a bun and let a long wispy curl dangle behind each ear, like Mrs. Ghose” (*Wife* 22). Mukherjee’s authorial comment reveals Dimple’s preoccupation to secure Amit’s approval: “To
Dimple, “his (Amit’s) disapproval was torture; all her life she had been trained to please. He expected her, like Sita, to jump into fire, if necessary” (Wife 28). Thus one finds that like most Indian women, Dimple’s role models were not real life women but mythical characters like Sita, the central female character in the Indian epic *Ramayana*. Sita epitomises self-effacement and unquestioning compliance and propensity to please the husband—an impossible ideal to emulate.

Manisha Roy highlights the valorisation of such impossible ideals as worthy of emulation for Indian girls. She comments thus on the impossibility of women living up to such abstract ideals and their consequent guilt at being less than perfect women:

> The cultural ideal of the relationship between husband-wife is portrayed by such characters as Sita, Savitri, and Behula. She must follow him in every way and sacrifice her own interests and life if necessary to insure his safety and well-being ... However it is clear that reality will fall short of this ideal because such abstract ideals do not take into consideration the process of evolution in a relationship (160).

Similarly, in *Desirable Daughters*, Tara Bhattacharjee’s aunts and mothers reiterate that modernisation and education must not dilute the sacrosanct regard for traditional norms of womanhood. Such a colonisation of the psyche of women is sanctified by mythology and religion. It is implemented by the agents of patriarchy under the guise of “benevolent paternalism.” So subtle is the indoctrination of women that their willing compliance made their subordination invisible.
Uma Chakravarti comments thus on the insidious impact of mythology and religion in perpetuating woman’s subordination: “Working together, paternalism and cultural models of womanhood in mythology virtually erased subordination; it was thus much easier for women to be complicit in such a structure. The modern Indian woman still carries with her such a socio-cultural baggage that forms the core of her intrapsychic legacy” (75). This is the socio-cultural and psychic legacy of the birth country that the Indian woman carries as a baggage when she emigrates.

**Absence of Reproductive Choices**

The absence of reproductive choices and the control of sexuality reinforce women’s subordination under patriarchal power structures. In *Wife*, Dimple is a product of a culture whose attitudes and mores regarding sex and sexuality is cloaked in secrecy and silence. For Amit, sex is a duty and he sees himself as a progenitor whose worth would be enhanced with a male heir for the family. Communication in sexual matters is non-existent between Dimple and Amit. There is little or no physical and emotional intimacy between them other than superficialities such as surreptitiously holding hands at the restaurant. Amit hears of Dimple’s pregnancy only through his mother. Mukherjee’s authorial comments express Dimple’s acute embarrassment, and inappropriate sense of discretion regarding the male anatomy:

In the first weeks of marriage Dimple had been embarrassed by the fly when she was laundering or ironing Amit’s pants. In Calcutta she had trained herself not to see his hand (always the left) as it stopped carefully
at each button, then slid up and down a few times before hanging limply at his side (Wife 88).

Thus such repression deters most girls in India from access to informed perspectives about sex and sexuality.

Vrinda Nabar highlights this aspect with her comments on the lack of body and sexual literacy even among educated girls in India: Unlike the West where body literacy among girls and women is rather high, “girls in India are strait jacketed into regarding such freedom as wrong and punishable” (37). Thus we find a chasm between Dimples’s lived experience and what she wants sexual relations to be. Such a mismatch between expectations and reality is a source of conflict and crisis of identity.

Among the marriages of Mukherjee’s women, Jasmine’s marriage is built on apparent equality and respect for the wife as a human being. In Jasmine, marriage is a momentous transition for Jyoti alias Jasmine, from the rural heartland of Punjab. Despite her middle school education and patriarchal mindset that circumscribe her life, Jyoti is vocal about her need to marry a man who knew English. To Jyoti, English is a vehicle for personal growth and fulfillment. She is certain it would enable her to transcend limitations of circumstances and a restrictive environment by expanding her choices. Jasmine’s perceptive remark, “To want English was to want more than what you had been given at birth, it was to want the world” (Jas 68), highlights her drive to rise above her limitations. She rationalises that even though “she was a sister without dowry, she didn’t have to be a sister without prospects” (Jas 70). The pragmatic Jyoti regards marriage as a vehicle for her aspirations. Thus when she heard Prakash Vijn talk, it was love
Of the husbands of Mukherjee’s protagonists, Jyoti’s husband Prakash impresses the reader with his sensitivity and progressive views. He insists on a “no-dowry, no-guests Registry Office wedding,” and abhors feudalism. He views marriage as a partnership between equals. He insists that Jyoti address him by his first name and not the “customary” pronouns Hasnapur wives used to address their husbands” (Jas 77). Thus Prakash, with his progressive views, and “trashing of tradition” is a catalyst who accelerates Jasmine’s personal growth with Pygmalion overtones.

Given the socially imposed interfamily migration so internalised in their psyche, one would expect Indian women to be able to negotiate any life transition with greater adaptability. Negotiation, however, involves two parties. In the case of Indian women, negotiation in the marital families is possible only when the husband and in-laws are also willing to negotiate and reformulate their norms and codes with the entry of the new person into their lives.

**Naming as a Patriarchal Strategy**

Five of Bharati Mukherjee’s novels have an ironic twist in the title. They refer to the identity of the protagonist in terms of male referents. These include the father (The Tiger’s Daughter, and Desirable Daughters), husband (Wife) or a symbol of phallic power (The Holder of the World, and The Tree Bride). Jasmine, however, is the only eponymous novel. The naming is symbolic of the protagonist being untrammeled by patriarchal derivative identity.
In the marriages of Mukherjee’s protagonists, one observes various strategies that act as instruments of patriarchal will and control. These perpetuate asymmetrical power relationships within the marriage. In *Jasmine* and *Wife*, naming is a patriarchal strategy employed by the husband or his family to efface the identity of the wife or daughter-in-law.

In *Jasmine*, for instance, a significant feature of Jasmine’s immigrant journey is the rapid successive transformations in her identity. This is accomplished largely through the protean changes in her name—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jane, and Jase in a chronological order that correspond to distinctive phases in her immigrant life. Thus Jasmine is reborn several times with a new name. Jasmine is the most significant of her names. According to the *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, Jasmine is a flowering creeper that climbs. It sustains itself with the support of others. The name connotes images of female grace, and fragrance; and objectifies feminine beauty.

According to Ralph Crane in “Of Shattered Pots and Sinkholes: Female Identity in Jasmine” (1992), a significant feature of Jasmine’s names is that all of them begin with the letter J. The significance of this is based on the underlying assumption that the protagonist is a “prophet of joule”—the unit of energy created by force. Jasmine unleashes the latent energy in her name when she deals resourcefully with the several challenges that confront her—her adverse emigration from India as an illegal, the brutal murder of Half-face, the wily captain of the illegal ship, and her skillful negotiations as an immigrant effected through her relationships with Lillian Gordon, her mentor, and the men in her life—Bud Ripplemayer and Wylie Taylor.
In Jasmine’s phases as Jyoti and Jassy, she is named by two women—her grandmother dida and Lillian Gordon. “Jyoti” meaning ‘light’, the first of the protagonist’s names, is conferred by her grandmother. “My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, light” (Jas 40). This is a rare instance where a woman appropriates naming rights. Jasmine’s grandmother, however, is a patriarchal surrogate who is both a product and preserver of inequity. The two women who name Jasmine are polar opposites. Dida is a product of patriarchal culture and mindset. Lillian Gordon, a white American, espouses women’s emancipation and empowerment.

Jasmine’s initiation into the American lifestyle culminating in her complete Americanisation is effected by Lillian Gordon, whose mission is to enable “undocumented aliens” get a foothold in the country. In another unusual instance, Lillian Gordon confers a new name; a new identity for Jasmine when she renames her “Jazzy.” Renaming Jyoti “Jazzy,” Lillian Gordon tutors her into acculturation to the American lifestyle. The transformation effectively eases her acculturation. Dressed in a T-shirt and tight cords and running shoes, Jassy abdicates all values epitomised in her earlier avatar as Jyoti – including her “Hasnapur modesty and Hasnapuri sidle” (Jas 133). However, except as Jazzy, Jasmine is defined in relation to the male and is never free from absolute patriarchal control.

The most significant of name changes in Jasmine coincides with Jyoti’s life as a married woman. Through the first instance of renaming, Jyoti becomes Jasmine. Her husband Prakash, in an apparently benign gesture, arrogates the rights to rename Jyoti. In order to refashion a new life for Jyoti, Prakash names
her “Jasmine” because he wanted her to break away from her rural past and begin life anew as a progressive urban woman.

Like the proverbial potter, Prakash shapes Jyoti, unmindful of her reluctance and resistance to being moulded. Jyoti, in contrast to her earlier assertiveness, abdicates her individuality and personhood. Instead she acquiesces to Prakash’s self-appropriated role as the sculptor of her identity. Paradoxically, once Jyoti is married, she reverts to the role expectations of a traditional Indian wife. Jyoti, henceforth known as Jasmine, comments on her renaming by Prakash and its impact on her identity:

He wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said, “You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You’ll quicken the whole world with your perfume.”

Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities (Jas 77).

The choice of the name Jasmine is significant. As a creeper, a climbing plant that needs support to survive, the name connotes dependency. Like the plant with its proverbial fragrance, Jasmine is also expected to please “others,” but belong solely to Prakash, whose ownership rights are absolute. Although Jasmine is excited at the change of name and its transformative potential, it splinters her identity and makes her confused.

Thus naming causes a crisis of identity for Jasmine. It entails moments of confusion and dislocation for Jyoti despite her desire for change. Similarly, Prakash’s condemnation of feudalism as inimical for modern India, and his espousal of nonconventional views such as “love was letting go, and
independence, self-reliance” makes Jyoti feel “suspended between two worlds” (Jas 76). It is disconcerting to note Prakash’s squashing of Jasmine’s individuality and personal preferences. He zealously assumes the role of a patriarchal sculptor in shaping his wife’s identity so that she would be a perfect foil for his career aspirations. Thus Jasmine feels stymied by her male defined identity and inability to define herself without a male reference. Jasmine reflects on Prakash’s procrastean intensity to refashion Jasmine out of Jyoti:

He wanted to call me by his first name. “Only in feudal societies is the woman still a vassal,” he explained. “Hasnapur is feudal.” In Hasnapur, wives used only pronouns to address their husbands. The first months, eager and obedient as I was, I still had a hard time calling him Prakash. I’d cough to get his attention, or start with “Are you listening?” … He liked to show me off. His friends were like him: disrupters, builders, idealists (Jas 76, 77).

Thus one finds Prakash’s progressive libertarian values is a facade. In her unquestioning compliance to Prakash, Jasmine is the quintessential Indian wife whose life centres on measuring up to an idealised wifehood—self-effacing and existing only in relation to pleasing and satisfying the significant others in her life.

Bharati Mukherjee’s portrayal of inequities in Jasmine’s marriage is noteworthy. In contrast to overt forms of suppression as evident in Wife and Desirable Daughters, the inequity is masked in a façade of libertarian views of the husband. As Jasmine, Jyoti acquiesces to playing the role of a traditional Indian wife. Jasmine decides to immigrate to the US following Prakash’s tragic gunning down by Sikh assassins in Punjab. Thus despite her apparent choice,
even her immigration to the US by proxy is to fulfill her late husband’s immigrant dream and then immolate herself.

In several parts of India, it is common for brides to be conferred a new name by the husband’s family. In *Wife*, one finds another instance of naming as a patriarchal strategy of control. The protagonist Dimple’s mother-in-law insists on conferring a new name—“Nandini” on the daughter-in-law. Unlike Jasmine, Dimple protests to her husband and her mother about the change of name. She remonstrates against her mother-in-law’s insensitivity and high handedness, “I don’t sound like Nandini” (*Wife* 18). When her bemused husband Amit asks her, “What’s in a name?” Dimple answers with quiet self-assertion, “Everything” (*Wife* 8). Thus Dimple voices her resentment in her unequivocal protests about the change of name. She is strident about the erasure of her identity and superimposing a new identity, sanctified by patriarchy and implemented by patriarchal surrogates such as the mother-in-law.

Vrinda Nabar comments on the obliteration of a young bride’s identity as symbolised by her natal name and the passive acceptance of the new name bestowed by the husband’s family:

Nothing could be symbolic of feudal ownership than this unambiguous assumption that, with marriage, a woman’s entire past becomes separate and unconnected with her married life. Moreover, since a name may be seen as conferring a form of identity, distinctiveness, such a practice implies that it is a husband’s prerogative to obliterate his wife’s identity, if he so wishes and give her one of his own choice (121).
Thus one sees that most of Mukherjee’s women are trapped in inegalitarian marriages that stratify and reinforce traditional gender roles. Under such restrictive circumstances, they regard immigration as an opportunity to unshackle themselves from the stranglehold of tradition and male power. This is particularly so of Mukherjee’s married women immigrants who view immigration as a liberation from the claustrophobia of the country of birth.

Attitudes towards Immigration

Immigration is not a voluntary or conscious choice for the women in Mukherjee’s novels. The decision to immigrate is often made by the significant men in the lives of Mukherjee’s women. Fifteen-year-old Tara Banerjee’s 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 emigrate in search of better career prospects. Jasmine, against all odds, makes an independent decision to emigrate. Her underlying motives, however, are to fulfill her late husband’s dream of immigration. In doing so, she hopes to refashion a new life for herself. Hannah Easton immigrates to India because her husband Gabriel Legge is in the maritime trade.

Tara Banerjee Cartwright is the youngest of Mukherjee’s immigrant women. For the vulnerable adolescent, immigration is traumatic. This is because of the disappearance of all that is familiar to her, especially the loss of intimate networks such as the family. Mukherjee captures Tara’s poignant sense of loss as an “innocent abroad” and her accompanying insecurity and inadequacy:

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For Tara, Vassar had been an unforgivable mistake. If she had not been a Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin, the great granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee, or perhaps if she had not been trained by the good nuns of St. Blaise's to remain composed and ladylike in all emergencies, she would have rushed home to India in the end of the first week (TD 10).

Paradoxically, Tara's social conditioning fosters tolerance as a virtue. It thus counters her impulse to flee to her country of birth in the initial phase of the transition.

The married immigrant women in Mukherjee's novels—Dimple Basu, Tara Bhattacharjee, Jasmine, and Hannah Easton—view immigration as liberation from the constraints of their lives in the home country. They, however, are not empowered to face the inherent challenges of a major life transition such as immigration. All of them, experience ambivalence and apprehension as the moment of departure becomes imminent.

The complexities of immigration become real to immigrant women only as the moment of departure becomes imminent. In Wife, Dimple's friends and acquaintances caution her about the realities of immigration. Their ominous tone forewarns Dimple about the incomprehensibility of cultural codes—"You may think of it as immigration, my dear, but what you are a resident alien" (Wife 46). Only when Amit's emigration is officially sanctioned, that Dimple realise the magnitude of the transition.

Mukherjee's authorial comments reveal the point of departure for Dimple when immigration ceases to be an abstraction: "She had not thought of Canada or America as real countries until now, only names that people dropped in
conversation whenever they could” (Wife 40). This indicates the complexities and adjustments inherent in a major life transition such as immigration.

The transportability of culture and heritage, both on literal and metaphorical levels, is a crucial issue for immigrants to confront and resolve. Dimple, however, is ambivalent about immigration and is torn between the desire to jettison her past and preserve her heritage. Mukherjee captures Dimple’s immigrant dilemma in the following lines: “Leaving Calcutta was still unreal to her; sometimes she wanted to take everything she owned, even the velvet monkey Pixie had given her. At other times, she wanted to walk onto the plane carrying just a small purse and nothing else” (Wife 45). Thus Dimple is ambivalent about relinquishing her past. She regards her prospective life in the US as a *tabula rasa* or a blank slate on which she would rescript her life. Yet she is ambivalent about what she would like to leave behind in the country of her birth and those aspects she would like to transport with her. This ambivalence is a source of identity conflict and crisis.

For women from patriarchal cultures, immigration is an opportunity to unshackle themselves from the confines of tradition and male power. Dimple looks forward to her impending emigration to the US, free from the constraints of impending motherhood. Even motherhood, a culturally enshrined ideal for women in India, does not fascinate Dimple.

Bharati Mukherjee conveys Dimple’s gradual disintegration and dehumanisation though the use of vivid animal imagery. Thus from the moment Dimple discovers she is pregnant, she thinks of ingenious methods to get rid of
the “vile thing” growing inside her. “She spent her time cataloging ways to get rid of it” (Wife 31). Her masochistic attempts to induce vomiting testify to her deep-seated desire to “get rid of whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes. Her insides were like clogged drain” (Wife 31). Dimple projects her repressed desires by transferring her destructive impulses that culminate in her killing defenseless creatures such as a mouse and cockroaches. Pursuing the mouse with focused fury, “Dimple seemed confident now; a woman transformed... the head... horribly misshapen, bloody from blows ... the rodent body covered with hair balls, wet, black and matted. It had a strangely swollen belly. To Dimple the dead mouse looked pregnant” (Wife 35). Cockroaches were another “soft” target for Dimple. Scaring roaches out of dark corners, Dimple hit the slow ones with her broom “until the hard shell broke and the white liquid splattered” (Wife 41). Deciding to skip her way to a gruesome abortion in her bathroom, so as to make calculated murder look like an “accident,” Dimple once again anaesthetises her conscience. Mukherjee vividly portrays Dimple’s masochistic self-induced abortion thus:

She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned; then she had poured water from the heavy bucket over her head, shoulders and the tight curve of her stomach. She had poured until the last of the blood washed off her legs; then she collapsed (Wife 42).

Dimple’s brutal self-induced abortion is symbolic of her desire to begin life as an immigrant without being encumbered by the oppression of tradition. For Dimple, immigration is an opportunity to restructure her life free of the constraints of her country of birth. According to Maya Manju Sharma in “The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant,” unlike Tara
Banerjee Cartwright in *The Tiger’s Daughter*, who “returns to India to recover her roots, Dimple Basu does everything she can to obliterate hers,” inducing miscarriage “so that she does not have to bring a child conceived in India into the New World. Dimple’s abortion is a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood” (15). Thus immigration is a harbinger of hope from the oppression of institutional structures in the home country.

The notion of immigration as liberation is evident in Bharati Mukherjee’s authorial remarks in *Wife*. Mukherjee says, “She (Dimple) did not want to carry any relics from her old life; given another chance she could become a more exciting person, take evening classes perhaps, become a librarian” (*Wife* 42). Such attitudes reveal the transformative potential of immigration for women from patriarchal societies.

Similarly, in *Desirable Daughters*, Tara Chatterjee expects her husband Bish Chatterjee to be an emancipator and redeemer who would usher in a new life for her. As a young bride who accompanies her husband to the US, Tara is overawed by Bish’s plans for her—to work in the library and then join him at the student pub, where there were other Asian American engineering students. The following lines express Tara’s excitement and anticipation of the promise of a new life:

This is the life I have been waiting for, I thought, the liberating promise of marriage, and travel, and the wider world. Bless Daddy and Mummy, they found me the only man in the world who could transport me from the enchanted garden of Ballygunge to Stanford University in the early 1980s, which has to count as one of the intellectual wonders of the modern world (*DD* 81).
Thus Tara views her new life in the land of opportunities as a passport to
freedom.

Likewise in Jasmine, the protagonist believes immigration would enable
her to “start with new fates, new stars” (Jas 85). Like Dimple, Jasmine is
perplexed when immigration becomes imminent. In response to her husband
Prakash’s poser, she confesses,” I don’t know what to think of America. I’d read
only Shane, and seen only one movie. It was too big a country, too complicated a
question” (Jas 81). Thus the implications of loss and disjuncture inherent in
immigration are far too complex to be conveyed through cultural artifacts such as
books and films.

Brinda Bose in “A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race, and
America Meet in Bharati Mukherjee” comments on the ambivalence experienced
by Mukherjee’s women due to conflicting influences in the country of the birth
that are intensified in immigration:

Duality and conflict are not merely a feature of immigrant life in America;
Mukherjee’s women are brought up in a culture that presents them with
such ambiguities from childhood. The breaking of identities and the
discarding of languages actually begin early, their lives being shaped by
the confluence of rich cultural and religious traditions, on the one hand,
and the “new learning” imposed by British colonialism in India, on the
other. These different influences involve them in tortured process of self-
recognition and self-assimilation right from the start; the confusion is
doubled on coming to America (50).
Thus for Mukherjee's Indian women, marriage is a traumatic transition that causes a crisis of identity. The process is further complicated by the complexities of immigration that augments their identity crisis.

**Crossing Boundaries: Life in the country of adoption**

Women immigrants are susceptible to higher levels of acculturative stress. Mukherjee's women experience acculturative stress resulting from clash of cultures; the difference is one of degree. The factors include the trauma of immigration, loss of networks of family and friends following migration, and women's non-participation in the decision to emigrate. Tara Bannerjee, an adolescent immigrant, finds emigration most traumatic. The absence 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.

Oliva Espín comments on the impact of immigration on women:

The transitions immigrant women confront often result in loneliness from minimal contact with people who shared past experiences. They also struggle with strain and fatigue derived from adapting and coping with cognitive overload; feelings of rejection from the new society, which affect self-esteem and may lead to alienation; confusion in terms of role expectations and values, and identity; shock resulting from the difference between two cultures; and a sense of uprootedness and impotence resulting from an inability to function competently in the new culture (19).
Nostalgia textures the world of immigrants. Nostalgia, a sentimental and often regretful yearning to connect with past, is characteristic of the early phase of immigration. Immigrants vivify their lives in the birth country in their memories and enshrine them as nostalgia. Expatriation or a tenacious clinging to the past is characteristic of the early phase of immigration. As expatriates, immigrants are preoccupied with a nostalgic need to reconnect with the home country they have left behind.

Christine Gomez in “The Ongoing Quest” explains the cocooned psychological isolation of expatriation:

Expatriation is actually a complex state of mind and emotion which includes a wistful longing for the past, often symbolized by the ancestral home, the pain of exile and homelessness, the struggle to maintain the difference between oneself and the new, unfriendly surroundings, and an assumption of moral or cultural superiority over the host country, and a refusal to accept the identity forced on one by the environment. The expatriate builds a cocoon around himself/herself as a refuge from cultural dilemmas and from the experienced hostility or unfriendliness in the new country (26).

In Mukherjee’s novels, nostalgia and expatriate sensibility characterise the early phase of immigration of the protagonists. Mukherjee’s protagonists go through a phase of unsettlement and confusion when they arrive in the US. One sees an expatriate sensibility distinguished by fragmentation and a sense of 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. Commenting on expatriate nostalgia in Darkness, Bharati Mukherjee says that as long as she
clings on to "souvenirs of an ever retreating past, she will "never belong anywhere" (2). Nostalgia causes immigrants to privilege the past over the present.

When one analyses the lives of Mukherjee’s immigrant women, one finds that all of them experience displacement and crisis of identity. Tara Banerjee is the youngest immigrant who immigrates to the US as a fifteen-year-old. Mukherjee’s other protagonists are married adult immigrants. The only exception is Jasmine who is a single adult.

The Identity Crisis of the Immigrant Adolescent

Tara Banerjee is an adolescent immigrant. Unaccompanied by her family, Tara experiences intense feelings of loneliness and vulnerability. The process of premature separation from her family and the familiar is traumatic. According to Espin, adolescents who immigrate in the absence of their immediate family are challenged because they may not have achieved the "intrapsychic capacity for separateness" (22). Thus for adolescents, immigration imposes additional burdens. Fifteen-year-old Tara Banerjee acquiesces to her father’s unilateral decision to send her alone to Poughkeepsie in New York. Tara experiences acute culture shock as she encounters the distinct universes of her birth and adopted countries. She struggles to retain a sense of personal identity due to the impact of acculturative forces.

Among Mukherjee’s protagonists, Tara experiences the most intense dislocation; painful in its intensity. As a neophyte at Vassar, Tara yearns for the security and comforts of her Camac Street home in Calcutta. The fifteen-year-old
struggles to impose a semblance of order and meaning. What restrains her from taking the flight home is her stringent upbringing with its insistence on decorum and propriety. Mukherjee captures Tara’s sense of alienation in the following lines:

For Tara, Vassar had been an almost unsalvageable mistake. … But there was no way she could confide to her parents the exquisite new pains… As each atom of newness bombarded her, she longed for Camac Street where she had grown up (TD 10).

Thus in the initial phase of immigration, Tara yearns for the home country—characteristic of expatriate sensibility.

For an adolescent immigrant, immigration is an emotional amputation. The sense of loss emerges from the trauma of an uprooting experience at a vulnerable stage. Tara Banerjee is distressed by the sudden disappearance of her intimate circle of family and friends. She has “lost” her country and her culture. Tara’s loss is heightened by the absence of simple everyday things that she once took for granted. The loss of her circle of friends socially isolates and excludes Tara from the mainstream. She thus struggles to cope by recreating memories of the lost friends and sending them souvenirs to reinforce their friendship. Mukherjee captures this central loss poignantly in these lines:

Tara saw herself being pushed to the periphery of her old world, and to save herself she clung to the loyalties of the Camac Street girls. For them she stood in line at the post office, hugging poorly wrapped parcels of shampoos and lipsticks, trying to understand the jokes of the ill-tempered Negro clerk (TD 10).
Such reactions reveal Tara’s alienated status and her perception of herself as an outsider among belongers.

Immigrants experience the pain of uprootedness in many subtle forms through several losses, big and small. Tara is overwhelmed by the social realities of everyday life that confront her. The technology-centric life in the US intimidates her. For an immigrant from a developing country, technology is a source of estrangement and alienation. Mukherjee captures Tara’s technological displacement in the simple act of opening a milk carton that bombards her with “newness:”

She thought of her panic at having to open a milk carton at Hom and Hardart her first night in America. What terror she had felt when faced by machines containing food, machines she was sure she could not operate, or worse still did not dare! (TD 108).

Such reactions point to the technological displacement of the immigrant. Espín comments on the immigrant’s loss of the predictable and the familiar thus:

The pain of uprootedness is also activated in subtle forms by the everyday absence of familiar smells, familiar foods, and familiar routines for doing the small tasks of everyday life. It is the lack of “the average acceptable environment” … which can become a constant reminder of what is not there anymore (30).

Immigrants typically resist the strong pressure to acculturate by glorifying the values of the home culture. As a defence against what she perceives as alien, Tara idealises her home culture. This in turn increases her sense of a “lost paradise” as reflected below:
Little things pained her. If her roommates did not share her bottle of mango chutney she sensed discrimination. Three weeks in Poughkeepsie and I'm undone, thought Tara. Three weeks and I must defend my family, my country, my Johnny Mathis. No previous test, not the overseas Cambridge School Leaving Certificate Examination, not even the labor unrest in her father's factory had prepared her for this. 

Tara's reaction reveals the unanticipated pressures in the early stages of immigration. Her coping strategies include clinging on to vestigial behaviour patterns, and valorising the cultural values of the birth country.

The newness of the immigrant experience embodies the beginning of Tara’s struggle to restructure her identity. She is trapped between the pressure to acculturate and her need to preserve her heritage. In desperation, Tara “prayed to Kali, for strength so that she would not break down before these Americans” (TD11). Espín remarks that the immigrant's retention and valorisation of the home culture values confers a sense of personal identity:

Immigrants may become entrenched in traditional social and sex role norms to defend against strong pressures to acculturate. Here, the home culture (the cultural values predominant in the country of birth) becomes idealized. Its values, characteristics, and customs become symbolic of stability in personal identity. Retention of these behaviors is a strong defense against identity loss generated by acculturation (23).

Immigrants often find it difficult to forge a visceral connection with people in the adopted country. Tara is unable to relate with her American counterparts who are eager to admit her into their circle. But she is unable to bond intimately with her Poughkeepsie friends as she did with her Camac Street
counterparts. The following lines convey Tara’s emotional distance from her peers in Poughkeepsie:

Not that her friends in Poughkeepsie were insensitive to her needs. “The girls in the residence hall tried to draw her out. They lent her books and records and hand lotions unasked. But how could Tara share her Camac Street thoughts with the pale dry-skinned girls the same way they shared their Alberto VO in the shower? (TD 10-11).

Thus the absence of a shared heritage is a perceptible immigrant loss.

Immigrants have disparate frames of reference. This is evident in Tara’s confession to her academic advisor that “I just can’t pray here. It doesn’t come. Do you know what I mean?” (TD 49). If Tara expected empathy it was an impossible demand as her advisor, unable to comprehend her “loss” “invited her to worship at the nearest Episcopalian church every Sunday” (TD 49). Thus for an immigrant adolescent, the lack of informed perspectives of bicultural realities is a stumbling block in healthy acculturation.

An immigrant adolescent’s greatest challenge is to negotiate gender roles. Often there is a polarity between gender roles of the birth and adopted countries. In The Tiger’s Daughter, the refreshingly liberal atmosphere at Poughkeepsie is a stark contrast to Tara’s patriarchal family and the Victorian prudishness of her St. Blaise schooling. The following lines capture Tara’s sexual and intellectual awakening in the affirmative atmosphere of Poughkeepsie:

At St. Blaise’s she had not been permitted to think about sex; love was all right if it could be linked to the poetry of Francis Thompson or Alice Meynell. But now, realizing that the girls identified her with the
population explosion, the loop, vasectomy in railway stations, she blossomed into a bedside intellectual (TD 11).

Such freedoms also unleash a crisis of identity for the adolescent immigrant. The stirrings of rebellion over parental authority regarding appropriate sexual behaviour are evident in Tara. She experiences the first stirrings of heterosexual love when she meets Manik Mota, a Bengali, at a gathering of the Indian Students' Association in New York. Tara dreams of being in love with Mota. “Tara’s imagination, in the custody of the St. Blaise’s nuns since the age of three, while not willingly touching on sex, quite often centered on love. She fancied herself in love with Mota” (TD 12). However, when Tara’s father advises restraint, citing “caste, class and province as more valuable in marriage than giddiness”, the docile daughter is in awe of her father’s proprietary control over her (TD 13).

Thus immigration disrupts the adolescent’s habitual patterns of cognition, affect, and behavior. As a 15-year-old, Tara hides her distress behind a semblance of successful adaptation. Oliva Espín observes the adverse impact of immigration on adolescents who migrate unaccompanied by their families: “Adolescent girls or young women who leave their countries without their families may find themselves affected by premature and traumatic separation from their parents that can stall or delay the process of healthy psychological separation in adulthood” (22). Tara realises the magnitude of her loss only when she is an adult. Her subsequent journey to Calcutta as an adult to rediscover her roots is a metaphor to actualise and come to terms with her sense of loss. Her
return symbolises her need to successfully complete the process of individuation from her family and achieve a sense of closure.

**Linguistic Displacement of Immigrant Women**

A major challenge for Mukherjee’s immigrant women is the intense linguistic displacement they encounter as immigrants. As immigrants, they have to acquire bilingual felicity. This is daunting. They discover that while their first language remains the language of emotional intimacy, it is inadequate to reflect diasporic realities and fulfill communication needs in the host country. Eva Hoffman in *Lost in Translation* comments on the impact of language loss on immigrant identity thus: “Linguistic dispossession is … close to the dispossession of one’s self. … [There is a feeling that] this language is beginning to invent me… there is of course the constraint and self-consciousness of the accent that I hear but cannot control” (121). Immigrants thus struggle to acquire the new vocabulary and syntax that would enable them to integrate and express their experiences.

Mukherjee’s immigrant women are linguistically dispossessed. Her Indian immigrant women speak English, as they come from a postcolonial country. Yet they feel linguistically challenged because their lack of exposure to the insider language. In *Wife*, Dimple’s sense of confusion begins the moment she lands in New York. When she hears Jyoti Sen speak “in a fast and funny mixture of English and Bengali, Dimple wonders if in a few months she and Amit too would speak that curious language” (*Wife* 51). Dimple feels isolated and feels that “her English had grown less confident since she arrived in America” (*Wife* 74). Thus
the conventions and codes of the first language in the adopted country reinforce
the outsider status and vulnerability of immigrants.

Immigrants therefore try hard to acquire the language codes that would facilitate their integration into their new world. Dimple resorts to reading popular magazines. At a social gathering, however she confuses Gloria Swanson, the actor, with Gloria Steinem, the feminist. The faux pas heightens her embarrassment and vulnerability. Similarly, her sense of loss is acute when she discovers Amit’s word list in his trouser pocket—“Words such as challenging, a replacement for secure employment, frontier justice, crisis management, relationship, constructive, and confrontation, neatly listed in columns” (Wife 104). Instead of the familiar emotion jealousy, against which she had defences, Dimple felt “helpless against Amit’s list of useful words and phrases” (Wife 104). Thus in the initial phase of immigration, language reinforces the immigrant’s displacement as the “Other.”

Mukherjee’s immigrant women find the English language inadequate to convey complex diasporic realities. Tara Chatterjee and Tara Banerjee, despite their anglicised upbringing, find English inadequate to articulate the texture and nuances of their personal experiences. The two women are a product of post-colonial, Anglicised educational and social structures, juxtaposed with tradition. Yet Tara Chatterjee finds it impossible to convey the cultural complexities that accrue of her hyphenated Indian-American identity to either her American or Indian friends. Tara remarks on her relationship with her Hungarian lover Andy, “It’s one of those San Francisco things I can’t explain in India, just as I can’t explain my Indian life to the women I know in California” (DD 25-26). The
resulting internal conflict heightens her alienation. Similarly, she is unable to
"translate" for her American friends her "arranged" marriage to Bish. Tara remarks thus on the losses that result in conveying cultural complexities to people who do not share a common heritage:

I have told my Calcutta story many times, and Americans seem to find them endlessly amusing and appalling. And yet, until last year, I’d never really understood what I was revealing and what I was suppressing. I was going for the effect, Tara, No! the easy approval. Oh! Tara, you’re so brave! (DD 26).

Tara is acutely aware of her sense of her outsider status and her feeling of not belonging. Her inability to identify with mainstream American culture is evident in her cultural dyslexia on reading American magazines. Despite being an eager immigrant seeking to acculturate, she finds the process difficult. Tara remarks on the cultural discrepancies that block her from identifying with the conclusions of an article that linked birth order and personality traits:

I was avid to learn and women’s magazines were my first great sources of forbidden knowledge. But when I tested its conclusions against my own experience, I found the article utterly unconvincing, relevant only to American families. In India, we didn’t have outside influences like the media, or lax schooling, or cars and dating and drugs. We didn’t know family breakdowns. Our families existed inside an impenetrable bubble. Anyone entering or exiting was carefully monitored. We honored proprieties. There was no rebellion, no seeking after individual identities (DD 43-44).

Immigrants experience acute linguistic dispossession because their first language is inadequate to convey diasporic realities. The following lines reflect Tara’s
predicament when she realises that her birth language cannot adequately reflect social realities in the adopted country.

We didn’t have a language for divorce and depression, which meant we couldn’t fit in concepts like powerlessness and disappointment. We couldn’t talk about why a young woman with everything she could ever want would decide to leave her protector and provider (DD 66).

Such a chasm between the social mores of two different worlds and the inability to transcribe those experiences for oneself and for others is a source of identity crisis for immigrant women. Thus Tara Chatterjee, Tara Banerjee, and Dimple Basu experience considerable linguistic displacement despite their fluency in English.

In contrast, Jasmine with her elementary knowledge of the language does not experience the same levels of linguistic displacement as an immigrant. As a neophyte immigrant, she wholeheartedly adopts Lillian Gordon’s injunction, “Now remember, if you walk and talk American, they’ll think you were born here. Most Americans can’t imagine anything else” (Jas 135). Thus Jasmine demonstrates an immigrant sensibility by her unquestioning analysis-free acceptance of immigrant codes that enable her to acculturate faster.

The Immigrant Woman: A Retainer of Cultural Memory

Single immigrant women, unlike married immigrant women, acculturate faster because they are not burdened by family pressure. Among Mukherjee’s immigrant women, Tara Banerjee and Jasmine who are single, acculturate faster. Dimple Basu, Tara Bhattacharjee Chatterjee, and Hannah Easton immigrate as married women who accompany their husbands. While the first two women
immigrate to the US, Hannah Easton does so to India. The absence of choice in deciding to emigrate and their status as married women have a causal effect on the identity crisis these women experience.

The absence of strictures such as the burden of tradition and oppressive gender roles facilitate the single woman immigrant’s acculturation. Tara’s cross-cultural marriage is also an indicator of her rapid acculturation. 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. An exception is Hannah Easton. Although married, her cross-cultural sensibility facilitates rapid acculturation.

Mukherjee’s immigrant women are expected to recreate the stability and security of the birth country for the diasporic male who fans outward in economic and social quests. One of the mechanisms through which predictability is sustained is through perpetuation of traditional gender roles and relations of the birth country in the diasporic setting. Such traditional role expectations are evident in the lives of Tara Bhattacharjee and Dimple Basu. As a young bride who lands in the US, Tara’s identity is predicated with that of her husband. As wife of Bish Chatterjee, the “Atherton communications guru,” “the swami of Stanford,” she was his “jewel in the crown,” his “rani” on magazine covers. Tara wryly remarks at the straitjacketing of her identity thus: “Wife of Bish Chatterjee was my only identity…. I wondered if (wife) was the only role permitted to me, if there was a way of being in this country with my own identity…. By twenty-two I had satisfied all my ancestral duties. I was married; I had a son, material comfort, an admired husband—what else is there?” (TB 16, 19). Tara is
dismayed to serve as a custodian of culture and tradition and ensure status quoism in the diasporic setting.

Paradoxically, this burden of predictability and retention of traditional gender roles is a source of identity crisis for the married immigrant woman. As an immigrant wife, Tara Bhattacharjee discovers that her husband Bish is the quintessential Indian husband. While he careens on the fast track of American individualism and entrepreneurial success, he is rigidly conservative in the private sphere. Tara comments on being forced to conform to the calendar image of the Indian woman in the private sphere: “He was even more the Indian husband, showing off for his mother, perhaps how well-trained this upper class Ballygunge girl had become: what a good cook, what an attentive wife and daughter in law” (DD 82). In another instance, Tara is dismayed to discover Bish’s traditional role expectations for a wife: “The girl Bish married never stepped inside a kitchen; the woman she married became a stupendous cook.” (DD 264). Tara’s identity conflict stems from role expectations that she would replicate the home culture in the country of adoption.

The dichotomy between the public and private self is a source of conflict for the immigrant woman. Tara Chatterjee finds a rigid demarcation between the public and private spheres of her life. In the former, she is permitted superficial concession to Americanisation in manners, speech, dress, and employment. In the private sphere, however, she is expected to revert to stringent traditional roles and unconditionally expected to maintain the purity of the sanctum sanctorum—

the home.
A similar dichotomy between the public and private persona is evident in Bish in his conflicting roles of the successful entrepreneur and the traditional Indian husband. As Tara remarks, “In his (Bish) Atherton years, as he became better known on the American scene—a player, an adviser, a pundit—he also became at home, more of a traditional Indian. He was spending fifteen hours a day in office, sometimes even longer” (DD 82). Such a tenacious clinging to the past is symptomatic of what Nalini Natarajan terms “the anxiety of the diasporic male” and his struggle to acclimatise as an immigrant (xiii). The ambivalence, however, is a burden to the wife who is forced to replicate the traditional values of her home country and thereby participate in her own subordination.

The diasporic woman’s dilemma arises from being forced to recreate the lost homeland and act as a semblance of stability for her husband. Dimple discovers that Amit is the archetypal traditional Indian husband who expects her to retain fidelity to Indian customs and traditions in the US. For instance, he resents Dimple’s desire for employment. He finds several plausible reasons that justify Dimple’s under preparedness for the role. Amit rationalises thus: “One breadwinner in the family is enough… Besides Dimple can’t add two and two. She would ruin your business in a fortnight …” (Wife 61). Thus Amit resents Dimple’s attempts at independence that challenge his patriarchal authority. The process of retaining her role as preserver of tradition and her yearning to break free of such strictures is ambivalent for the immigrant woman.

Married immigrant women are burdened by the operation of archaic gender norms from their birth country. Amit taunts Dimple on her attachment to her parents. He says, “You write too often to your parents. I guess your heart is
still in Calcutta" (Wife 97). Like most men in societies where patrilocal marriages are the norm, Amit believes that once married, a wife must instantaneously sever all emotional ties with her natal family.

Such traditional role expectations are dysfunctional and a source of identity conflict for the immigrant woman. Dimple is burdened with the self-effacing notion of Indian womanhood. At a social gathering, Amit proudly proclaims that Dimple “does not like alcoholic beverages, she doesn’t even like Coke” (Wife 77). Even when friends try to coax her to try her first taste of alcohol, Dimple feels constrained by social expectations of fulfilling other’s expectations (in this case Amit) while even refusing to acknowledge her desires. Dimple thus feels torn between conflicting demands to preserve the traditions of the home culture and the need to acculturate as an immigrant.

Mukherjee perceptively sums up Dimple’s diasporic predicament thus:

She (Dimple) felt that Amit was waiting for just the right answer, that it was up to her to uphold Bengali womanhood, marriage and male pride. The right answer, I do not need stimulants to feel happy in my husband’s presence ... My obligation is to my husband, seemed to dance before her eyes as though it were printed on a card. All she had to do was to read it, but she feared Ina’s laughter or anger more than anything else in the world. If she took a drink she knew Amit would write to his mother and his mother would call the Dasguptas and accuse them of raising an immoral drunken daughter. The Calcutta rumor mill operated as effectively from New York as it did from Park Street (Wife 78).

This variability of appropriate sex role behaviours in different cultures is particularly confusing for married immigrant women. As transmitters of tradition
and culture, women are expected to retain their fidelity to traditional norms and values. This makes it particularly ambivalent when they are trying to acculturate and at the same time repudiate the values of the birth country are perceived as “disrespectful.”

Marie-Paule Ha comments on the role of the immigrant woman as a retainer of cultural memory:

For the immigrant male, the woman becomes the means by which home can be transported; the expectations of predictability become displaced onto the wife, mother, sister, or daughter. Invariably it’s the woman’s function to recreate the idyllic home in the new destination, whether or not this idyll can ever become reality. Home, is the site to which one can turn or return for a collection of all those things with which one is familiar—language, food, social traditions, rituals, ceremonies, and cultural values—is increasingly identified with the woman. She becomes the locus of all that is known and treasured, the repository of cultural memory (3).

Thus married immigrant women are trapped in traditional gender roles. The new demands imposed by immigration and retention of dysfunctional gender roles augment their identity crisis. Their dilemma arises from such enforced roles and the need to seek their identity in the more liberal atmosphere of the adopted country.

**Sexuality and Identity Crisis**

Sexuality, like gender, is a socio-political construct and therefore culture-specific. The onus of being the custodians of culture and tradition is the biggest burden for Mukherjee’s immigrant women. It is counterproductive in the face of greater independence and the more liberal gender roles in the adopted country.
Such gender-based cultural prescriptions together with the liberal sexual mores of the host country further complicate the process of acculturation and precipitate identity crisis.

This is particularly evident in the lives of Tara Bhattacharjee and Dimple Basu. Like most immigrant women, they acculturate faster than men, especially with regard to their sexuality. One could say that Mukherjee’s women discover themselves through their revitalised sexuality as immigrants. Bharati Mukherjee in an interview in *The Iowa Review* remarked on the impact of acculturation on immigrant women:

> When an Asian man comes to America, he comes for economic transformation, and he brings a wife who winds up being economically changed. This is one tragedy you see being played out in all New Jersey shopping malls these days. The Indian woman walking around in the malls with nothing to do all day, while the men are out busily making money. The men have a sense of accomplishment. They have no idea of staying here. The idea is saving money and going. But they don’t realise the women have been transformed (16).

Immigrant women, in contrast to immigrant men, undergo rapid psychological transformation that causes them to reformulate and revision their identity. In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara Bhattacharjee experiences sexual awakening as an immigrant. Tara realises painfully that she and her husband, Bish have polarised positions regarding the meaning of love. Tara perceptively remarks on the disparate frames of reference between Bish and her with regard to love:
“Love” is a slippery word when both partners bring their own definition. Love, to Bish, is the residue of providing for parents and family, contributing to good causes and community charities, earning professional respect, and being recognized for hard work and honesty. Love is indistinguishable from status and honors (DD 27).

In another instance, Tara juxtaposes the traditional conservatism towards sex as espoused by Bish and the raw spontaneity of Andy:

The two long term lovers in my life are such opposites there are no points of comparison. Whatever one is, the other isn’t. Andy isn’t rushed, he isn’t methodical, but sometimes his presence is a kind of absence. Sometimes I feel I should call him back. I never had to do that with Bish. Thousands of years of arranged marriages had somehow habituated us even before laying eyes on each other; there would be nothing in our sexuality that was finally exotic (DD 77).

In contrast, Tara finds that for Andy, love is uncomplicated. She remarks, “I can’t imagine my carpenter, Andy, bringing anything more complicated to it than, say, “fun.” Love is having fun with someone, more fun with that person than anyone else, over a longer haul” (DD 27). Thus Tara experiences an awakening of sexuality in the immigrant country. This, however, conflicts with traditional notions of sexuality ingrained during her formative years in India.

As an immigrant, Tara has experienced sufficient psychological growth and maturity to perceive and articulate conflicting bicultural values with regard to sex and sexuality. While the resulting ambivalence and conflict has enabled her to grow, it also distances her from her husband who refuses to abdicate the values of his country of birth. As a divorcee, Tara retrospects on the break up of her marriage:
I'm as single mom, raising a boy and halfway teaching school. I'm the supremely lucky one. Bish is generous and protective; he has more than enough to provide. Indian men, whatever their faults, are programmed to provide for their wives and children. If I had wanted only to be provided for, stupendously provided for in the gated community, endlessly on display at dinners and openings, I would have stayed on in Atherton (DD 27).

Such ambiguities and ambivalences stem from role expectations for immigrant women that stipulate duplication of traditional gender roles of the home country. The resulting discord due to cognitive dissonance causes disillusionment and precipitates a crisis of identity. It leads to the break up of Tara’s marriage. Tara remarks poignantly, “When I left Bish after a decade of marriage, it was because the promise of life as an American wife was not fulfilled” (DD 82). Its long term impact in the form of a crisis of identity ultimately compels Tara to undertake a search for her roots.

Similarly, as an immigrant Dimple experiences a sexual awakening that is at variance with her husband. The shy repressed girl who once had been embarrassed by the male anatomy now directs her bold gaze without fear of ridicule or embarrassment. Mukherjee comments perceptively on Dimple’s new sexual outlook thus:

She (Dimple) looked up at him archly as he stood beside her, his left hand absently brushing the buttons of his fly, making sure that everything was in order. She wished he would not do that…. In the first few weeks of marriage Dimple had been embarrassed by the fly when she was laundering or ironing his pants. In Calcutta, she had trained herself not to see his hand (always the left) as it stooped carefully at each button, then
slid up and down a few times before hanging limply at this side. But in New York these little gestures had begun to irritate her. She wondered if minor irritations accumulated over decades could erupt into the kind of violence she read about in the papers and talked with Jyoti Sen (Wife 88).

Dimple’s impulsive relationship with American Milt Glasser symbolises a hedonistic awakening. Milt Glasser excites her and he represents the forbidden pleasures of the New World—“he was, to her, America” (Wife 174). Like Tara Chatterjee, Dimple compares and contrasts Milt Glasser and Amit Basu. To Dimple, Milt epitomises all that Amit is not. Mukherjee captures Dimple’s fascination for Milt Glasser at the physical and psychological planes vis-à-vis Amit:

On the whole he (Milt) was hairy; he had hair all over his body, on his chest, shoulders, thighs, and even on the bulges of his calf muscles. He was very muscular, especially in the legs that came from basketball, he said. Amit was hairy on the face and not at all muscular. Amit shaved the night before going to bed, and again in the morning, “just to make sure”, he always said. And he would not wear blue bikini briefs and sit on the sofa reading the papers if he had an appointment to keep at three o’clock.... She did not think Amit would wear bikini briefs under any circumstances (Wife 197).

Interestingly, Dimple was formerly negative about human anatomy and associates shame and guilt with physicality. As an immigrant, however, she is more aware and accepting not only of her body but also of the male anatomy. With Milt she feels like a person, synthesised and whole. She finds the individuality he accords her exhilarating. She is “amazed” that during one of her outings with Milt, “the inhuman maze of New York became as safe and simple
as Ballygunge” (Wife 196). Dimple’s relationship with Milt Glasser is guilt-free. She regards her impulsive relationship with Milt Glasser as a quest for self-fulfillment. When Milt Glasser calls off the relationship, Dimple is disappointed and rationalises her sexual escapade thus: “It was only the preinfidelity stage that was difficult, she’d learned, because there were no rules for that phase. Individual initiative, that’s what it came down to and all her life had been devoted only to pleasing others, not herself” (Wife 211). As an immigrant, Dimple demonstrates considerable psychological growth and maturity with regard to the most intimate aspect of her life—sexuality.

Espin comments on the centrality of sexuality in the lives of immigrant women. She says, “For immigrant women, claiming their own sexuality becomes a necessary endeavor; it is a statement of their personhood, independent from the expectations of both their communities and society” (131-132). Thus through their revitalised sexuality, Mukherjee’s immigrant women move towards discovering their authentic selves.

K.S. Narayan Rao in a review of Wife raises a question about the price of freedom for the immigrant Indian wife: “The novel raises an important question: Was the Indian wife happier in India with her limited freedom and greater docility, or does she achieve happiness in her painful search for more individual freedom in the process of maturing?” (475). The answer, painful as it may seem, is that psychological growth and maturity come at considerable personal pain that ultimately enriches the immigrant woman. For immigrant women, empowered sexuality is central to the transformation in identity.
The Identity Crisis of the Single Immigrant

Immigrant women are marginalised. Brinda Bose in “A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race, and America Meet in Bharati Mukherjee” comments on the double marginalisation of ethnic women thus:

Ethnic women in America are twice marginalised by virtues of their ethnicity and gender. Mukherjee’s women protagonists fight two simultaneous battles against marginalisation during their early experiences in America: coming as they are from (an) Other world, their very identities are in question in America, calling for a re-visioning and redefining from the start (47).

The perception of “Otherness” is a source of conflict for Jasmine, a single immigrant. Jasmine’s predicament about her otherness is best exemplified when she haplessly wonders, “How do I explain my third eye to men who see only an inch-long pale puckered scar?” (Jas 60). The Third Eye is a Hindu metaphysical allusion. It refers to the second of the seven energy centres in the body situated between the eyebrows. A centre of energy and intuition, it is also the third eye of Shiva, a Hindu pantheon deity. Mythologically, the third eye of Shiva is associated with clarity of perception and awakening. Jasmine articulates her predicament at being perceived as “exotic” and “the other” when she meets Bud Ripplemayer who is fascinated by what he perceives as exotica in her. Having regarded Asia only as a “soy bean market” Bud’s initial fascination for the “Otherness” he perceives in Jasmine culminates with the latter living with him as his common-law wife. Jasmine’s “genuine foreignness frightens him” (Jas 26).
Unlike Mukherjee’s other protagonists, a significant feature of Jasmine’s immigration is her rejection of hyphenated identity and her quest for unity. She unequivocally rejects the astrologer’s Cassandra prophecies of widowhood and exile. Her negative reply is a pointer to Jasmine’s inherent dislike for dichotomy: “No!” I shouted. “You’re a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds” (Jas 1). Her inherent tendency to reject hyphenation is also seen in the bizarre incident in which she touches the carcass of a dead dog that ruptures into “two.” Weaving powerful visual and olfactory imagery, Mukherjee highlights its significance in shaping Jasmine’s life choices:

Suddenly my fingers scrapped the waterlogged carcass of a small dog. The body was rotten, the eyes had been eaten. The moment I touched it, the body broke in two, as though the water had been its glue. A stench leaked out of its broken body, and then both pieces quickly sank (Jas 5).

Later as an immigrant in the US, it served as a reminder of Jasmine’s quest for synthesis; her rejection of hyphenation—“what she does not want to become” (Jas 5). Thus the rejection of the two “twos” at the beginning of the novel is a significant prognosticator of Jasmine’s immigrant sensibility that seeks to move towards synthesis and harmony of opposites.

Among Mukherjee’s immigrant women, Jasmine seeks an autonomous identity as a person through exercising her free will. Yet the process creates confusion and incomprehension. As a new immigrant, Jasmine’s sense of geographical dislocation is acute as she hurtles across the Florida countryside. She confesses, “In India, I would have come across at least a village or two, but in Florida there was only the occasional country store or trailer park” (Jas 128).
Like Mukherjee’s immigrants in her earlier novels, Jasmine too confronts ambivalent sociocultural realities of her new world. For instance, she is unaware that in America children do not sleep with their parents, but have a room of their own, even when they are babies. She therefore finds it difficult to “imagine a small child sleeping alone” (Jas 172), as even as an adult she found sleeping alone for the first time unnerving, “having never spent a night alone until I got to Lillian Gordon’s” (Jas 172). Much to her relief, she looks forward to her job as an au pair for the comfort of sleeping on a narrow bed with a child. In her naïveté, she asks Wylie, “Who will I sleep with?” (Jas 172). That there is a miscommunication due to disparate social realities and values is evident in Wylie’s curt answer, “What you do in your own time is your business. But show discretion for Duff’s sake. I hope you understand” (Jas 172). Ironically, the significance of the double entendre was lost on both women!

Immigrant women are trapped between conflicting mores and values of their birth and adopted country. In Jasmine, one finds such an illustration with reference to woman’s fertility. Jasmine’s conservative attitudes were shaped in a society that placed a premium on fertility. In the rural feudal heartland of India where Jasmine grew up, the onus for inability to have a child almost always rested with the female partner. The fact that male infertility could also account for childlessness was never acknowledged. In such a milieu, attitudes towards adoption were still conservative and adoptive parents were reluctant to disclose the adoption status both to the child and to others. Thus Jasmine is disconcerted by the matter-of-fact approach of the Hayes towards adoption. This is evident in her observation, “I could not imagine a non-genetic child. A child that was not
my own, or my husband’s struck me as a monstrous idea. Adoption was as foreign to me as was widow remarriage” (Jas 170). Jasmine thus finds herself at the crossroads of conservatism and liberalism.

The presence of support structures facilitates the process of acculturation for immigrant women. Unlike Mukherjee’s other immigrants, Jasmine has a mentor in Lillian Gordon, a White American who rehabilitates disadvantaged immigrant women. Through her practical, down-to-earth approach, Lillian Gordon demonstrates the need for immigrants to ruthlessly dissociate themselves from their past to integrate with their lives in the adopted country. To Jasmine, she modelled “low tolerance for reminiscence, bitterness or nostalgia.... She was a facilitator who made possible the lives of absolute ordinariness that we ached for” (Jas 111). Her exhortation, “Let the past make you wary by all means, but do not lest it deform you,” (Jas 131) becomes a mantra that is an antidote for the displacement and dislocation that initially overwhelms Jasmine. She submits herself unconditionally to Gordon’s pragmatic refashioning of an immigrant identity.

Jasmine’s immigrant sensibility and the absence of oppressive gender roles and expectations, thanks to her single status enable her to deal skillfully with the transition. Yet the process does entail moments of confusion. Jasmine admits feeling alienated at “the speed of transformation, the fluidity of the American character and landscape. I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I’m on” (Jas 138). Like Alice in Wonderland hurtling through
the hole, Jasmine too wonders where she is headed for. As a resourceful immigrant, however, Jasmine is prepared to meet the challenge head on.

**Conclusion**

Immigration is a stressful life transition. Like any other aspect of life, immigration too is gendered. Bharati Mukherjee’s immigrant women are trapped between two worlds—the home (birth) country and the host (adopted) country. As immigrants, they experience acute dislocation and displacement at several levels—geographical, social, cultural, and psychological. The transitional dilemmas and bicultural conflicts constitute a diasporic burden that ferments a crisis of identity.

Immigration is not a voluntary or conscious choice for Mukherjee’s protagonists. The absence of choice in deciding to emigrate and their status as married women has a causal effect on the identity crisis of immigrant women. 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. 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 immigrate. Ironically even she immigrates to the US to fulfill her late husband’s immigrant dream. Mukherjee’s married immigrant women view immigration as an escape from the claustrophobia of their birth country. Without exception, they regard the husband as emancipator and redeemer. For these
women, immigration is an opportunity to unshackle themselves from the stranglehold of tradition and male power.

Marriage, whether arranged or volitional, is a traumatic transition for Mukherjee’s Indian immigrant women. Tara Banerjee and Jasmine make independent choices with regard to marriage. 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, and unilateral adjustment on their part. 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. 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 the shackles of tradition and male control and definition of their identity. But they are often mistaken.

The onus of serving as custodians of culture and tradition is a burden for Mukherjee’s immigrant women. Married immigrant women are trapped in traditional gender roles. The new demands imposed by immigration and retention of dysfunctional gender roles results in a fragmented identity that causes a crisis. As immigrants cross geographical boundaries, however, it is imminent that they restructure their identities. The following chapter explores immigration as a quest for identity and self-discovery.