CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

The literary journey of four decades has enabled Bharati Mukherjee (1940 - ) to have a permanent place in the various anthologies of Asian American literature, Canadian multicultural literature, Indian Women writers in English, Post-colonial literature, writers of the Indian Diaspora and in mainstream American writing. South – Asian writers openly engage with issues of ethnicity, location and racism. Literary artists envisioned different types of negotiations in terms of their personal identities, histories and geographies, but she might be considered “the quintessential immigrant turned citizen who now embraces being an “American citizen” with a troubling and insistent fierceness.”¹

During her stay in Canada between sixties to eighties, she had been treated as an outsider as well as an “expatriate” identity and state of mind. She herself states : “The Society itself … routinely made crippling assumptions about me, and about my ‘kind’.² She calls Canada as a racist Canada and finally decided to settle in the United States. Here she feels more culturally integrated. She describes this situation as a ‘movement’ from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration. Bharati Mukherjee’s adoption of an immigrant as opposed to an expatriate identity has been profoundly strength-
giving for her writing. She relates her personal identity to that of her identity as a writer: she sees herself as an American writer in the tradition of other American writers. She has made emotional, social and political commitments to the country she has adopted. She began her career as a novelist to write as an American on American and immigrant themes. She finds America among the least snobbish of societies of Europe while other expatriates and immigrants to Western Europe complain that the societies of England or France are stratified, closed and impregnable from the outside.

The works of Bharati Mukherjee focus on different aspects of her oeuvre, her stance on multiculturalism, her idea about expatriation and immigration and Bengaliness. Mukherjee’s writing often displays remarkable vigour as well as exaggerated ferocity. She presents a timely example of how far the Indian woman’s periphery may be extended beyond the home and she is adept at turning this into rich metaphoric material. She characterizes her writing about migrants not as oppositional to mainstream America but as representing the voice of ‘the new America’ and thus enunciates a neo-nationalism. Her discourse of nationalism is articulated from two sites: in her fiction she constructs stories about the entry into American culture of immigrants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, for the most part Indian. In addition, she constructs a personal mythology of immigration and ‘assimilation’ in numerous
autobiographical and quasi–autobiographical writings. She critiques the way multiculturalism, as an index of democratic spirit and of equality of all citizens, is being practiced in the national space of America. A more extensive account of Mukherjee’s language of migration, its development across her oeuvre and the ways in which it both supports and undermines her literary and cultural project at different times. This linguistic shift illustrates identity formation, from her initial endorsement, and later renunciation, of “expatriate” life to her more recent and qualified acceptance of ‘immigrant’ status. In her complex commitment to her central subject of immigration, Mukherjee nonetheless continues to use language in new and exciting ways, and her insistence on endlessly varying and reworking her themes of expatriation, immigration and a host of other sub-categories and in-between states has ultimately enriched both contemporary American letters and literature of the South Asian diaspora.

II

Various categories of travelers have led to the diasporic clusters – exiles, refugees, emigrants, indentured labour, adventurers, traders and business people at different times in world’s history. The diaspora was always a reality in some form or the other, the boundaries of a nation have never been able to contain the minds, imaginations, needs and compulsions of its people. However, today the diaspora scene has become far more complex than ever
before with globalization on the one hand and the politics of power on the other, vying with each other. The writing by our immigrant writers that has emerged abroad, fluctuating as it does between two cultures, compels us to ask certain questions related to the aesthetics of their writing, their position vis-à-vis homelands, distant or imaginary, our reading and critiquing of them and the binary oppositions they still adhere to. Do we consider them our representatives abroad, with their framing of literary values, our histories and our pasts? The questions of authenticity and difference crop up as literary values in our relationship to it. A great deal of critical theory, especially among the diaspora, today emanates from issues of pedagogy, survival, identity or relocation. The creative writer, through his/her interpretation, selection and framing of cultural histories, pasts, myths and realities is also making a theoretical statement which is embedded in the writing itself.

The term neurosis has become a part of our everyday vocabulary. To say, “He is neurotic”, can be anything from a complaint about someone whose behaviour is consistently annoying, to a term of sympathy for someone who is frequently distressed and is somehow unable to work or relate effectively. The concept of neurosis as a type of emotional disturbance was popularized by Freud. He viewed nemesis as a pattern of behavioural and psychological disturbance produced by conflict within the personality structure. From this
perspective, neurosis is a relatively specific disorder. Consequently, neurotic individuals experience acute distress, and engage in a variety of behaviours designed to avoid or reduce the distress. These behaviours of avoidance frequently interfere with everyday functioning. Thus, the neurotic might be unable to relate well to others.

At this time Freud’s thoughts became more and more sociologically oriented. Freud had highly qualified belief in the essential good nature of human beings. He held that people group together primarily to satisfy their needs which is not possible in isolation and common hatred can write them in love. This view cannot be easily dismissed because there is no concrete scientific evidence to prove that human beings are either good or bad by nature. Men are, therefore, perpetually on the lookout for pleasure and long for the absence of misery. The purpose of life is decided by the “programme of the pleasure principle.” But all the ‘regulations of the universe’ embodied by civilization “run counter to it.” Man has to grapple with at least three important sources of suffering – from his own body, from the external world and from human relationships. The last of these is artificial and avoidable but the most painful at the same time. As a natural reaction to this, man may seek refuge in voluntary isolation, sublimate his instincts or create an alternate delusional world where the ugly and unpleasant features of reality find place.
Indo-Anglian women novelists have favourably responded to the changed psychological realities of Indian life after independence and give an authentic treatment to this situation. An interesting pre-occupation of these writers appears to be delving into the labyrinthine depths of the Indian psyche and showing its relation to society. This concern is more obvious in the novels that present neurotic characters. In their novels, the characters are shown as grappling on the one hand with the changed realities of Indian life and the trauma they entail and on the other, with the psychic conflicts of personal origin. These conflicts and traumas become too pronounced at a particular point of time in their life and their ability to hold their feelings under repression gives ways. Anita Desai’s *Cry, The Peacock* and *Where shall We Go this Summer?*, Kamala Markandaya’s *A Silence of Desire*, Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s *Get Ready for Battle*, Nayantara Sahgal’s *The Day in Shadow*, Nergis Dalal’s *The Inner Door* and Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*, portray sensitive individuals in their moments of intense struggle and in their efforts to seek neurotic solutions to their problems. In the course of the ordeal the protagonists of these novels find themselves at odds with society and undergo various degrees of psychological transformation. Both as a physical reality outside and a psychic agent within, society which we take to mean the essence of one’s relationships with others plays a very important role.
The study of these novelists, especially for the study of neurotic characters, highlights another important theme that has been frequently harped upon. This is the cultural conflict resulting from a character’s exposure to a different culture. Again, the extent of cultural shock depends on the individual’s susceptibility and the psychic conflicts he carries in his unconsciousness.

Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* is often chosen to demonstrate what devastation a hostile culture can cause in a sensitive individual. A study of the novel shows Dimple in an entirely new light. The already existing neurotic picture in her is precipitated and aggravated by her American life. Her husband does not suffer from any of those conflicts because his psyche is structured entirely differently. What then ultimately interests us is not so much the cultural conflict but the psychological suffering of the individual to which the cultural conflicts often contribute.

Mukherjee’s novel *Wife* stands out as a unique fictional work by virtue of its insightful probing into its heroine’s psyche. The novel is the simple annals of Amit and his wife Dimple, newly married Bengali immigrants to the U.S.A. The Protagonist’s ill-concealed compulsions are soon precipitated by the violence ridden and individualistic American life and culminate in her killing of her husband. Her psychic development can be viewed as her desperate efforts to ‘forget’ her Indian roots are necessitated by the demands of American life and
her assertion of independence from her overbearing husband. Hence it can be argued that the protagonist suffers from the neurotic compulsion of indulging in abnormal acts in order to conceal her own sense of intrinsic weakness and failure.

Thus *Wife* can be viewed as a modern novel as it presents an intense inner world of neurotic and solipsistic individual. Instead of the combination the freedom of the individual and tolerance for fellow beings, the novelist chooses to glorify the alienated individual. Rootlessness and unreal existence are the main concerns of this expatriate novelist who has set out to make a deliberate distortion of Indian womanhood.

Mukherjee’s characters, especially women, are tantalized by the possibility of passion, which they mistake for love and self-expression. America which appears to be a free land, a veritable dreamland, is the enigma of existence for all Indian girls. The protagonist is an extremely immature girl who constantly dreams of marriage as she hopes that it would bring freedom and love. She is not clear about the concepts of freedom and love. The ambiguity underlying her mental makeup defines the incompleteness of her very being. After a painful waiting which makes her desperate and suicidal, Dimple Das Gupta, the plaint, docile, obedient and submissive daughter of a middle class Bengali family married Amit Basu, an ambitions engineer, chosen by her
parents, about to migrate to the U.S. “She thought of premarital life as dress rehearsal for actual living”(3). So she was married to a worthy groom by Indian standards, her chances of happiness ought to be very high.

But soon after her marriage, she feels cheated as her romantic, adolescent mind cannot grasp the reality that freedom too has certain limitations. Her husband, Amit Kumar Basu, is an average middle class, unimaginative, young engineer who dreams of making a fortune in America and on retiring to live a comfortable rich life in Calcutta. She begins to resent her new home, her in-laws and even her husband who does not seem to be capable of feeding her fantasy. Amit fails to meet out the requirements of her imaginative world. The prospect of becoming a mother enrages her. She treats it as an outrage on her body and induces an abortion, disposing of that ‘tyrannical and vile’ thing deposited in her body. Dimple has lived so long in a fantasy world that she is emotionally incapable of understanding another human being, as she cannot understand Amit. Her vision of Sita’s docility, sacrifice and responsibility is a flag with many messages, she wants to break through the traditional taboos of a wife rather she aspires for freedom and love in marriage. This aim brings her indignation, grief, resentment, peevishness, spite and sterile anger. Hence she becomes an escapist, lost in her world of fantasy. She feels as if she is instinctively drawn towards some disastrous end:
“It was as if some force was impelling her towards disaster; some monster had overtaken her body, a creature with serpentine curls and heaving bosom that would erupt indiscreetly through one of Dimple’s Orifices, leaving her, Dimple Basu, splattered like a bug on the living room wall and rug.” (Wife156)

Life with Amit, both in India and America, is naturally a big disappointment to her. Marriage has not “provided all the glittery things she had imagined, and brought her cocktails under canopied skies” (Wife 101). Like any traditionally brought up Indian husband, Amit does not know how to pay a compliment to his wife. He appears to be almost a personification of Ego in the Freudian sense. On the other hand, Dimple has to cope up with her traumatic mental condition all alone:

“She had expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place.” (Wife 109)

In Wife Bharati Mukherjee had portrayed the enigma of existence, the hollowness of the Indian institutionalized marriage. Bharati Mukherjee had seen the stereotypical pattern of conventional Indian marriage. Being the writer of modern time, she has depicted in her fiction the problems faced by Indian
and other third – World immigrants who attempt to assimilate into North American lifestyles. Mukherjee focuses upon sensitive protagonists who lack a stable sense of personal and cultural identity and are victimized by racism, sexism and other forms of social oppression. In the novel, the protagonist is trapped between two cultures, and aspires to a third, imagined world. Living in her social vacuum, Dimple is not unlike hundreds of American men and women who believe and are betrayed by the promise of fulfillment offered by the media, and who choose the solution suggested by a violent environment. Violence is her fundamental experience of New York and thus despair sets in her life. She thinks “her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an intense desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne” (117). It becomes a diabolical map, a torment without hope of either release or relief. The murder of Amit is an assertion of her American identity. The novel expresses the enigma of existence, the psychic breakdown of an Indian wife in America. She is neither of India nor of America but a stunned wanderer between these two worlds, yet is trying to attain a distinct identity. She is yet to release her ‘self’ from the hallucinatory world; she is yet to get out of her schizophrenic self. A waylaid traveler, she is yet to reach her destination and carve out a miche for herself.
There are some writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee and others who married English gentlemen and lived in U.K. and U.S.A. It is evident that these writers are the product of two cultures; they sometimes feel an inner strife between their cognition and perception. An association between social configurations and the inherited ‘sanskars’ make one’s culture strong. The Hindu or Indian culture “exercises an influence on individual thought and behavior that is somewhat comparable to the working of the reality and pleasure principles. Instinctual and reality demands, it seems, have their counterpart in cultural imperatives. Denial of these imperatives can create tension and create tension and diseases in the individual.” Thus the difference between the Eastern and the Western cultures is that in the Eastern (Hinduism) guilt is related to man’s ignorance for comprehending his own nature while in the Western culture it is related to the sinfulness of sexual love. However, the text of this thesis deals with the theoretic norms of diasporic sensibility as the issues of isolation, alienation, dislocation, exilement.

Mukhejree’s *Jasmine* deals with the enigmatic and traumatic complexities of human behavior. The thought and speech related to the inner analysis of the characters become symbolic and suggestive of the dialectics of culture and the process of acculturation. There is nothing intrinsic about the semantic values, as “the semantic values are dictated by the reactions of
language users to the socio-linguistic environment.” The novel is based on the metaphor of collective memories (semantic and episodic), it becomes symbolic of the duality of cultures – the East and the West. Jyoti, the protagonist, experiments life for human feeling, intuition, sensation and the dilemma of an expatriate who voluntarily leaves India and comes to America. Mukherjee herself marries an American, Clark Blais and undergoes the experience of diaspora.

Mukherjee’s possessed emotion becomes symbolic of human behaviour through the medium of poetic imagination, for the creation of Jasmine, the novel and protagonist immediately witness the poetic qualities of the novelist so far as the range of imagination and the objectivisation of human emotions are concerned; it solves the question of otherness and assimilation through the logicentric dialectics of culture. The contemporary literary writing includes mainly two aspects in its contents; politics and culture. Politics symbolizes the centre of power while the culture includes the social sharing of ideas among various communities, races and religions. The woman too shares her contribution to the processed identity of a nation, so far as the narration of a nation in a literary genre is concerned:

“This relation between the nation and the novel is more acute in the case of women’s writings. For a long period of time the state, the language,
his patriarchal elite culture posed as if she was not there – not as human being. Thus, women were always either attractive, sensuous play things or hussies and mothers. In fact, on the socio-political scene she was a show piece to be held high, a flesh piece to be violated to bring disgrace to the clan or group or nation she belongs to. Thus, a woman is always treated as an object and not as an individual.”

Simple village girl, Jyoti, renamed as jasmine in Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine, reveals socio-psychological traumas, relating to the life of an exile or expatriate. In India her marriage with Prakash Vijh absorbs her light and changes her into a modern girl, Jasmine. She thinks of accompanying her husband to America, but as luck would have it, a Sikh terrorist, Sukkhi, murders him. With the cognitive mode of exploitation in a feudal society at Hasnapur, Jyoti as jasmine exemplifies the will of a woman who fights in order to exist, first in India and then in society of America. In Indian feudal society she points out the exploitation of women when she says, “daughters were curses” (Jasmine 39) at Hasnapur. It is the semiotic relationship which presents the seminal analysis of jyoti of Hasnapur in times to come:

“Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine and jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash Vijh and Wife”. (Jasmine 97)
Hasnapur as a cognitive metaphor of collective memories has been repeated several times in the text of *Jasmine* and it becomes suggestive of ethnocentric mode of a community. The astrologer foretells about Jasmine’s “widowhood and exile” and she realizes the mythic reality of trinetra (third eye) of Lord Shiva:

“it’s not a seer”, I shouted, “it’s my third eye.” In the stories that our mother recited, the holiest sages developed an extra eye right in the middle of their foreheads. Through that eye they pierced out into invisible worlds. “Now I’m a sage.” (Jasmine 5)

With a specific cognitive mode as semantic memories, she begins her journey towards America for materializing the dream of her husband-Vijh and wife. On the way, she was raped first in the boat and then in a hotel. The metaphor of third eye reminds her the power of a woman (nari Shakti). She prays before the idol of Ganapati and transforms herself as Mother Kali and kills her rapist:

“No one to call to, no one to disturb us. Just me and the man who had raped me, the man I had murdered. The room looked like a slaughter house … what a monstrous thing, what an infinitesimal thing, is the taking of a human
life; for the second time in three months. I was in a room with a slain man, my body bloodied. I was walking death. Death incarnate”. (Jasmine 119)

With the emotion of bhaya (fear) the poetic elements with its sthayin (permanent emotion), of bibhatsa rasa is discernible in this textual citation. The dominant emotion of fear also decides the structural mode or prabandha vakrata to be developed in the text of the novel. In her translocation, a missionary lady, Lillian Gordon helps Jasmine and sends her to New York. Here she finds the job of Day’s Mummy in the house of Mr. Taylor. Gradually, she begins to love her master Taylor. Finally, she moves to Iowa where she comes in touch with Mr. Bud, an agriculturist, she begins to love Bud and gets pregnant by him. Mr. Bus promises to marry her soon. At the same time, her former lover Taylor comes to Iowa. The past union as the beloved of Taylor overpowers her emotionally and she leaves the company of a father like husband, Mr. Bud, for the sake of Taylor’s love. She now stops to think herself as Jane – a name given to her by Bud.

Her imaginative insight makes her adjust amicably in alien land. Through her imagination, she brings the social and cultural chart of Hasnapur and reports to the readers thus:
“The men in our village weren’t saints. We had our incidents. Rape, ruin, shame. The women’s strategy was to stick together. Strugglers, beware” (Jasmine 55.) Here one sees the colonial and the feudal otherness of women in their own country. Jyoti, the traditional girl of Hasnapur of Punjab, finds the crumbling of her tradition in an alien culture:

“I know, and of course, the papers nowadays are full of caste-no-bar-divorcees-welcome matrimonial ads, but it seems to me that once you let one tradition go all the other traditions crumble.” (Jasmine75)

Thus Jasmine experiences the pangs emanating from the association of two cultures: the feudal and the modern unshared environment. She brings forth the modernization of the Hindu culture by comparing the statements of her uncle and her husband:

“For the uncle, love was control. Respect was obedience. For Prakash, love was letting go. Independence, self reliance: I learned the litany by heart. But I felt suspended between worlds.” (Jasmine76)

There comes a strife in her due to the native sensibility. However, the pragmatic vision of Prakash is so writ large as the code of her inner psyche that she breaks the traditional bonds of society of Hasnapur of realizing the dreams
of Vijh & Wife. She undergoes the metamorphosis of many names such as Jyoti, jasmine, kali, Jassy, Jase, Juhane and Jane. Thus she becomes aware of the dialectics of history, culture and the cyclic movement of time. Hence she decodes the oblique and the complicated code of history and culture. She narrates the dialectics of history and culture through the words of a terrorist, Sukkhi. Sukkhi calls “all Hindu women whores, all Hindu men rapists.”

Hasnapur as the unconscious is linked with the process of culture and with the seminal analysis of the protagonist. The clash between her culture and nature as a woman produces the concept of cross-culturalism. The gross memories of Hasnapur become her national identity which comes in clash with European culture. In spite of some social and psychological differences of nationalism, the association of the two creates the third one the composite culture of the East and the West.

It is through her cognized mode of India that Jasmine works out the theory of Karma and Kal (Time). For the theory of Karma, she brings forth the unconscious mode of her thinking. She swings without any certainty between real and human time which make her disillusioned between reality and maya (illusion of time). As a fighter and adapter, and even after so many transformations of herself into different names, she still enquires, “who I am” (Jasmine197). She quotes the words of Karim who says about her: “I am
tornado ... How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, and how many more husbands” (Jasmine, 215). Here she expresses the inner pangs of an exile and expatriate who lives in America. At the instance of an Indian woman, she submits her person to the unseen and unrealized bounds of time:

“Then there is nothing I can do. Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into cloud.” (Jasmine 241)

Thus, journey of Jasmine comes to bhava parivartan (spiritual change) after material dialectics. Since the journey of Jasmine is meant for socio-psycho-historical dialectics of human thoughts, it reveals an analysis of dissociation and association of human sensibilities. She leaves a message of human exploitation, post-colonial reaction and post-structural view-points. The linguistic epithets used in the text such as “tornado”, “rubble maker” created the situational and contextual referents which make Jasmine a helpless being in society.

The predicament of the fate of the females in cross-cultural spaces has been a major component of the literature produced by writers, surviving in the conflicting pulls of “home” and “homelessness”, passing through the voyage of migration to assimilation. Bharati Mukherjee with her consciousness of the dilemma of cultural crisis shares the anguish and suffering of “Womanhood” in
the order of patriarchy. Most of the protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee, besides preserving their essential ‘femininity’, endeavour to protect their womanhood and individuality in the cultural surroundings, chosen out of personal choices or thrusted out of professional compulsions. Hence the complexity of female identities in the writers of Indian diaspora reflects distinctive dimensions yielding only a greater isolation, insecurity, sexual exploitation, violence and the triumph of male Chauvinism.

The real feminism consists in the experience of being a ‘woman’. Bharati Mukherjee’s fictional world is an account of women experiences in different cultural spaces, seeking a common conclusion that the realization of being a woman and the unconditional surrender of a woman to the tributes of femininity are the integral parts of feminine psyche. She exposes women’s silence, resistance, oppression against the order of patriarchy, horror of rape, the phobia of pregnancy, craving for male companionship, as the experiences common both to native heritage and the cultural surroundings of the country of their migration. In an interview, Mukherjee states:

“The kinds of women I write about … are those who are adaptable we’ve, all be raised to please, been trained to be adaptable as wives and that adaptability is working to women’s advantage when we came over as immigrant.”

10
In Jasmine’s case, the murder of Half Face was a mode of revenge no doubt, but it was also a method of justice though it may be wild. As Morgan writes:

“Rape after all is an omnipresent terror to all women of any class, race or caste. Baltry is the nightmare of the emotional and physical pain no matter who is the victim.”11

In Bharati Mukherjee’s fictional world, the flux of identities and cultural diversities make no discrimination in the experiences specific to feminine sensibility. As Sushila Singh observes:

“Bharati Mukherjee’s women characters offer a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization and control mechanism expose her underlying passive violence.”12

Most of the female protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee adopt the process of assimilation as the only possible remedy to break the shackles of conventionalism and to obliterate the past. For them freedom and immigration become synonymous. Another critic, Fakrur Alam points out: “Mukherjee is making a kind of feminist statement in her novel; women can make a difference in their lives even if they cannot cheat fate completely.”13
The novels of Bharati Mukherjee, whose writings are largely hued by her personal experience as a woman caught-in-between, which itself has been described as a text in a kind of perennial immigration. In her first novel, *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1971),¹⁴ she uses the trope of the immigrant’s return to India in the hope of recovering her roots and the stability of her cultural identity as an Indian. She discovers she is more an outsider than a native, having an objective concern with the complex and confusing web of politics, privilege and the hierarchies of power and class in India. In this novel, Tara’s quest for self proves frustrating slowly leading her to disillusion, depression and alienation ending in a tragedy. The greatest irony of the story of Tara is that she survived the racial hardships in a foreign country but becomes a victim in her native soil. Tara’s psyche is always tragic as a result of the tension created in the mind between the two socio-cultural environments, between the feeling of rootlessness and nostalgia. She feels both trapped and abandoned at the same time. Neither can she take refuge in her old Indian self nor in her newly to totally condemn any one world. This point is highlighted by Brinda Bose:

“Duality and conflict are not merely a feature of immigrant life in America; Mukherjee’s women are brought up in a culture that presents such ambiguities from childhood. The breaking of identities and the discarding of languages actually begin early, their lives being shaped by the confluence of
the rich cultural and religious tradition on the one hand, and the ‘new learning’ imposed by British colonialism in India on the other. These different influences involve them in tortured process of self recognition and self assimilation right from the start; the confusion is doubled upon coming to America.”

Mukherjee in her mission to make the familiar exotic: the exotic familiar, she wants the American reading public to accept her as an American writer, in the American mainstream trying to extend it. She has been aware of achieving her goals, she redefines the nature of American and what makes an American. She makes them believe that their destinies were never that distinct from the new immigrants in their midst as to remind their historical linkage to South Asia. Her own study of the Mughal miniature paintings of India has also taught her and in return she could take from Indian culture for use in the country she has made her own and intends to transform through her work in the form of the typical Indian myth, which depends on “shape-changing, miracles, godly perspectives”. Her The Holder of the World\textsuperscript{16} (1993) does seem to embody all the goals she had set for herself, a novel deliberately written to extend the mainstream of American writing. It is obviously designed to redefine for her readers the meaning of America and what it meant to be an American and structured to emphasize the links between North America and South Asia. The
novel has two plots, the main and the subsidiary. The subsidiary plot tells the story of Beigh Masters, the novel’s narrator. Beigh is a very modern, very sophisticated, 32 year-old woman, making a living as an “asset hunter”, which is something of an euphemism for a job that involves ferreting out antiques and treasures for rich collectors interested in the most elusive, and therefore the most precious, objects. Beigh has a lover, a brilliant computer scientist named Venn Iyer, whose family came to the United States from South India and settled in the Boston area. Beigh is intrigued by his project and near the end of her narrative actually does the time travelling for him. But Beigh’s job is to track down for a client a diamond called the Emperor’s Tear, reputedly the most perfect diamond in the world, and she travels from Boston to India and back again in search of the priceless object supposed to have been lost while in the possession of Emperor Aurangzeb.

The main plot of The Holder of the World, however, has to do with the strange and surprising adventures of Hannah Easton, a New Englander who was born in Brookfield, Massachusetts, to Edward and Rebecca Easton in 1670. Edward Easton died of a bee sting a year later, and Hannah’s chief memory of Rebecca Easton is of the moment when she arranged for Hannah to be left with a neighbor so that Rebecca could fly away to her Nipmuc Indian lover.
Though the episode keeps stimulating Hannah to go beyond the strict parameters of the Puritan family but under pressure readily agrees in 1692 to marry the dashing Irish adventurer Gabriel Legge, mainly because he appears to be the type who could take her into the unknown. And so after a couple of years in England, she is brought to the south eastern India as the wife of the East India Company man Gabriel. Eventually, Gabriel always irresponsible and basically the type who’ll not be domesticated, turns pirate and leaves Hannah to fend for herself in India. Hannah ends up with an Indian lover, a Hindu raja named Jadav Singh, but he is embroiled in a struggle with the mighty Mughal emperor. The novel is thus to be interpreted as a quest narrative written to point to American readers of this age how lives have been intertwined and can be intertwined across space and time if we are willing to let go the superficial divides that separate us and if we are willing to make an emotional investment in connecting with each other. Certainly it reminds us of the interconnections among cultures that have made our modern world, and advocates a ‘vigorous’ as well as ‘bitter fusion’ of peoples.

Another Major theme of The Holder of the World is that of sexual awakening through an “other” lover. This theme, too, develops ideas Mukherjee has previously used in her fiction. We remember, for example, her narratives of wives leading unfulfilled lives, on the verge but not quite able to find fulfillment
through an affair with a man from another race—works such as *Wife* and *Jasmine*. Although Beigh has experienced the ache of sterile relationship and is relishing happiness with Venn, the theme of sexual awakening through an “other” is conveyed chiefly through Hannah Easton’s life—that is, the main thematic focus of *The Holder of the World* is in the romance of Hannah’s relationship with an Indian raja. Gabriel Legge had at first courted Hester Manning, but when she dies mysteriously, he marries Hannah. Marriage to Gabriel, however, fails to fulfill her: even the romance of the East proves to be as distant from her life as a housebound wife in England as it was in Salem, who makes no mention of sexual passion.

Just as the New England Puritans had separated themselves from the American Indians, the English in India seemed to have fenced off from the natives of India. Unlike them, Hannah keeps looking for opportunities to transform herself in contact with Indians. Gabriel neglects her as she seems frustrated in her quest for self-fulfillment. It is a love at first sight for her and sex in the first close encounter she experiences in the palace and in the process she comes “to understand the aggressive satiety of total fulfillment.” (*The Holder of the World* 237) So in the final confrontation between the two armies’ takes place and the raja is killed in battle. The emperor lets Hannah go back to the English zone. She heads back for Salem, giving birth to Pearl on a ship
somewhere in the Atlantic. With her mother and her daughter, she manages to eke out an existence in the margins of the Puritan Community. Not daunted by the taunts of the people of the colony, she is content to keep alive in her memory her great romance and to nurse its fruit, Pearl. In fact, she seems to even revel in the independence she has achieved in the process of waking up to true love. It is this sense of self-worth that will enable her and her daughter to lead the chant for the freedom of the colonies from the English yoke later in her life. Thus Bharati Mukherjee is asking her readers to place The Holder of the World in the tradition of American romance inaugurated by Hawthorne and is emphasizing the historical dimension of her novel. As Claire Messud has noted in her shrewd review of the novel; “this is an alternative history which could revise forever the imaginative relations between immigrants and natives in Mukherjee’s America.” But it is “alternative history” not chiefly in the sense that Mukherjee is distorting history but in the way she is developing clues left in history that allow her to blow up the links between America and India over the centuries. According to Mukherjee, what she saw in the seventeenth century miniature painting in a 1989 pre-auction viewing in New York, a blonde Caucasian woman “in ornate Mughal court dress holding a lotus bloom”, was the original stimulus for the novel. Certainly by writing this novel, Mukherjee is
quite literally trying to extend the tradition of American prose narrative so that it can accommodate her work.

Thus the novel shows a hunger for connectedness. It is an impressive work that reaffirms her Indianness while asserting her Americanization. This works brings Mukherjee in extending Forster’s tradition. In Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction the quest for the definition of self and search for identity become the main features of her women who are seen caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. Neither can they completely detach themselves from their past nor do they have any certainty in the future.

In all her fiction Mukherjee advocates many faces of feminism encompassing agitation for equal opportunity, sexual autonomy, and right of self determination. Her fiction convinces us that gender is a multifaceted category, subject to change and variation. They reinforce particular forms of female marginality that must be examined in relation to the conditions of women’s lives as immigrants, minorities, wealthy, poor, black and white, sex workers, maids, or academies. Her depiction of women and their different relationships portrays the dominance of patriarchal practices in traditional societies, as well as the forms of liberation and empowerment which are available to women in their diasporic situation.
Mukherjee’s female characters are real, modern, life-like. They are typical representatives of young women particularly of the Third World countries who cherish the dream of emigrating to America for higher prospects and later on settle there permanently. Their situations and the difficulties they face are also realistically portrayed. In her novel, *Leave It to Me* (1997), Mukherjee’s shift from an immigrant diasporic writer to a multicultural one becomes complete. In this novel, the protagonist Debby Dee is a Eurasian orphan who is adopted by an upstate New York family of Italian origin. Born in India and raised as an adopted child, she travels through America to find her bio-mom. The novelist correlates the protagonist’s predicament with the reality of time-travel and reverts to her earlier obsession with an exile’s agony.

*Leave It to Me* is perhaps the most American of Mukherjee’s novels. Apart from the American English style in which it is written, it expresses her ideas on another dimension of the immigrant experience. She has made important contributions to the multiethnic literary field of the United States.

The themes of notable identity and dislocation are very important in this novel as they are of the same importance in *Jasmine* as well as *The Holder of the World*. The themes are the making of new Americans and the consequent two-way transformation of America. Debby in *Leave It to Me* comes to discover about the self being protean by the end of her adventures, but she starts her
journey from a very different place that the writer did. As an orphan, Debby has to find out not only who exactly her biological parents were, and what part, if any, have contributed to her personality. In terms of race, being part white, part Pakistani, Part Vietnamese, she feels at first that she can’t claim any ethnic group as her own the way that her Italian-American sister can. The whole world has gone into the making of Debby. She has to learn to look on that as miraculously freeing. Her intelligence and maturity are beyond her age. She understands that there is a huge difference between vengeance and justice.

The narrative progresses in a picturesque fashion, bringing together a variety of characters who help the protagonist in various ways to search her ‘bio-mom’. She came across the man of her life and felt wanton. Devi realized that “... happiness is the consolation prize.” (Leave It to Me 156) She repeats the theme used in the novel Jasmine where we find the individual’s dilemma in the American multiethnic society. But here the context is new. The Vietnamese war had made people very cruel. Devi also feels there is a world of difference between justice and vengeance and she sees with clarity that what she is seeking for, is justice. The novel similarly is violent as the prologue and it leaves Devi disturbed and confused in the end.

The novels Jasmine, The Holder of the World and Leave It to Me show the cultural plurality of the adopted land. The protagonists’ struggle symbolizes the
restless quest of a rootless person suffering from a depressing sense of isolation. At every step they revolt against their fate and the path drawn for them. Her characters like Jasmine in *Jasmine*, Rebecea, Hannah and Bhagmati in *The Holder of the World*, and Debby in *Leave It to Me* recurrently defy estrangement in the society they live in and get the answer by rejecting cultural stereotypes. They develop life of their own outside the home and the more they learn about themselves, the more individualistic they become. They are self-possessed, intelligent and desirable, irrespective of their time and place. These novels tell the reader that social and cultural change is a recurrent process and women have a very important role to steer the action.

Mukherjee attempts to see her characters through a different angle instead of satirizing them. She shows Vengeance in them to find a solution for their search of identity. In *Leave It to Me*, Debby Dee is an Indian girl raised by an Italian family. She is a young sociopath who seeks revenge or parents who abandoned her. The novel also looks at conflict between eastern and western worlds and at the mother-daughter relationship through the political and emotional ways by the main character in her quest for revenge. She undergoes tremendous conflict when she wants to find out her own identity. The novelist uses Indian myth of Devi to play in the struggle between good and evil. Myths embody archetypes, which is why they speak, to all of us no matter what our
ethnicity. Greek myth places humans at the centre of the story whereas Indian myth places destiny at the center. In the post-colonial diasporic context, violence is the other face of power. Her protagonists adopt violence to fight against the evil they face and move further courageously. Jasmine kills Half Face who rapes her, Hannah Kills Morad Farah when he attacks Jadav Singh, Devi burns the house given by Francis A. Fong and kills the friends of Jess Du Pree to create fear in her. Thus the themes of notable identity and dislocation become important.

Mukherjee’s novel Desirable Daughters (2002) ranges widely across time and space, with a murder plot which links India, the Indian community in America, and the narrator, Tara Chatterjee (from Calcutta), living in San Francisco with her lover, a Hungarian refugee, ex-Hells Angel, and now “Zen Master of the Retrofit’, proofing Californian homes against the threat of earthquake. As Tara comments in The Tree Bride (2004), “I saw my life on a broad spectrum, with Calcutta not at the centre, but just another station on the dial.” (The Tree Bride, p. 20). Tara’s ex-husband Bish made a fortune in Computer bandwidth routing technology with his Stanford friend Chet Yee. Bish’s globally operating connections threaten to dwarf Tara’s individual existence.
In *Desirable Daughters*, the desirable daughters, Didi, Parvati and Tara, are part of an apparently doomed social group, teasingly described in Darwinian mythology, as “homo bengalensis, subspecies Hindu Calcutta, subbreed Ballygunge” (245) a middle class, conservative, Calcutta – bred clan, “already extinct in our native habitat” (245). The plot turns upon a case of attempted identity theft when Tara finds a stranger, “Chris Dey”, claiming to be her nephew. “Chris Dey” addresses Tara in terms which emphasize sisterly kinship. He calls her “Taramashi” (34); - referring to a lateral branch of the family. Unknown to her sisters, Didi had given birth to a son. As the illegitimate offspring of a Bengali Brahmin’s eldest daughter, Chris Dey’s existence goes unrecognized. His descent is utterly denied. Before he can claim his heritage, his place is usurped by an interloper who kills him and steals his name, and attempts to take his place in the family. By the time Tara establishes the existence of the illegitimate child, the real son is already at the bottom of the sea. The claims of descent are false. The point of the novel is not to re-establish contact with a denied male line, but to focus on a sibship.

Thus the novel begins with the story of the Tree Bride. The opposition between the narrow traditional path and the broad, pathless present is embodied into the contrast between the opening scene of the novel and its broadband present. The novel opens on to a path disappearing into darkness
and fog. To a modern reader the action – the arranged marriage of a five-year-old girl – is likely to evoke unease. Everything suggests the horrors of past “darkness” and absence of consent. Such enlightenment as there is, European and modern, the globalization that we really want to prize ... that we can take from each other’s heritages what we need and sew it together into our heritage, have been the chief cause of modern conception of tragedy in diasporic novels.

Tara Lata is not about to be transferred to a human bridegroom to continue an ancestral line. She is headed deep into the forest to marry a tree. Her family tree is just that a large hardwood. The groom has died of snakebite in the dark, and Tara Lata has been transformed into an unmarriageable girl, who brings ill fortune. For a solution, her father turns to Hindu custom in marrying her to occupy the respected position of married woman, within the family home. This apparent return to tradition is also a revolt against modernity. Tara Lata becomes famous for acts of rebellion and she becomes a freedom fighter and martyr. The three sisters occupy different places on the family stage. Didi, the eldest, earns her living as a traditional Indian performance artist. Parvati shares her family space and lives in a world of compromise. As the third child, Tara Lata repeatedly finds herself displaced. The novel thus replaces on Oedipal narrative in which the yoke of parents, colonial history or
tradition, has to be thrown off, in favour of a sibling story, less vertical and more horizontal.
REFERENCES


