Chapter Two

Crisis of Identity

(Post-colonial Theme and Expatriate Experience)

The theme of East-West encounter is one of the favourites of Kamala Markandaya and *Nectar in a Sieve* being her first published novel, is not untouched by it. The major characters Rukmani and Nathan symbolize the Eastern mindset while Dr. Kenny and the establishment of tannery are the representatives of the Western approach. Rukmani and Nathan suffer not only from natural calamities like flood and drought that result in famine, but also from rapidly growing industrialization. Both suffer at the hands of three traditional villains— the Zamindar, the Sahukar and the Brahmin.

Industrialization gobbles up their farming land to set up a tannery on their productive and food- providing field. The novel is packed with verbal fencing between Rukmani and Kenny. Kenny tries to be a bridge amid the deep chasm between East and West relation like Cyril Fielding of *A Passage to India*, but the consequences of both are nothing but failure and absolute failure.

The conflict between Rukmani and Kenny is apparent in the following statement by the latter where the former favours Indian attitude and passivity.

Times are better, times are better. Times will not be better for many
months. Meanwhile you suffer and die, you meek suffering fool. Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand—cry out for help—do something? There is nothing in this country, oh God, there is nothing!” (Nectar. 43-44)

Like many works of post-colonial fiction, Kamala Markandaya's Two Virgins, set in contemporary India, centers on the conflict between the village and the city, tradition and westernization. The other novels seek a reconciliation of the traditional and the "modern," asserting that their central character's quest for selfhood must be based on an attempt, in Edgell's words, to "graft the best of the old onto the best of the new". Markandaya's novel, by contrast, presents, on the surface at least, a forceful denunciation of the anonymity and dehumanization of urban life and, concomitant affirmation of rural, communal values. Indeed, the structure of Two Virgins embodies Markandaya's apparent preference for traditional Indian values over imported western ones. The narrative begins in the village, moves to the city, and then returns to the village at the end. At the same time, it is important to note that the novel's ending is not a simple return to the beginning, for the journey from the village to the city that the central character, Saroja, makes represents her evolution from innocence to experience. She returns to the village no longer a child but a woman. Through Saroja's experience, Markandaya implies that though westernization has ineluctably changed the fabric of Indian society, India's development must be based on a reaffirmation of its own unique identity embodied in the immutable, life-giving patterns of village
life. Underlying the pro-tradition surface theme of *Two Virgins* is a powerful feminist critique of the ways in which the Indian society moulds women's lives. Two Virgins focuses on the contrasting fates of two young girls: Lalitha, who, seduced by the city's glamour, runs away to become a film star but ends up being pregnant instead; and Saroja, who, accompanying her parents from the village to the city to confront her sister's seducer, decides that she hates all that the city represents.

As several critics have pointed out, Markandaya's story possesses the archetypal quality of a fable: and indeed at one point in the novel Saroja, the narrative's central consciousness, recalls the tale Lalitha had told her of a town mouse and a country mouse. The archetypal shape of Markandaya's novel enables her not only to elucidate her theme of tradition versus modernization but also to reveal two disparate paths for Indian woman's lives. Lalitha, the city sister, chooses individual freedom (represented by the city) over the "curbs and compulsions" of traditional village life; by contrast, Saroja, the country sister, chooses the bonds of family and community over the anonymity and superficiality of urban life. However girl's choice produces the desired result. Lalitha's personal freedom is won at the expense of "catapult[ing] herself outside the orbit of her community" and as she leaves her family for the second time at the end of the novel, "go[ing] off to face the world on her own," Lalitha's future seems at best precarious. Similarly, Saroja, returning to the familiarity and
security of the village, discovers that although "everything was the same" (p. 248), she herself had changed, and the novel ends with the hint that the village may no longer provide a sufficient scope for Saroja's developing selfhood. If the fable of the town mouse and the country mouse reveals, as Saroja reflects, that "there were snags in both life-styles" (p. 193), then Markandaya's contemporary fable of Lalitha's and Saroja's divergent fates becomes her vehicle for revealing the limitations of the paths open to women in Indian society.

Lalitha represents an extreme version of the way in which the society's emphasis on female beauty constructs the Indian woman's identity and destiny. Her fate becomes the primary vehicle for Markandaya's questioning of society's norms. Yet in her desire to break free from the bonds of convention in order to achieve self-fulfilment, Lalitha can be seen as a bold, perhaps even heroic figure.

A sense of identity always works as an impetus for an author in the realm of creative writing. And both the authoresses-Kamala Markandaya and Bharati Mukherjee- are not uninfluenced by this theme.

The question of identity becomes manifest when one feels alienated. Strictly speaking, identity is a matter of prominent consciousness. Whether one lives in one’s homeland or abroad, everyone has his own identity. No one wants to live with a suppressed identity. There are two aspects of identity— personal
and social. Though the former some way or the other comes within the ambit of the latter, its shape is different. The domain of personal identity crisis is confined only to the family while the realm of social identity crisis begins from the extreme end of family and runs up to the world level. Identity crisis of an immigrant can be categorized as social. He tries to correlate his recently fading culture with the new one into which he steps. The crisis of identity of the social kind does not surface when one is in one’s native land because he can easily survive in the midst of the acclimatised surroundings. But it is not vice-versa when someone is an immigrant. He sees about him a new world, a new culture, a new language (as far as accent is concerned), and fundamentally a new man. With all these, he has to respond as correctly and effectively as he used to do in his own country. If he is unable to do so, he suffers from identity crisis. He oscillates between two traditions, two cultures and especially two worlds. When he tries to correlate himself with one world, he loses contact with the other.

In the present era of globalization the entire world is a global village. People are taking advantage of free market policy. But globalization has given way to cross-cultural conflict, too. People of a country look upon the “other” with an eye of suspicion. Each one feels insecure in an alien country.

The British technocrats in *The Coffer Dams* are excessively arrogant and callous towards the Indian technicians and labourers. On Indian soil they indulge
themselves in “a subtle ravage struggle for domination over the mass whom Krishnan presently led, whom Clinton needed behind him.” (21) Krishnan, despite holding a dominant position due to being a leader of labour union is not given the importance he deserves. The British engineers hold him in low esteem on account of his identity as an Indian. Occasionally, he feels let down in their company. His suggestions and warnings with regard to the impact of North-East monsoon, cyclones and labour troubles are not taken seriously by Clinton and Mackendrick. Stung by the British engineers prejudice against him, he angrily utters, “Brush us off like flies, hurt and insult like splinters under his skin, despise us because they are experts and we are just beginning. But it’s over now. Our day is coming. The day when they will listen to us.” (19)

British technocrats are averse to any type of relationship with Indians other than that of master-slave relationship. They consider it better to keep themselves aloof from Indians than to mix with them on any occasion or at any place. As Jackson says, “We like keeping ourselves to ourselves.” (36) While Clinton is the most stubborn and obstinate technocrat, blind to the difficulties of even those who stand for his strength, his wife, Helen and colleague Mackendrick have some degree of resilience in their dealing with Indian labourers. Helen’s female friend Mrs. Millie, unlike Helen, represents the culture of coffee parties, club meetings and hotel dinners.” There was ruthlessness in her that matched Clinton’s.” (38) An occupant of a grand bungalow in Clinton’s
Lines, Millie is excessively insensitive to the plight of her servant Das who lives in “a tin-can structure that filled smoke and threw him out whenever he cooked his rice.” (40) Clinton’s indifference towards Helen leads her to go closer to “the fragile huts that a man and a boy could put up in a day or a determined wind can demolish in less: the primitive patches of surface root crops of community with one harvest in mind, rather than the recurrent cycle of growth, the haphazard cleaning, over-shadowed by overreaching forests. On these impermanent flyaway foundations, whole people built whole lives.” (43) Her desire to associate herself with tribals is fulfilled with the cooperation of Bashiam “the hill man whom they called junglywallah or more disparagingly, the civilized junglywallah.” (44)

Bashiam’s passion for machines like her husband’s disappoints her because she “expected people like Bashiam—a backward people—to be content with natural things like hills and woods and a water pump or two, and this expectation made any further desire on their part smack of effrontery. Perhaps they contributed, with their humble acceptances, perhaps they were easily contented; but sometimes their loves and wants extended beyond and why not, she thought: they were creatures of the nuclear age however much it had bypassed them. It was ludicrous not to acknowledge it; to delude oneself that no one among them hankered for the offerings of the age to which they belonged.” (45-46)

From Helen, Bashiam does not hide his love for machines. He proudly affirms, “Machines are to me what they are to your husband.” (46) Helen is remorseful that her husband’s project has played havoc with the peace and happiness of tribal life. She ruefully utters, “It must have been quiet before we came, before the blasting began.” (46) To Helen Bashiam unhesitatingly reveals
his plight which is common to all tribals. Having acquired expertise in the
operation of machines, he cuts himself off from the tribal huts and “the jiffy
towns, the tin and canvas camps, the contracts rigged up at breakneck pace for
the labour.”(47) His condition is not different from that of those who leave “their
families behind to answer the call of the wealthy building and contracting firms,
when the work is over, return to their roots, razing to the ground the temporary
structures they had helped to build in a jiff at boom time” (47) For several weeks
after her arrival in India Helen is kept in the dark about this harsh reality
confronting the tribals who were ousted from the place where Mackendrick
builds the grand bungalows. The fact about the tribals’ forceful displacement by
Mackendrick at the behest of Clinton hurts Helen deeply. The following dialogue
between her and Bashiam reflect her anguish against the maltreatment meted out
to the tribals including Bashiam:

“Do you know what they call you behind your back? “junglywallah”
he said at once without hesitation, Do you know what it means? A
man of the jungle. An uncivilized man. “What it really means” she
said cruelly, “is someone who doesn’t count. Someone who gets
kicked around and doesn’t do anything to stop it. There used to be a
village where the bungalows are …where our bungalow is . A tribal
village. A small settlement”. “Yes.” “When they were told to go, they
went.” “Yes”. “Without protest. Just got up and walked away, like
animals.” “I suppose you could put it like that.” “You were—you
are—a member of that tribe. It was their land. They didn’t want to
leave it, they were persuaded. Why did they allow themselves to be?
Why did you? Without even protesting?” (48-49)³
Obviously, Helen is excessively sympathetic towards the tribal labourers whereas her husband is condemnably cruel and apathetic towards them. He loves the work but hates the workers. He is aware of the poor workers’ helplessness and misses no chance in taking undue advantage of it. He comfortably says to Mackendrick, “we could sack the entire coolie labour force overnight and have a queue a mile long by morning if we wanted and they know it.” (54) He considers the workers’ loss as a gain worth consideration. That is why he tells Mackendrick, “Dock their pay and you’ll have them wrapping themselves round your feet. You know what these people are, live from hand to mouth.” (54)

The labour force engaged in the construction work consists of two wings—the low landers and the local recruits from the tribe. Clinton’s decision of imposing fine on both wings of labour force creates ruckus in the labour union and provokes the labourers to fight the suppressive measures adopted by the British technocrat. Bashiam represents the spirit of protest when he says to Helen, “We are an emotional people. The spirit has been bruised as well as stomach.” (70)

The lower echelon of Indian society presented in the novel comprises the tribal families divided between the layers of primitivism and modernity. While the old generation represented by the tribal chief is supportive of the old system of their dependence on forests for their sustenance, the young generation represented by Bashiam believes in the speedy growth and prosperity by way of
earning money through jobs in private or state-run firms. The conflict between the old and modern tribal generations intensifies after the Clinton- Mackendrick construction company attracts the young tribals by offering them salaries in lieu of their physical labour. Although the old tribal chief opposes the young tribals’ growing tendency of madly running after money instead of depending on forests for livelihood, a large number of tribals join the company at the expense of their socio-economic ethics. Aggrieved, the old tribal chief tells Helen, “They are becoming as money mad as you foreigners are.” (72) On Helen’s emphasis on the importance of money as a useful commodity he comments, “Useful you say. What for, I ask you: for that rubbish they buy from the camp shop? Tin cans and cardboard books, and scented pigs’ grease to plaster on their hair, for this they moan.” (72)

The old tribal chief apprehends that the consequences of young tribals’ hunger for money will cause them immense loss sooner or later. He is of the view that because of their materialistic approach to life “they are punished and are hurt like small children. Like fools.” (73) Excessively sad at this morbid situation, the old man prophetically opines, “But before that they will learn what is real and mourn what is lost. A score or more before they bend the river… the Great Dam will take them, the man eater will have its flesh.” (73) Clinton’s contempt for the tribesmen drives him to prevent his wife from getting close to the tribal life. Helen’s statement that the snakes are harmless enrages Clinton and
leads him to sneer at her blind faith in the words of tribals. Offended by her obsession with tribal ethos, Clinton asks her not to attach weight to the words of “a people who worshipped birds and beasts and probably snakes, decking the forest with scruffy hutches which they knocked up out of driftwood and crammed with leaves and flowers for their deities.” (76) In order that she may not go ahead with her growing proximity with tribals, he sternly instructs her to “keep away from those bloody aboriginals and behave like the other women on the station do.” (78) He also warns her that she cannot be in a good relationship with him if she continues “to hobnob quite so much with the tree men.” (79).

The leitmotif of Bharati Mukherjee’s novels is the depiction of the problem faced by a man in another country. The diverse aspects of identity proved an impetus for Mukherjee in her domain of writing. Her oeuvre consists of novels, short stories and non-fictional works that deal with immigrant experience, cross-cultural crisis, identity crisis conflict in religion, sex, race and so on.

When one leaves one’s native land for another country, more often than not, one loses one’s identity at both places, as can be noticed in C.L. Chua’s comment on one of the short stories of Bharati Mukherjee titled “The World According to Hsu”:

[ 38 ]
... Ratna shunned as a ‘white rat’ in India and scorned as ‘paki’ in Canada....

Miss Dimple Dasgupta, an upper-class Hindu woman from Ballygunje, Calcutta, had waited patiently all her adult life for the "happiness" that the culturally valued script of wifehood would bring. But when, as Mrs. Dimple Basu, she fails to attain the state of bliss that the Indian media had led her to expect from wifehood, she turns to the “west” as the source of this ideal "happiness;" with her husband's success in obtaining a permanent residency in the United States, Dimple believes she has a fair chance of experiencing this happiness that she had associated with the "west." When the "west" also fails to deliver on its promise of happiness, she becomes increasingly unhappy. Confined to her apartment in Manhattan through both her own fear of the unknown as well as through cultural proscriptions, Dimple comes to deem herself a failure in this challenging cultural encounter. Her frustration and paranoia turn her increasingly into a nervous wreck, and the story ends with a macabre murder scene in which we see her enacting a real or imaginary murder of her husband who seems to have become, in her eyes, the obstacle that stands between her and happiness.

Dimple's seemingly unconscious decision to hold her husband responsible for her unhappiness, and to make him the actual or potential target of her violent impulses, comes as a surprise. It is not that she has not betrayed a penchant for
violence before; still, except for a seemingly accidental stabbing of her husband, and the strange thrill she experiences at his vulnerability after that incident of stabbing, we do not see Dimple consciously selecting her husband as the outlet for her frustrations. At least, on the surface, Dimple finds suicide an easier proposition to entertain and a viable solution to her problems; to the end, we only see Dimple updating her list of ways to commit suicide which, by the last count, had grown to an impressive total of nine (154).

The murder, however, crystallizes the extent to which the protagonist has been adapting herself to the cultural geography of her new location. Suicide, as Mukherjee says (Hancock 44), would have been Dimple's chosen mode of signifying discontent if she had remained in her original cultural location because that option is not as alien to the definition of "good" wifehood propagated by the patriarchal caste Hindu culture (Spivak, 300). By choosing husband-murder, instead of self-obliteration, as the solution to her discontent, Dimple suggests the distance she has travelled from adherence to the caste Hindu ideals of *pati vrata* and *pati parameshwar* which raise loyalty to one's husband to the level of a religious dogma, and instruct wives to treat their husbands as gods; in fact, by murdering her husband, she has, consciously or not, denied herself the only access that caste Hindu women have to the ideal of *moksha* which Hinduism deems the ultimate aim in life for all devout Hindus: service to one's husband. The Hindu dharma - which Kakar says can be defined as "the ground plan of an
ideal life-cycle” at one level (The Inner World, 43)\(^6\) does not contain, at least in the *Brahmanical* scriptures, any form of salvation that caste Hindu women can attain apart from their husbands. Murder denies Dimple access to the ideal life-cycle of a normative caste Hindu femininity.

The permission, if not provocation, to contemplate murder as the solution to her dilemma must, therefore, come from a different cultural source which, moreover, has the power to dislodge from her subconscious the norms imbibed through her primary cultural training. Murder, or as Mukherjee says, "turning to violence outward rather than inward," then, "is part of her slow and misguided Americanization" (Hancock 44). This is not to say that the act of murder should be seen as a necessary rite of passage that anoints Dimple as an American. Her decision to select murder as a solution to her problems is a misreading of the cultural map of America. At the same time, we must not forget that she resorts to murder in America in order to signify her unhappiness because murder is openly entertained as a possible avenue of escape for unhappy women in the fantasy narratives of American culture - in television soap operas, for example. Even if murder as solution does not signify a successful cultural assimilation and, in fact, reveals Dimple to be a misguided immigrant lost in the mass-mediated cultural wilderness of America, the act of murder indicates Dimple's desire, if not her actual readiness, to become part of the new ideology of gender that informs relations between men and women in her new cultural milieu.
The last section of this chapter, will discuss how we may read resistance into this act of cultural mistranslation. But, so far, it is sufficient to point out that Dimple's (in) appropriate response not only limits the trauma of cultural dislocation, but also the reconstitution of subjectivities that transnational migration entails; Dimple's story, at best facilitates a critical reinterpretations of Mohanty's persuasive argument in favour of a pan-Third World commonality, and tilt it in favour of the significance of location which, in spite of Mohanty's best intentions, becomes subsumed in the primary aim in her essay.

It is difficult to agree with Mukherjee that Dimple discovers the possibility of happiness and unhappiness "suddenly" upon reaching the shores of America. Mukherjee's description not only suggests that an awareness of self, and the concomitant pursuit of personal happiness, are peculiarly "western" cultural attributes but, also that the absence of these in the Hindu cultural ethos indicates lack: "in the United States, she suddenly asks self-oriented questions. Am I happy? Am I unhappy? And that, to me, is progress" (emphasis added; Connell, Grearson, and Grimes 20). Certainly, the Hindu philosophical understanding of the meaning of human life differs radically from that entertained in the "western" cultural ethos, and the two philosophies place different emphases on the pursuit of personal happiness. But these differences do not unproblematically point to "progress" in the one, and its absence in the other. Hindu theology places a high value on asceticism, and the Hindu ideal of
moksha, which Kakar defines as the ultimate aim of existence for all Hindus, and can only be available to those who have renounced all desire and worldly attachment. The pursuit of personal happiness, with its emphasis on the individual self and positive recognition of desire, would, therefore, have greater cultural sanction in the "west" than in the Hindu cultural ethos.

If "desire," however, is the motivating principle of "western" cultures today, it is because the imperatives of capitalism organize social and economic relations in "western" cultural space. An ethic of individualism, self-interest, and the pursuit of personal happiness feed into that ideology, induce desire for profit and self-fulfilment, and ensure a steady supply of committed capitalists and faithful consumers. To see the "west" as an ideology free of transcendental happiness is, therefore, to buy into a very "interested" representation of the "west" as the heaven/haven of democracy, freedom, and free enterprise. Moreover, the historical fact of European colonialism no longer warrants such a juxtaposition of "America" and "India" as the presence and absence of happiness because the economic agenda of colonialism has introduced this concept of (capitalist) happiness to the colonies. "The story of capital logic, "as Gayatri Spivak says, might be "the story of the West ... (but) imperialism establishes the universality of (that) mode of production narrative ..." ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 298). Mukherjee's perception of the "west" - or America rather - as the repository of happiness leaves out of the equation the fact of "western"
hegemony in the contemporary world: the "replacement of the civilizing mission of colonialism with the developmental mission of neo-colonialism" (Gupta 192). It is the "interested" projects of colonialism and neo-colonialism that inscribe the "west" as a space of desire in the "half-caste" native's eyes. The subsequent part of this chapter, therefore, will focus on how the "west" comes to constitute happiness in Dimple's eyes, what exactly about the "west" constitutes happiness for her, and how the "west" as space of desire undergoes revision as she moves from India to America. This three-fold clarification of Dimple's position as a dissatisfied consumer in India and in the United States will lend credence to an inter-cultural reading of her husband's murder as an act of resistance on Dimple's part.

If Mukherjee's characterization of Dimple's unhappiness unmoors the issue of happiness from its worldly anchor, and endows it with metaphysical status, Dimple's announcement towards the beginning of the novel that "real happiness was to be found in the movies or in the West" (48) reveals quite clearly its worldly moorings. The somewhat odd pairing of "movies" and the "west" as the twins paces of desire in Dimple's mind, in fact, requires that we look closely at what attributes of these entities constitute happiness for Dimple. Such an inquiry reveals the long arm of a capitalism that seeks to incorporate all within its economic embrace. Dimple's discontent with what marriage has brought cannot, therefore, be separated from her dreams of what might have been
nurtured by the Bombay B-movies and magazines which disseminate the capitalist message in post-colonial space. If she sees marriage to Amit Basu as confinement within a drab and cramped apartment on Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road, it is because visions of another life continue to tease her from remembered movie scenes and the pages of magazines, and offer her imaginative getaways. In these, Dimple's "natural" milieu becomes the fashionable Park Street restaurants and five-star hotels where she joins the glamorous women of movies and magazines at the pool-side, and stands "on the edge in a scarlet sari with a gold border, behind wrap-around sunglasses, trail(ing) her toes in the water" (24). The ideal man who accompanies her in these fantasy narratives, unlike Amit Basu, her husband, is both willing and able to perform the role she assigns to him: to wear "blue bathing trunks" and "leap feet first into the pool" (24).

If movies are the "unreal" space from which Dimple has imbibed her desired version of happiness, she is certain that it is readily available in the "real" space of the "west". The "west" is the space in which, Dimple assumes, a desirable alternative to the seedy apartment of the Basus in Calcutta awaits her: "living rooms in which the guests could break upto song and dance, winding carpeted staircases, sunken swimming pools, billiard tables, roulette wheels, baby grand pianos, bars and velvet curtains" (64). Of course, an unpleasant surprise awaits her in the "west" when she finally arrives in America: "(t)his apartment (in New York) was barely the size of the Basus on Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road" (64):
and she realizes that the "west" of her imagination had been constructed according to specifications supplied by the movies: "she realized suddenly that she had expected apartments in America to resemble the sets in a Raj Kapoor movie" (64). Nevertheless, the conflation of the movies and the "west" in her mind as the embodiment of a desirable other life clearly indicates the workings of capitalist ideology in post-colonial space. Swimming pools and five-star hotels, winding staircases, roulette wheels and baby grand pianos, as the specific attributes of the desired happiness, clearly reveal the ideology of the "good" life which enslaves her and, moreover, generates her discontent with her actual environment.

Dimple's unhappiness springs from an awareness of lack; she lacks the buying power of those others, whether in the movies or in the west, whose access to the material aspects of the "good" life brings happiness and freedom. The eye that signifies discontent with her present options and life-style, therefore, is one informed by an ideology of consumerism propagated by the instruments of a nascent consumer culture and shaped by an understanding of the "west" as a space of wish-fulfilment. Love, romance, and freedom, seemingly metaphysical attributes, are inseparable in Dimple's mind from one's buying power; self-expression means the freedom to select one's own draperies (20). Thus, if Dimple expects love and romance to become miraculously manifest with marriage - attributes which are alien to the dominant Hindu definition - that expectation is
inextricable from her dreams of the "good" life: "(m)arriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love" (3). To Dimple, freedom means marrying a neuro-surgeon; to marry an engineer is to be sentenced to a lifetime of electrical engineers in cramped quarters; her life as the daughter of an electrical engineer, who lived in "a narrow pink house on Rash Behari Avenue" with engineer neighbours on either side (3), has induced in her a desire for a different kind of life. Freedom of choice means the ability to select her own occupational category in husbands; the father's eventual selection of an engineer as husband signifies her failure to increase her buying power as a wife. It is a life of greater affluence that Dimple "had set her heart on" in selecting a neuro-surgeon as her ideal partner: "an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris" (3). Marriage to Amit means failure to get a better deal from life; it means a cramped apartment in Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road instead in Chowringhee Lane, dinner at Kwality's rather than at a more fashionable restaurant on Park Street, and shopping trips to Ghariahat Market instead of New Market. The eye that disapprovingly notes the details of the Basu abode — the ripped out door bell, dark stairway, warped green door, the living room with its blue rexin sofa and five hard cushions, two office chairs and a cabinet full of clay fruits and china dolls - seems spurred on to be unusually harsh by an image of what might have been. Marriage to Amit means denial of
access to the glamor and excitement that the affluent female consumer enjoys in
the imaginary world of the media; it means, as she sees it, a lifetime of endless
waiting in a shabby apartment with a ready glass of fresh lime and water for the
husband at the end of the day (31). Amit neither has the time nor the money to
join her in her pool side flirtations; a man whose favourite hobby is to score shots
against crows with a catapult cannot feed her fantasy life (31).

Dimple is not unaware of the identity of the gauge that measures her
unhappiness: movies and magazines. It was from the magazines that her friend
had brought "in those days of waiting on Rash Behari Avenue" that she had
learnt "'Young Marrieds' were always going to decorators and selecting 'their'
colors, especially their bedroom colors. That was supposed to be the best part of
getting married: being free and expressing yourself" (20). Amit, she admits,
appears inadequate only in comparison to the male models on the magazine
advertisements (24); otherwise "he was quite handsome, not in the way movie
stars were, but in the way weal people sometimes were" (23). So it is not
surprising that the ideal man of her dreams should be a composite figure created
from those very magazines that had given her ideas of the happy life; Dimple's
discriminating eye roams the aisles of the consumer paradise on offer in the
magazines to select desirable body parts: "a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips,
eyes, and chin from a body-builder and shoulders ad, the stomach and legs from
a trousers ad" (24). Amit's attempts at injecting some element of romance into
their lives appear amateurish and unconvincing to Dimple only in comparison with this disembodied other world of movies and magazines. Still Dimple seems unaware of this glamour world's origins in the market needs of a commodity culture; even as her consumer's eye reveals to us the commodification of human life that the nascent consumerism on the rise in urban India seeks.

*Jasmine* may be read as an instance of emergent post-colonial feminism, rather than the life-story of a post-colonial woman, because one can see Jasmine's story as assuming a counter-discursive stance vis-a-vis several discourses which have, heretofore, appeared in a hegemonic relation with the post-colonial female subject. As a post-colonial novel, *Jasmine* contests a certain stereotypical profile of the "ethnicized" woman as victim - the "Hindu" woman, the "Third World" woman— a profile that has an enduring legacy in "western" feminist writings on "other" women. As a feminist novel, *Jasmine* presents itself as a challenge to the patriarchal definitions of feminine subjectivity and life-options that seek the protagonist's compliance in the two national cultural locations in which she finds herself.

In keeping with the contention that there is no paradigmatic "Third World" or post-colonial woman, this study seeks to present Jasmine's contestatory stance as framed by, and emerging from, particular discourses which impinge upon her subjectivity as a caste Hindu woman in rural India;
homogenization, after all, has too often been a means of foreclosing both alterity and agency among post-colonial female subjects in the dominant discourses that the novel contests. *Jasmine* is but one of other possible instances that depict post-colonial women as not always the stereotypically silenced victims of hegemonic narratives. Furthermore, it may be argued that Jasmine might not be seen as unequivocally advancing the counter-discursive agenda of post-colonial feminism. The journey of Jasmine's gradual evolution in terms of assertion of her right to speech charts a problematic course from the point of view of post-colonial feminist politics because Jasmine is at times guilty of self-consolidating presentations of the "other" that replicate the "colonizing" impulses of the discourses which her narrative, at another level, subverts. Thus, in italicized paragraphs set off from the main text, the force of contradictions in the novel is highlighted and no attempt is made to "explain" away their presence; these critical interruptions will signify the desire to resist an overtly enthusiastic endorsement of *Jasmine* as a representative post-colonial feminist text while recognizing its contribution to post-colonial feminist praxis as a contestatory representation of a post-colonial woman.

Jasmine speaks of the possibility of transformation. Born as Jyoti of Hasnapur in rural Punjab, Jasmine's extraordinary journey across continents, which takes her from India to the United States also results in many reconfigurations of subjectivity. Permanent settlement seems out of question for
Jasmine. When a bomb blast spells a tragic end to her first marriage, she comes to America in order to end her life on American soil. Rape in the Florida swamps, however, thwarts her "mission," and Jasmine emerges from the traumatic experience, a murderess but with her will to live, restored. Her next effort at settlement in New York with her employer, Taylor, is foiled by a ghost from her past, and she treks west to Iowa where she settles down with a fifty-year old banker, Bud, in hopes of security and safety. She is contemplating his offer of marriage when a postcard from Taylor propels her westward once more to California. The novel ends with a somewhat bemused Jasmine contemplating the possibility of other “selves” waiting to be born.

If Jasmine speaks of both the possibility and desirability of transformation, she does so in defiance of a dominant patriarchal discourse that speaks of its impossibility. The autobiographical first impression takes us back in time to an old astrologer's prediction of widowhood that had sought to map out her life for her even before it had really begun: "Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears ... to the stars and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns" (1). In the astrologer's scheme of things, Jasmine has no escape from the cosmic doom that the stars announce: "I was nothing, a speck in the solar system. Bad times were on their way. I was helpless, doomed" (1). But what the astrologer presents as cosmic fate is more specifically
a cultural fate; his understanding of widowhood as an ill-omen indicates a man steeped in the religio-cultural orthodoxies governing caste Hindu femininity in his particular sublunary location. Caste Hindu conventions regarding "good" wifehood make the well-being and longevity of the husband the concern and responsibility of the wife, and label the woman unfortunate enough to survive her husband an ill-omen; Brahmanical doctrine defines a woman's access to moksha [release from the cycle of births and deaths] exclusively in terms of her husband so that widowhood, almost by definition, spells an end to a woman's higher spiritual aspirations. Social conventions consign the "unfortunate" widow to a form of desireless existence that is, in some ways, worse than death; cultural proscriptions against remarriage among caste Hindu widows define them as the object of one husband, and cultural prescriptions regarding the conduct and life-options of the widow define the loss of even this object-status in widowhood as the worst possible predicament for all caste Hindu women.

If socio-cultural norms and practices, however, subtend the designation of widowhood as misfortune, the astrologer draws on another Hindu philosophical concept — karma— to emphasize the immutability of that designation: "fate is fate" (1). The narrative of inescapable misfortune that the astrologer weaves for Jasmine is situated within a cultural tradition of mythological heroines whose narratives supposedly emphasize the power of fate: "When Behula's bridegroom was fated to die of snakebite on their wedding night, did building a steel fortress
prevent his death? A magic snake will penetrate solid walls when necessary" (2).
The story of Behula is the old astrologer's chosen weapon to impress upon a young Jasmine, "fast and venturesome," the irrevocability of fate and the futility of individual striving: as it was, so it will be again. The prediction thus becomes a powerful assertion of cultural orthodoxy that seeks to maintain patriarchal control over women's lives; it is, moreover, a powerful argument in favor of a conservative view of society which does not acknowledge the possibility of change; stars, fates and stories are all in its service.

Jasmine's story unfolds in contradistinction to the narrative of irrevocable patriarchal fate that the astrologer had sought to script for her. If the astrologer sees her life as already mapped out, envisioning no means for Jasmine to escape the fate stamped on her forehead, the narrator's location of that prediction "lifetimes ago" (1) already hints at many lives in-between in which she has been able to gradually consign that fate to a long past. If the power of prediction lies to some extent in a willing suspension of disbelief, Jasmine's delineation of the scene of that prediction - "Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears - his satellite dish to the stars - and foretold my widowhood and exile" (emphasis added; 1) - already signals a certain disbelief in its effects. The old astrologer's prediction signifies an unshaken belief in the continuity of cultural traditions and their undiminished power to enforce submission; Jasmine's deliberately modern analogy, on the
other hand, hints at the discontinuities that characterize the post-colonial space that both she and the astrologer inhabit, and the possibilities for resisting indigenous patriarchal control that such a discontinuous socio-political and cultural heritage open up.

And Jasmine's post-colonial cultural legacy is evident in the mode of intervention she selects. Her particular socio-cultural legacy has not only given her an education and a language with which to signify her dissent, but also a narrative mode - autobiography - that speaks her refusal with power. Autobiography, as Jenny Sharpe says, "is guided by a desire to authorize the life that has been lived" (Allegories of Empire, 30) and, in Jasmine's case, it refuses the astrologer's attempt to reduce her to "nothing, a speck in the solar system" with no individuality, and no will to resist the dominant patriarchal culture's definition of her subjectivity and life-options. In her powerful assertion of subjectivity in this autobiographical narrative, therefore, Jasmine not only goes against the Hindu philosophical questioning of the desirability of "I-ness" and of individuating in order to portray herself as a self-assertive individual (Sudhir Kakar, The Inner World, 19-20), but also defies the self-effacement and passivity that the dominant patriarchal culture glorifies in its popular mythological heroines and seeks to instill in its female subjects through socialization. In the astrologer's scheme of things, fates are given, struggle is futile, and escape impossible; Jasmine's autobiographical narrative moves from a first chapter that
announces the irrevocability of fate in rural Punjab to a second chapter in which, as Mrs. Jane Ripplemeyer of rural Iowa, Jasmine has escaped to a large extent the power of that prediction to bring about her submission to a culturally-defined fate.

The astrologer might have accurately forecast her widowhood, but as the "wife" of Bud, and the soon-to-be mother of his child, Jasmine is not the unfortunate widow destined to a desireless non-life that the astrologer had foreseen. Her familiar references to monster tractors, contour plowing, and "ag-loans" in rural Iowa do not speak "exile;" her at-home tone, instead, signifies belonging, even as she deliberately claims America as her own: "The Ripplemeyer land: Bud's and mine and Du's" (4). Widowhood would have meant exile - from a normal life of desire - in Punjab; in the United States, widowhood offers her another chance at life away from the conventional patriarchal narratives of caste Hindu culture. The migratory routes of a late-capitalist world have brought her to the United States and, in that space, her widowhood is no longer a devaluing “scar” it is, instead, a star that speaks of possibility because it leaves her free, unlike Dimple in Wife, to rescript her life in a more desirable manner.

The disruption of patriarchal doom that Jasmine's opening sequence announces, therefore, not only offers a picture of the protagonist's post-colonial
socio-cultural space as a polyvalent one in which women have access to other discourses in order to express their resistance, but also foregrounds the limited reach of socially-enforced scripts. After all, what the astrologer sees in the stars becomes "real" through cultural enactment of its implications. In India, widowhood would have appeared disabling because collective cultural opinion and material necessity might have enforced Jasmine's submission to normed conduct. In America, on the other hand, she realizes that she need no longer adhere in imagination to a form of social subjection that is not enforceable through social pressure or punitive material effects. Thus, Jasmine's Punjabi friends, the Vadheras, fail in their effort to bring about Jasmine's conformity to the norms of culture that they seek to keep alive in their apartment in Flushing, New York. To them, Jasmine, as a widow, is a worthy object of their charitable impulses; but, in exchange for the food and lodging that they offer her, she must "show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude" (128).

Jasmine, however, is less than willing to adhere to the mode of conduct they prescribe: "In Flushing I felt immured. An imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future" (131). With a green card in hand, and a job, she has the financial means to reject her dependent status which enforces submission and, outside the Vadheras' apartment in the larger American society, no social expectations of widowhood hinder her movement or conduct. Jasmine, therefore, does not simply dismiss the
astrologer's prediction of doom which is enforceable through cultural practice but sees it dismissed by the post-colonial milieu in which she lives where international travel and relocation can mitigate its powers of enforcement. Jasmine cannot fully disregard the power of that prediction until the very end, but she does not fully delegate to it the power to map out her whole life. As Jasmine points out, the trajectory of her narrative shows all the marks of an on-going conflict between her "fate" and her "will" (9). And the story of Behula illustrates such a struggle. The astrologer's citation of Behula's saga as an instance of exemplary fatalism comes to a strategic stop where he wants: the irrevocability of fate. But the folk tale continues, as Jasmine perhaps knows, and emphasizes the possibility of a reversal of fate through individual striving and perseverance. Of course, in Behula's case, the gods' decision to reward her loyalty and perseverance by giving life back to her husband enables her to evade "inauspicious" widowhood; Jasmine's saga, in the very prosaic late-capitalist world of today, is a variation on that theme of individual perseverance and deistic intervention which, nonetheless, dislodges the stamp of ill-omen from the status of widowhood.

Jasmine's narrative, therefore, unfolds not only in defiance of a debilitating individual fate but a debilitating collective fate that awaits the female social subjects of her socio-cultural location on account of their gender. What the astrologer's prediction ultimately articulates is the "scar" of femaleness, a
generalized devaluation of women in a particular social milieu that makes femininity itself into an ill-omen, or into what is called "bad luck" (36). Her mother's desire to spare her this "bad luck" had almost deprived her of life even before it was really begun. Her mother's despair at the sight of yet another (a fifth) inauspicious daughter had almost stilled her voice at birth, and her ability to survive the "sniper" attack of her mother, not only proclaims her own survival but also enables Jasmine to speak out against the cultural devaluation of femininity which becomes fatal, in turn, to the female sex:

If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfil. But daughters were curses. A daughter had to be married off before she could enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generations. Gods with infinite memories visited girl children on women who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations. (34).

It is a devaluation which turns women against their own female off-spring making Jasmine's mother desire to kill her own daughter. It makes Jasmine automatically ineligible in her father's eyes for education and leads him to proclaim her desire for education a mark of insanity: "The girl is mad! I'll write in the back of the dictionary, the girl is mad!" says her father (45). Her mother must suffer patriarchal ire in its full physical force in order to ensure Jasmine that right: "The girl is mad. Her mother is mad. The whole country is mad. Kali Yuga has come" (45) declare Jasmine's father and her paternal grandmother. It is a
"bad luck" which can only be mitigated somewhat in marriage and motherhood, and even marrying the girl to a widower with three children is a better prospect than having an unmarried daughter on one's hands (41). It deprives her of the right to an independent income; in her father's eyes, wage earning work for women - "a lady working for strange men? Money changing hands?" (44) - is akin to prostitution. It makes widowhood inauspicious, and an affirmation of the "bad luck" of femaleness. It is a "bad luck" that leads women to kill themselves rather than face the taboo of social disapproval. Jasmine's friend, Vimla, flings herself on the stove after her husband's death; Jasmine's mother refuses food after she is prevented from immolating herself upon her husband's funeral pyre.

If the mother's act and Vimla's indicate a willing assumption of their own worthlessness at the demise of their husbands, Jasmine's censure of the deadly injunctions of the dominant caste Hindu patriarchy does not stop at internalized devaluations. If, in some cases, the women voluntarily offer themselves in self-sacrifice in order to mitigate or efface the "bad luck" of their femaleness, in other cases, the women are doomed by a "bad luck" that comes upon them from an unspecified outside: "All over our district, bad luck dogged dowryless wives, rebellious wives, barren wives. They fell into wells, they got run over by trains, they burned to death heating milk on kerosene stoves" (36). In this formulation of the women's "bad luck", the issue of agency is kept deliberately indeterminate. Did they jump into wells, or were they pushed in? Did they place themselves on
railway tracks, or were they placed on them? Did they burn themselves or were they burnt? Perhaps the indeterminacy of the perpetrator in this dead-pan listing of the women's "bad luck" suggests that the presence or absence of will and agency is ultimately immaterial. Whether Vimla sought to escape the fact of inauspicious widowhood in suicide, or whether the anonymous wives' "bad luck" — barrenness, insufficient dowry or rebelliousness — brought about their deaths at the hands of others, the general devaluation of femininity is clear in both instances although the question of their distinction is also raised in the process.

The novel does not, in any case, represent the rural Punjabi women of Jasmine's milieu as homogenized victims of their particular socio-economic context. The experiences of Jasmine, her mother, Vimla, and the anonymous "wives" point to the differential manifestations of patriarchal control according to the women's age, education, and position in the socio-economic hierarchy; in other words, in *Jasmine*, there is no single female subject of powerlessness. Jasmine's own narrative of resistance does not offer an image of that localized Hindu patriarchy as immutable in its control over the women's lives and their options. Jasmine's "ruby choker" at birth (34) might be the imprint of a foiled strangulation, but it also speaks of survival and thus might be seen as a first step towards escaping the patriarchal stranglehold on her life as a female. Her mother who had at first sought to enact the patriarchal death sentence upon Jasmine later becomes her ally in the effort to change the patriarchal definitions of her options:
marriage and motherhood. She fights collective joint family opinion against female education in order to reap Jasmine gain that right. The mother's cut lip and puffed-up cheeks may betray patriarchal abuse of dissenting wives but those bleeding lips utter words of victory and a seeming belief in the possibility of change. The deliberately post-colonial formulation which announces that success - "They've come round. Just make sure you ace your exams" (emphasis added; 45) - hints at the possibility of change and gradual erosion of masculine control where a patriarchal culture seeks to present itself as something immutable. And Jasmine does not confine herself to the roles of motherhood and wifehood that her father calls for; she earns her own living and even becomes a small time entrepreneur in her own right in opposition to a father who had been appalled at the very thought.

In the end, widowhood leaves her free to engage in new prescriptions of herself in another cultural space without immediate masculine control and supervision which, in Dimple's case, become an impediment to her desire for new definitions of herself. And the anonymous widow who, according to Jasmine, adds forbidden onions to her diet even in rural Hasnapur hints at the possibility of negotiated resistance against patriarchal lore regarding a widow's conduct (41). Patriarchy does not signify a seamless weave of masculine control, and the women do not remain the undifferentiated and silent victims of such a homogenized oppression.
Jasmine, who defies the patriarchal injunctions against feminine self-assertion and articulates her needs, thus, refuses the position of the "noble dog" or "martyr saint" assigned to the "Hindu" woman in the middle class British feminist discourses of an earlier era, or the illiterate, convention-bound "Third World" woman of more contemporary "western" feminist discourses. Jasmine is neither a "dumb animal" nor a "martyr saint;" her attempts at self-assertion, at one point, involve murder. Her assertion of "voice-agency" through the autobiographical narrative mode signifies her ability to speak for, and defend herself against, indigenous patriarchal practices without either native elite or "western" feminist interventions. She, in fact, kills the "dumb animal" — the mad dog — who seeks to take her life where patriarchy has failed; her encounter with the decomposing corpse of a dog in the river makes her realize "what (she doesn't) want to become" (3): yet another example of silent sacrificial femininity.

The interest of novelists inevitably undergoes a change over a period of time and in the twenty-first century, the era of globalization and relaxation in immigration laws, most of the authors tend to focus on the theme of the crisis of migration and the quest for identity in a newly stepped world, the writers’ crucial aim being the depiction of the individual’s pursuance for the self in all its varied and complex forms. The clash between the intimate and the wider world is invariably discussed in most of the novels.
Denis Wrong rightly suggests that the terms “identity” and “identity crisis” have been the “semantic beacons of our time” (Wrong 12).

Eminent psychologist and theorist Eric Erikson remarks:

... identity is a configuration arising out of ‘constitutional givens’, idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favoured capacities, significant identification, effective defences, successful sublimations and consistent roles.

(Erikson 116)

Tara Bhattacharjee, thirty-six years old divorced single mother, undoubtedly, is an epitome of a free woman. She leaves her technically-driven, fifteen-hour working, renowned and affluent husband and walks out, breaking a smoothly-going-on relationship, to subscribe a live-in relationship with a retrofitter Hungarian Buddhist Andy Karolyi. She, renouncing a well-equipped house of Bish, lives with Zen in “cracked walls, rattled windows, last defrost-by-hand refrigerator” and the home where “generations of cats had bred in the basement, rats, and squirrel in the walls, mice in the closets” (Mukherjee, Desirable 25).

Desirable Daughters commences with the wedding scene of five-year old Tara Lata, the daughter of Jai Krishna Gangooly. Prayer is being offered to the god for getting a magnanimous and magnificent husband and children who can spread the renown far and wide. But the barge of the thirteen-year groom
Satindranath Lahiri, the fifth son of Surendranath Lahiri, reveals that he is no more due to snakebite; however his father increases his demand for dowry. “Refusing to be cowed into submission, Jai Krishna took his daughter into a deep forest and married her to a tree, and thus Tara became known as Tree Bride” (Agarwal 86-87).¹⁰

The ubiquitous – quest for identity in *Desirable Daughters* operates at many levels. The novel assays to unfold the identity of Tara Lata, the Tree Bride, three sisters—Padma, Parvati, including the protagonist Tara herself and of Rabi and especially and fundamentally of Christopher Dey who is the manifestation of the love affair between Tara’s oldest sister Padma and Ronald Swarup Dey, a Christian doctor. “The real villains here are caste-ridden Bengali-Brahmin sootiness” (Ruta 12)¹¹. Tara’s incessant quest for Chris’ identity and of her own forms the cornerstone of the novel.

Tara, the narrator of the novel, asserts in the beginning “I am exploring the making of conscious” (Mukherjee, *Desirable 5*)¹². And a few pages later she articulates the intention of her expedition “I was on a mission of discovery” (Mukherjee, *Desirable 17*)¹³.

Chris, a love child, a gatecrasher, and a mysterious young man, is the core figure of the novel whose nebulous identity is the subject of quest and upheaval for the protagonist. Tara is stupefied by his ingress and is not ready to swallow the incredible consequence of the liaison between her di Padma and Ronald.
She expresses her agony in the following words:

I think what troubles me most is that I learned today the most shocking thing in my life- I still can’t believe it- but it isn’t the boy at all. It is the ignorance. It’s what I don’t know about me, and her, and....

(Mukherjee, Desirable 49)\textsuperscript{14}

Tara asks Chris, “Who are you?” With smile he answers, “That’s what I’d like to know myself.” Further he adds, “I am looking for my mother.” Chris wanted to know more of himself than he had been informed. He claims to be her long lost nephew and wants a mother, a family, aunties, and cousins. He persuades Tara that he has got her address from Parvati Mashi and she will provide him with his mother Padma’s address. But the situation becomes worse when Tara calls Parvati to ask why she has sent the audacious young man to her. Parvati with surprise confirms that she does not know any such sort of person whom Tara is talking about. She adds that the man is a felon and asks her to hand him over to the police. Chris keeps Tara on tenterhooks. Now her fright rises to a crescendo and the complexity of the mystery of the web is getting more and more intricate. And she herself has to divulge the secret identity of the so-called Chris.

Lionel Trilling defines the novel as “a perpetual quest for reality” (Trilling 205)\textsuperscript{15}. The phrase is aptly applicable to Desirable Daughters where from the initiative point to the end the heroine and narrator goes on a fishing expedition to explore the relationship of her di with Ron and the true identity of Chris.
When the newly married couple (Tara and Bish) arrives at Stanford at the student pub Tara is inflamed by the sheer brilliance of non-Indian girlfriends and wives of Asian students. Her longing is expressed as “This is the life I’ve been waiting for, I thought, the liberating promise of marriage and travel and the wider world” (Mukherjee, *Desirable* 81). But this life does not last long. After a decade of marriage Tara leaves Bish because “the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled”. It is quite ironical that “Bish’s globally operating connections threaten to dwarf Tara’s individual existence.” (Newman 151). Tara suffers not with suppressed identity but with suppressed freedom. She has everything at Bish’s home except freedom- the freedom of her own desire, thought and sort. It is an impact of the western culture and society around her that she wants to seek, being out of marriage. In comparison to an Indian woman she has much freedom. Two things manifest through the lens of East-West cultural encounter. Firstly, had she been in India, she would never have thrown down the gauntlet before the institution of marriage because as far as Indian society is concerned, it does not allow one to violate its sanctity. Another reason is– the prevailed custom and feminine attitude of living with husband and worshipping him as ‘swami’. Secondly, the openness and freedom of will of iconoclastic culture of West used to haunt her in typical traditional relationship with Bish.

Bish (his American nickname means poison in Bengali [and Hindi]).
another cross-cultural misunderstanding) is so busy expanding his Mughal-like empire that his humanity suffers. Working fifteen hours days, at home he relapses into the role of a traditionally demanding Indian husband, hectoring and threatening his dreamy, artistic son Rabi. To save her son from his father’s crushing attempt, Tara flees the gated community.  

(Ruta 12)\(^{18}\)

(Parenthesis mine)

After crossing the black waters, the name— a symbol of social identity, is dwarfed. Bishwapriya- Bishu- Bish; Rabindra- Rabi- Rob; Christopher-Chris; Andras- Andy; Ronald- Ron. But the desire to grab more and more wealth is mounted up. The name shortening of the name is not an issue for a western-minded man. Even in India such people use an apocope–omission of the last letters. R. K. Narayan in his early years signed his name as R.K. Narayanaswami but apparently at the time of the publication of *Swami and Friends* (1935) he shortened it to R. K. Narayan on the advice of Graham Greene, again a western mind; while “A Hindu Indian’s last name was designed to announce his or her forefathers’ caste and place of origin” (Mukherjee, “Beyond Multiculturalism” 30)\(^{19}\). Sometimes the curtailed name distorts the real meaning of the name, as ‘Bishwapriya’ stands for the ‘beloved of the world’ or the ‘lover of the world’ but ‘Bish’ signifies the ‘poison’. It is indeed ironical that as long as people live in India they are bottled up in social customs, rigidity of caste system, traditional attitudes and the like but as soon as they migrate, India gets bottled up in their minds!

Tara enjoys the bike ride, the wine and the food in hotels, the horse back
riding and brave smell mixed with the sweat of ‘American adventure’ and especially the hot tubs—these were missing with Bish. Sexual life between the couple was not satisfactory particularly from Tara’s point of view. Bish was not able to live up to her own expectation.

S. Rowbotham articulates the will of the feminist “...we want our love to be joyous and free— not clouded with ignorance and fear” (224) which also echoes Tara’s inherent wish.

Tara, unlike any other Indian wife, shows courage and stands up for herself and her son and takes divorce to suspend an unhappy life. Rabi shows symptoms of happiness in Andy’s company and he proves himself a better father than Bish.

Suzanne Ruta vocalised the theme of *Desirable Daughters* as ‘gates and gate-crashers’ in its review. The theme overwhelms the narrative from the very childhood of desirable daughters to their further lives. They were gated by cynical, caste-ridden and over-conventional family principles. But where there are gates there are gatecrashers, too. Padma stealthily transgresses the familial boundary and allows Ronald to unfold and explore the sexual depth of her body. Chris, too, is a gatecrasher who intrudes into the iron gated San Francisco home of Tara.

Rabi enjoys the company of Chris without his mother’s knowledge. Once Tara sees them having coffee together. She warns him that the man is dangerous
and he should not meet him without her knowing. Rabi advised her to call Padma
_Mashi_ to ask about the love-child because Chris does not seem to be a liar, crook
or a criminal. Rabi advocates in favour of Chris “You’d like to flush him down
the toilet like some piece of shit that stuck to your shoe...” (Mukherjee, _Desirable
90_)²¹.

Parvati meets Ronald Dey at a party. She asks about his bastard with her
sister. He answers that he has only one son named George who has never been
anywhere except Goa.

Tara talks over the phone to Padma about Christopher Dey. Her eloquence
and loquaciousness change into numbness and saying that her husband Harish, in
a romantic mood, has come up with a huge bouquet, she quickly puts the receiver
down. Tara’s ‘roots search’ gets a glimpse of hope in the silence of Padma. Her
‘blind vanity’ and _amour propre_ of belonging to Bhattacharjee family has been
shattered by the stillness of Padma’s speech.

Ronald’s reply to Tara’s letter, containing news from Bombay eventually
arrives. Tara gets a clear answer that Chris, an orphanage-raised boy, is his son.
But the letter that Chris showed her is not authored by him. Chris’ height—six
feet four inches—compared to filmmaker Satyajit Ray and “Chris does not speak
Bengali” are two disturbing facts revolving in her mind because the self-called
Chris is not taller than even Tara—about five feet and he speaks better Bengali
than English. Now she realizes that the monster in Chris’ clothing is an impostor.
Tara files a report in a police station. Sergeant Jack Sidhu, with a badge nicely printed ‘Ethnic Squad’, pens three long yellow legal pages containing details of desirable daughters and the authentic as well as spurious Chris. She washes her sister’s dirty linen in the police station. Both thrash out the problem. Jack assures that as soon as he gets any information he will transmit the same by a phone call.

Rabi, too, comes to know, slightly not perfectly, that Chris is incog. He is not who he says he is because he was asking his mother Tara’s social security number. “In the United States, a Social Security Number (SSN)\textsuperscript{22} is a nine-digit number issued to U.S. citizens, permanent residents, and temporary (working) residents.... Its primary purpose is to track individuals for taxation purposes. In recent years the SSN has become a \textit{de facto} national identification number...” (\textit{“Social Security Number”}).

Tara suffers dual shock– one by the letter explaining Rabi’s different sexual orientation as gay and another by Andy who ditches her and bids goodbye to lead a happy life, because of his pride and prejudice packed with jealousy and sense of possession. Andy believes that she is drifting towards Jack. Their live-in relationship is ruined as without Andy’s permission she pays a visit to the police station and also because of an information-call from Jack Sidhu.

Tara visits Padma. She shows serious concern about her younger sister’s beauty and rebukes her for her negligence because she wants a new match for
her. Her words are– “There are scads of divorced men just waiting, even for girls like you” (Mukherjee, *Desirable* 186)\(^{23}\).

Chapter XII is all about Tara’s quest for her own identity and a support like Andy that can take her out from the scattered world of gloom to the shining world of glamour. And the clue for it is flirtation. Flirtation tips from Padma– “flirt like crazy” and “don’t get stuck with anyone” (Mukherjee, *Desirable* 189) and flirt with divorced money bags and money spinner in parties – the ‘bridge parties’. Tara describes her identity crisis in the following words:

> I felt as though I were lost inside a Salman Rushdie novel, a once- firm identity smashed by hammer blows, melted down and reemerging as something wondrous, or grotesque.

(Mukherjee, *Desirable* 196)\(^{24}\)

Jack Sidhu faxes Tara two images– one of the two has been identified as Abbas Sattar Hai, the fake Chris, the murderer of real Chris and member of the Dawood gang wanted for murder, extortion, kidnapping, and arson. The imaged page also texted his records as employer of a long series of aliases, well known to assume the identity of his victims, a true chameleon, and adept in many languages including English, Urdu, Bengali, Hindi etc. Jack warns Tara that Rabi, Bish and she are ‘potential target[s]’ of Hai “Beware of him”.

Tara’s home is targeted by powerful explosives for destruction when Bish comes to drop Rabi. Bish, in spite of not being one, fulfils a husband’s duty, jeopardising himself and saves his divorced wife. He is badly burnt and is sent to
the burns and trauma centre. His symbol of movement is curtailed and the doctor says he cannot stride except a shuffling gait.

Tara, a woman without roof, takes off with Rabi leaving his bed-ravaged saviour for her Indian home and visits the fascinating house of The Tree-Bride. For Tara, Bish is a mystery and she is unable to crack it.

Bharati Mukherjee, the cognoscenti of immigration literature, has excellently conducted us on the tour of the mythical-historical theme of the Tree-Bride with the racial, ethnic and immigrant identity of the characters. As a connoisseur she has observed minutiae of the persona. And the theme of “roots search” leads us like a detective and suspense novel. Parties and their design remind us of Jane Austen’s novels. From tip to toe *Desirable Daughters* enthrals the reader as a page turner novel. Tara’s perplexed and quagmired mind, at the first encounter with Chris, compels us to cogitate of Raina. Their firmly established idea gets a lethal blow and scatters into pieces. Tara successfully pulls out the disguised cat from the bag with the assistance of the police department. And her mission of uncovering ends with the news of victimisation and execution of the real Chris and revelation of charlatan Chris’ identity as mobster Abbas Sattar Hai. But Tara’s identity is by now unquested. She has returned to India and her identity as single mother will be brutally crushed under the orthodox nailed-boot of Indian society. India cannot be a sheet anchor for such a woman who has taken divorce from her husband and jumped on to a live-
in relationship and then has been dumped. Her identity was linked to Bish even after separation; she was recognised as ‘wife of Bish’ or ‘divorced wife of Bish’.

In San Francisco Tara was living as a single mom, but as such a concept is alien to the typical Indian mindset, this role of hers is denied any recognition in the Indian scenario. When the novel ends Tara is left completely alone, bereft of any identity.
REFERENCES


3 Ibid.


13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.


24 Ibid

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