Chapter 1

Literary Criticism and Theory: A Brief Overview
This thesis assesses the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, which deal with the problems of immigrants, with special focus on identity crisis and cultural transplant. The thesis attempts to highlight the conditions of Asian immigrants in North America, with particular attention on the lives and experiences of South Asian women immigrants to the New World.

Bharati Mukherjee is a postcolonial, contemporary writer who has presented her themes of cultural conflict in different dimensions. She has depicted the problems faced by Indians and other Third World immigrants to America. This thesis explores, through detailed analysis and critical assessment, the novels of Bharati Mukherjee in order to discover the modes in which she portrays her various immigrants. The analysis has necessitated the use of contemporary literary theory. Mukherjee is primarily concerned with the problems of women immigrants. Feminist literary criticism is an approach which focuses on gender politics. It is a political movement defined in opposition to patriarchal social structures and the systematic domination of women and children by men. Feminist criticism developed from women’s movements in Europe and North America in the 1960s. The second wave of feminism, which questions the social inequalities experienced by women, takes into account the deep seated ideological structures which place women at a disadvantage in relation to men.
Patriarchy is one such structure. Patriarchy is a status, which deprives women of their own voices. In feminist social and cultural theory, there is an interlocking of politico-economic, cultural and social structures through which men dominate women. Historically, the first of the new movements to generate its own distinctive cultural theory is ‘second-wave’ feminism. Women’s resistance to patriarchal oppression is as old as patriarchy itself. Feminist intellectuals perceive women’s oppression as having cultural, rather than biological roots. They see women’s cultural production as central to ‘consciousness raising’ and hence to social change.

Bharati Mukherjee’s protagonists differ in their perceptions of their roles in society and in their expectation from life. Tara Banerjee (The Tiger’s Daughter) falls in love with an American David Cartwright and marries him against her father’s wishes and in the eyes of her clan pollutes herself by marrying a man from another race. The Indian society to which she belongs is a patriarchal society and it hardly ever allows women to take decisions and talk of liberation and equality. Here, male members decide the fate of their female counterparts. Dimple (Wife) starts breaking down after the realization that she has been deceived in marriage and Amit will not cater to her dream world, and she murders him in a misguided act of liberation. Mukherjee’s next novel Jasmine is the celebration of the strength of womanhood. Search for self-recognition makes the protagonist rebel against
blind belief and superstition. The image of Goddess Kali i.e. the Goddess of strength brings out the protagonist’s feminist traits. Jasmine has embarked on a perilous journey to the New World, ’greedy with wants and reckless from hope.’ This is the final affirmation of an optimist—a true feminist. The feminist movement gives way to feminist literature and feminist criticism. Showalter claims ‘the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories.’ Showalter’s generation of critics, including Jonathan Culler and Card Gilligan include aspects of history, linguistics, psychology etc. in their readings.

Hannah Easton (The Holder of The World) and Debby Dee (Leave It to Me) both brought up by strict conservative foster parents, migrate from one continent to another to seek happiness. The three Bhattacharjee sisters (Desirable Daughters) were trained to be desirable daughters, yet they defy the dictates of patriarchy.

Psycho-analysis has been helpful in the study of immigrant psychology, especially aberrative behavior patterns visible in Dimple’s neurosis, Debby’s murderous inclinations and Tara’s adjustment problems. Since the 1920s, a very widespread form of psychological literary criticism has come to be psychoanalytic criticism, which was established by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)
Freud had developed the dynamic form of psychology that he called psychoanalysis, as a means of analysis and therapy for neurosis. Freud, Jones, and Bonaparte were the first psychoanalysts. Their interest in literature was to reveal an individual author's psychology and validate psychoanalytic concepts.

Julia Kristeva, the psychoanalyst-feminist, explains the separation of the child from the mother. Chodorow contends that 'girls identify with their mothers and that their ego boundaries are flexible and less defensive than boys.'

Cultural Criticism has helped to clarify the effects of cultural conflicts and, at the same time, reproduced culture itself. There is so much cultural mixing in the post colonial era that it has given birth to hybrid culture or multiculturalism which is the extension and institutionalization of cultural diversity through such avenues as the legal system, the education system, government policy towards health and housing and respect for culture-specific, linguistic, communal and religious practices and customs.

Mukherjee, in her novels, depicts immigrant experiences and cultural conflicts. Fredric Jameson comments:

The post modern is [...] the forcefield in which very different kinds of cultural impulses what Raymond Williams has usefully termed “residual” and “emergent” forms of cultural production must make their way. If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back in a
view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces, whose affectivity is undecidable.\(^3\)

Structuralist criticism designates the practice of critics who analyse literature on the explicit model of structuralist linguistics. Structuralist premises and procedures, however, continue to manifest themselves in a number of current enterprises and especially in the semiotic analysis of cultural phenomenon, in stylistics and in the investigation of the formal structures that, in their combinations and variations, constitute the plots in novels.

The present work focuses on thematic analysis with special attention on identity crisis and cultural transplant. This thesis seeks to study the phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants and the feeling of alienation, experienced by the immigrant with special reference to Mukherjee’s women characters. Asserting her immigrant status she quotes:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries [...] when we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country.\(^4\)

The act of migration no doubt entails identity crises as well as cultural clashes. The second wave feminism acknowledges Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) as a major source of intellectual
inspiration. She defines woman as ‘a free and autonomous being like all human creatures [...] finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other’. Mukherjee’s women experience ‘Otherness’ not only because they are women but also because they are immigrants. They travel through a gamut of emotions, ranging from naive beliefs in dreams and promises to extreme frustration and anger. Shift to America from Canada helped Mukherjee to overcome the crisis of identity and brought her a sense of elation. Mukherjee’s background and her early experiences had a great bearing on her writing and outlook of life. Mukherjee said:

While changing citizenship is easy, swapping culture is not, I want to write about others, who for economic, social, political or psychological reasons have had to uproot themselves from a life that was predictable to one where you make up your own rules.

Bharati Mukherjee was born on 27 July 1940 in Calcutta, India, to an upper-middle class, Hindu Brahmin family. She was the second of three daughters of Sudhir Lal, and Bina Banerjee. Both husband and wife provided ample, educational opportunities to their daughters. Mukherjee’s mother was determined that her daughters’ lives would not be confined to home and family. She was the driving force behind the success of her daughters. At the age of fifteen, Mukherjee finished her High School and went on to a Calcutta University affiliated Women’s College run by Irish nuns.
After getting her B.A. degree from the University of Calcutta in 1959 and her M.A. in English and Ancient Indian culture from the University of Baroda in 1961, she came to Iowa, United States, to participate in a Writer’s Workshop on P.E.O. (International Peace Scholarship). She planned to study there to earn her M.F.A. degree, then return to India to marry a Bengali Brahmin as per her father’s wish. Hindu tradition forbade intercaste, interlanguage interethnic marriages. Bengali tradition even discouraged emigration. To remove oneself from Bengal was to dilute true culture. But here she was drawn to a Canadian writer Clark Blaise. After a fortnight’s courtship, the couple married impulsively in a Lawyer’s office above a coffee shop. She soon realized that the bond was permanent. Mukherjee says that ‘the big things in my life happen fast’. After receiving her Ph.D. in 1968, Mukherjee moved to Canada with her husband, where she became a naturalized citizen in 1972. The fourteen years in Canada were some of the hardest of her life. The country was hostile to immigrants while it propagated the concept of cultural assimilation. In 1966, she joined Mc Gill University. Beginning her career as a lecturer, Mukherjee moved up very swiftly to become a professor in 1978. In those challenging years in Canada, she was able to produce her first two novels The Tiger’s Daughter (1972) and Wife (1975). Mukherjee felt the need to claim her identity in a powerful way, turning aside prejudice to which she was subjected.
These tensions emerge in these two novels. She also registered her sentiments in her first collection of short stories. *Darkness* (1985) reflects her mood of cultural transplant. Mukherjee was unhappy with her life in Canada. She encountered many difficulties as a writer. She felt that there was a strong bias against Canadian citizens of Indian origin. In 1980, Mukherjee left Canada, and migrated to United States with her family as a permanent U.S. resident, and started work at the University of California, Berkeley, California.

Mukherjee felt great relief in America and merged much more easily with the life and people around. She felt that America had a more positive attitude towards Indian immigrants as compared to Canada. Canada is a country that resists cultural fusion. Mukherjee states ‘Canada refuses to renovate its national self-image to include its changing complexion. It is a new World Country with old world concepts of a fixed, exclusivist national identity’.7

She had diverse experiences throughout life. She lived through several phases of life, including a life of exile in Canada and finally as an immigrant to U.S. ‘I am an American writer, in the American mainstream trying to extend it [...] not an Indian writer, not an exile not an expatriate but an immigrant whose investment is in the American reality, not the Indian’.8
Bharati Mukherjee’s voice has increasingly gained special attention in contemporary modern English literature. A close examination of Mukherjee’s background and her life reveals a series of displacements. She moved from place to place, nation to nation.

She has produced fiction not only about uprooted individuals, the anguish of expatriation, and the inevitable frustrations felt by immigrants trying to cope with loneliness and an often hostile culture, but also about the excitement of immigration, the sense of rebirth and the expectations of a better that are part of the immigrant experience.  

Mukherjee is the author of seven novels and two collections of short stories, including *The Middleman and Other Stories*, for which she won the National Book Critics Circle Award. She has also co-authored two non-fiction works with her husband Clark Blaise. In 1973 Mukherjee and her husband went to India for a year. *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977) details their different responses to the country. As an immigrant herself, Mukherjee had seen and experienced life closely and intensely. This led to a colouring of her vision of life and her novels are the projection of her quest for identity in a world full of loneliness and despair. Mukherjee had a strong desire to express the shifting tensions and complexities of an immigrant in an alien land. In her fiction, her women characters are seen struggling to obtain a footing in a New World and redefining for the values, the beliefs, and quests for an identity in a world that is rapidly changing. Alienation, identity crisis, cultural
clashes are some of the themes that characterize contemporary fiction. Mukherjee's novels frequently use the quest mode. Her characters, variously, quest for identity, quest for peace, quest for roots, and quest for meaning.

Mukherjee's novels represent three stages in her career. The first phase represents her attempts to find her identity in her Indian heritage. During this phase *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Days and Nights in Calcutta* were published. Expatriation is actually a complex state of mind and emotion, which includes a strong yearning for the past, pain of exile and homelessness, the conflict between the old-self and the new in an unfamiliar surroundings which Mukherjee herself experienced as an expatriate in Canada. The fiction written in Canada reflects her experience of expatriation. The expatriate dwells on her/his 'ex' status of the past, while the immigrant celebrates her/his present in the new country. In *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*, both Tara and Dimple, share the expatriate characteristic of being maladjusted both in the native culture and in the alien one. In the above mentioned novels, Mukherjee writes about put her experience of Canada and finds a voice of her own in the experiences of Tara and Dimple. Mukherjee does not believe in multiculturalism. According to John K. Hoppe 'Multiculturalism emphasizes the difference between racial heritages. This emphasis on the difference has, too often, led to the dehumanization of the different. And dehumanization
leads to discrimination. And discrimination can ultimately lead to genocide'. Mukherjee is not interested in the preservation of culture, and she does not stop with the celebration of longings for the past, rather all her characters are pioneers who undergo personal changes to adjust to new surroundings.

The second stage originates in Mukherjee’s own experience of racism in Canada. Apart from *Wife*, a number of short stories were published in this period. She exposes the outrage heaped on immigrants in Canada. Characters in this stage are shown as innocent victims of racial discrimination. She concentrates on the nature of individual experience when two culturally divergent characters confront each other and attempt to establish themselves. The third phase saw the publication of *Jasmine, The Holder of the World, Leave It to Me* and *Desirable Daughters*. The characters now are adventurers and explorers, rather than refugees and outcasts. She portrays them as survivors and as inhabitants of a new changing America. Beginning with an expatriate’s uprooted identity in the early 70’s; her creative writing explores the transitional dilemma of characters in early 80’s. In *Jasmine* (1989), Mukherjee tries to reach a solution of the complicated layers of cross-cultural reality through a series of adventures, which the protagonist undertakes during her journey. Her struggle symbolizes the restless quest of a rootless person. Mukherjee explores other process of branching of cultural
transplant in *The Holder of the World* (1993). It is a tale about dislocation and transformation that arises when two cultures come in contact with each other viz. the Puritan 17th and early 18th Century American world trying to come to terms with the Mughal view of Indian life. The title *The Holder of the World*, the literal translation of Alamgir, is the title for the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb. This is a story of two white women, Hannah who lived in the seventeenth century and Beigh, who lives in the present one. Beigh Masters becomes obsessed with retracing the former’s transformation from a Puritan girl brought up at Salem in Massachusetts to the ‘Bibi’ of a Hindu Raja. *In Leave It to Me* (1997), Mukherjee reverts to her earlier themes and enlarges upon them. She creates Debby Dee, a complex, multiracial orphan raised in the off-beat California. Debby comes to India in search of her roots. She is confused, hurt, and angry. She passes through various phases of life before she can be at peace with herself. Mukherjee calls Debby ‘the difficult sister of Jasmine’. *Desirable Daughters* (2002) is both the portrait of a traditional Brahmin Indian family and a contemporary story of an Indian-American woman who, in many ways, broken off with tradition but ultimately discovers that strong ties remain.

Mukherjee says that ‘the immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformations in America and at the same time they alter the country’s appearance and psychological make-up’.11
Through her writing, Mukherjee presents an America that is an idea, not political, social or moral, rather a stage for transformation. In an interview she states that:

What America offers me is romanticism and hope I am coming out of a continent of cynicism and irony, a traditional society, you are what you are according to the family you were born into [...] and I find myself in a country where merit counts theoretically at least.^{12}

America is centered around a constitution that promises democracy, promises equal rights. Mukherjee asserts that ‘I am an American, not an Asian-American. My rejection of hyphenation has been called race treachery, but it is really a demand that America delivers the promises of its dream to all its citizens equally.’^{13}

Culture is too baffling a term to be defined precisely. Many intellectuals have tried to define culture. The word culture come from the Latin root ‘Colere’ which mean to inhabit, to cultivate, or to honor. In general it refers to human activity. UNESCO defines culture as the ‘set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group’. Culture encompasses in addition to art and literature, life styles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

Culture is the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviour and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning.
Cultural studies emerged as one of the most significant global movements during the last quarter of the twentieth century especially in immigrant literature. Immigrant worries whether they are sufficiently cultured as individuals to get on in life. They worry about the possibility and desirability of living in a multicultural society. Raymond Williams, the Welsh cultural theorist in his book, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, drew attention to four important kinds of meaning that attach to the word 'an individual habit of mind; the state of intellectual development of a whole society; the arts and the whole way of life of a group of people'.

Andrew Milner and Jeff Browitt offer their working definition of culture as, 'referring to that entire range of institutions, artifacts and practices that make up our symbolic universe. In one or another of its meanings, the terms will thus embrace; art and religion, science and sport, education and leisure.'

Culture means caste, race, religion, region, flora and fauna, clothes, food, language, customs, attitudes and beliefs. Culture is related to religious and educational variation. Transplant means removal from taking from one place to another place. The job of the transplanted is to imitate the native. Mukherjee’s women who migrate cannot accurately imitate the original. As a consequence they suffer from culture-shock. The term culture-shock describes the anxiety produced when a person moves to a completely new
environment. This term expresses the lack of direction, feeling of not knowing what to do or how to do things in a new environment. We can also define culture-shock as the physical and emotional discomfort one suffers when coming to live in a place different from the place of origin. Mukherjee has repeatedly asserted in her interviews and essays that America has always been a country of immigrants, which means that any one central dominant culture does not exist. America is the melting pot of cultures. But in *Jasmine* she has moved to ‘fusion’ rather than melting pot, signifying that everyone changes slightly while retaining original self. Melting pot assumes the loss of the old self and the creation of a new self.

Bharati Mukherjee has moved to fusion from the melting pot theory. She refers to this phenomenon in explicit terms:

> It was not right to describe the American experience as one of the melting pot but a more appropriate word would be “fusion” because immigrants in America did not melt into or were forged into something like their white counterpart but immigration was a two way process and both the whites and immigrants were growing into a third thing by this interchange and experience.\(^{16}\)

Diversity of cultures and complications provide little scope for total assimilation. In cases where cultural dissimilarities are sharper in terms of ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious determinants, the issue gets complex for the immigrant to cope with. The process of migration to America started in the mid nineteenth century, has reached a high level in terms of immigrant
population. These days immigrants are economic refugees, leaving their country willingly for the satisfaction of some personal ambition. For the immigrant the new culture, which develops in an alien land, is completely different from the parent culture. The migration of multiple races, classes and cultures to America has totally changed the face of America. Those immigrants, who choose to stay and finally settle down, experience cultural transformation.

Identity is the collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitively recognizable or known. It considers different social facts such as gender, race, class, age, parentage, nationality, marital status, profession, religion and sexuality that mutually constitute an individual’s social locations. An individual’s experiences influence the formation of one’s cultural identity. Identity crisis means the crisis that comes when one’s adjustment with any of the above mentioned things is disturbed. Bharati Mukherjee’s work deals with identity crises of women who move to United States.

Identities both condition and are conditioned by the kinds of interpretations people give to the experiences they have. As Mohanty says, ‘Identities are ways of making sense of our experience, they are theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways’.
A leading theme throughout Mukherjee’s novels is the clash of cultures and how it affects identity. Mukherjee states:

Culture clashes and coalescences have always been very important in understanding who we are as peoples and as individuals. Imperial literature, post colonial literature, “first contact” literature in North America just to name a few sub-genres have spoken the importance of addressing the process of specific cultural encounters.18

This thesis aims at an in-depth study of various facets of identity crises of immigrant, Indians especially women. The first investigation is of the problems faced by women within Indian culture in India. Indian women confront numerous anxieties regarding marriage and adjustment to in-laws. Dimple Dasgupta and Jyoti are depicted passing through this phase. Mukherjee brilliantly and sensitively perceives and defines the personal yet universally recurrent reactions and hopes of both these girls. Tara Banerjee is totally confused and lost, and remains suspended between worlds.

Another aspect concerns Indian women’s adjustments to western culture. Dimple and Jasmine, both face the problems of loss of culture and both of them struggle to assume a new identity in the U.S. Both pass through torturous physical mental and emotional agony, which leads to violence. Dimple is an Indian immigrant’s wife in North America. The novel tracks the violence building up inside and all around her in the North America until she
is driven to murder her husband. Dimple suffered crisis of identity caused by entry into a new culture. Dimple has come to America ready to be transformed and to seek an identity. She represents Indian wives in America while Jasmine exemplifies all immigrant women who have taken their destiny in their hands. Jasmine leaves for America on forged papers knowing not what the future holds in store for her. She is more fluid and adjusting than Dimple. She responds promptly to American culture and assimilates.

Jasmine starts her life in the U.S with a murder while Dimple rounds up her stay there with the murder of Amit. Dimple had an uncaring husband, so she butchered him. Jasmine had a faithful and loving husband who was mercilessly butchered by the terrorists. To avenge his death Jasmine discarded the old identity and took on a number of new identities. Dimple is an escapist, who lived in her private world of fantasy, on the other hand Jasmine, rejects despair and cynicism and believes that she can move ahead to make a life for herself. Unlike Dimple she has a surviving spirit, she survives all alone in an alien country.

This thesis also explores the identity crisis of white-skinned women who migrate to India. Hannah Easton (The Holder of The World) is an immigrant from America who came to India in the 17th century. She is a white Puritan woman from Salem who makes a journey to the Coromandel Shores in the late 17th Century and
finally becomes the mistress of the Indian ruler Raja Jadav Singh of Devgad. This study discusses the transformations that results from the meeting of different cultures. This study emphasizes the multiple planes of Hannah’s identity who has a Christian, a Hindu and a Muslim self. Hannah’s life succeeds in questioning and discovering new ways of defining identity. For the adventurous, freedom-loving, Hannah, India is an ideal place. She is able to lead a life of sensuality and emotions in India. She does not feel remorse at the loss of her old life. Like Jasmine, she finds contentment in the new land.

White-skinned women, in interaction with Indianness, feature in the sub-plot of *The Holder of the World*. It tells the story of Beigh Masters, the novel’s narrator. She has a lover, a brilliant South Indian computer scientist, named Venn Iyer. The narrator deliberately, selects to associate with a man from another race and crosses racial boundaries and attempts to eradicate them.

The problems of Indian women returning home and then encountering a rearranged Indian situation are identified in the individual, as well as comparative study of Tara Banerjee and Tara Bhattacharjee. Tara Bhattacharjee is the youngest of three daughters of a traditional Bengali family of Calcutta, who struggles to reconcile her assimilated life in San Francisco to the traditional culture of her family and community. She finds the duplicity of the
conservative Indian society very upsetting. Tara Banerjee, too, is shocked to discover that Calcutta has become as dangerous and as alien as America appeared to her in the beginning. She finds that she does not fit into Calcutta life, which she had left seven years ago and for which she yearned desperately at Poughkeepsie.

Maternal wisdom falls short in most of the cases. Jasmine is raised in a family that does not feel affection for her. Her mother tries to strangle her at birth because she already has four daughters. Dimple does not open her heart to her mother. There is a lack of communication between mother and daughter. Hannah Easton follows the example of her mother. Her mother had deserted her daughter by running away with an Indian lover. Hannah, too, comes to India to become the mistress of a Hindu Raja. In Debby’s case, the drugged mother did not even know she had given birth to a baby.

The return of maternal wisdom is rediscovered in *Desirable Daughters*. Tara Bhattacharjee solves all her problem of identity crisis by identifying herself with the legend of Tara Lata. Her visit to her motherland represents final moments of liberation.

All these aspects combine to define the modern Indian woman. The attempt of this thesis is to define how Mukherjee’s novels present an intensive as well as an extensive study of the Indian woman who has found her place in not only the global
situation but also in global literature. The immigrant situation, too, has been discussed from the point of view of both men’s as well as women’s experiences. The value of Mukherjee’s novels lies in their sensitive portrayals of situations that form the crucial points of New World experiences.

Notes and References


