CHAPTER IV

THE LATER PHASE

JASMINE
by Bharati Mukherjee
(1989)

The Holder of the World
by Bharati Mukherjee
(1993)

Leave It To Me
by Bharati Mukherjee
(1997)

Desirable Daughters
by Bharati Mukherjee
(2002)
CHAPTER-IV

THE LATER PHASE

Both, the first and second generation of women writers of Asian Diaspora, have taken up various themes like that of language, identity, nostalgia, loyalty, socio-cultural adaptability and have produced “a constantly evolving and often self-questioning body of literature.”

Among the first writers of Indian Diaspora, Bharati Mukherjee, an American writer of Indian origin, is known as the Queen of Indian Diaspora, as capturing and depicting almost every kind of feeling experienced by Indian immigrants in the U.S.A. in her novels that has been her forte. Fakrul Alam has truly said that her novels have been mainly on the “phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates.” In addition, the sense of assimilation and belonging in the host land is fully dealt with, though mostly in her later novels.

Nevertheless, the one theme that underlines her novels is the question of finding and asserting their identity; a constant search mainly by the protagonists, for the answer to the question “who am I?”; “Do I have a personality of my own?” or “Do I have just to be what others want me to be or what I imagine myself to become?” Moreover, we witness a conflict, internal and external, in this process of defining, discovering and affirming their self-identity, once they have realized where do actually they stand for? Although the degrees may vary, the protagonists of each of Mukherjee’s novels who are all women, exhibit eventually an assertion: a direct or indirect statement of their being self-styled, self-motivated and independent thinking individuals, geared up for facing all
the consequences of that assertion, and never giving up. This quest for assertive identity has been a continuous process, evolving with each novel Bharati Mukherjee has come up with.

Bharati Mukherjee has always adopted a unique perspective on the immigrant experiences where she focuses on the positive aspects of immigration. Mukherjee’s later novels—Jasmine (1989), The Holder of the World (1993), Leave It to Me (1997) and Desirable Daughters (2002)—comprise her later creative phase conveniently termed here as the Phase of Immigration. By now she has traveled a long distance in terms of thematic perception and character portrayal. Beginning with an expatriate’s uprooted identity in the early 70s, her creative faculty explored the transitional dilemma of characters in early 80s, whose acculturation bids were occasionally thwarted by the complexity of cultural plurality in the adopted land. However, after the publication of The Middleman (1988), the process of cultural acclimatization appears to be complete and the characters betray the confidence of an immigrant, almost a naturalized citizen, in facing the challenges of human life.

Jasmine (1989) is a revealing story of adventures of Jasmine, the heroine of novel, who begins her odyssey of journey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa like a flying bird in search of nest as a rootless traveller. Her search for identity looms loneliness, depression, despair, displacement, identity and existence and her perpetual “widowhood and exile” continues till she emerges as a survivor, a fighter and adapter. Her cultural context to diasporic world is full of crisis of identity and finally her reconciliation to her choice.

In Jasmine (1989), Mukherjee tries to unravel the complicated layers of cross-cultural reality through a series of adventures which the
heroine undertakes during her odyssey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. Her struggle symbolizes the restless quest of a rootless person expressed by a depressing sense of isolation all around. The story opens with the village astrologer under his banyan tree foretelling Jasmine’s “widowhood and exile”. It all turns out just as nastily as he says it will, but at the same time, Jasmine is a survivor, a fighter and adapter. Her journey through life leads Jasmine through many transformations—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane via divergent geographical locales like Punjab, Florida, New York, Iowa and finally California. Jasmine is a born rebel. At every step, Jasmine revolts against her fate and the path drawn for her. The past is Jyoti’s childhood in the small village of Hasnapur, Punjab, her marriage to Prakash Vijh and the consequences leading to her departure to America. The present in her life as Jane in Baden, Iowa where she is a live-in-companion to Bud Ripplemeyer, a small town banker.

Jasmine’s transformation from Jyoti to Jane had its own scars and stresses. Jyoti is born in a feudal village of Punjab, eighteen years after the partition riots. The fifth daughter and seventh of nine children of her parents, she is a dowryless, undesirable female child, a curse for them. However, she is bold and intelligent, the first ever likely student of Masterji fit for English education. She is a non-conformist, a rebel who questions the prophecies of the astrologer about her “widowhood and exile” in the harshest terms- “You’re a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds!”

This irritates the fortune-teller and he chucks hard on her head and she falls on the ground getting a star-shaped scar on her forehead. This scar is seen as a curse to her but she treats it as her “third eye” and feels like becoming “a sage” (p. 5). She does not believe in the prevalent
conviction that “Village girls are like cattle’ whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go” (p. 46). To exhibit the force of her belief, she refuses to marry the widower selected by her grandmother and eventually ends up marrying Prakash Vijh in a Court of Law.

The cursed and hopeless village girl in Jyoti becomes Jasmine, a city woman, wife of a modern man Prakash who wishes her “to call him by his first name” (p. 77). This christening means much to her:

He gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said: “You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You’ll quicken the whole world with your perfume.” (p. 77)

After marriage, she becomes a true wife in the Indian sense of the term identifying her husband’s wishes with those of hers. Prakash’s ardent wish was to secure admission in some obscure American institute of technology. They start dreaming about their life in America but as the ill-luck would have it, Prakash falls a prey to the Khalsa Lions, the rebels demanding a separate land of Khalistan for Sikhs, on the eve of his departure which renders Jasmine heart-broken and alone. A born fighter as she is, she does not allow this heart-rending tragedy to deter her decision. She plans to visit the supposed institute where Prakash had to get admitted and to burn herself a “Sati” on the campus of that engineering school. Jasmine’s decision leaves her family aghast and they wonder “a village girl, going alone to America without job, husband or papers?” (p. 97)

Jasmine leaves for America on forged papers, knowing not what future holds in store for her. But she is aware of the fate of her likes. She muses:
We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-of corners of waiting rooms where surly, barely wakened customs guards await their bribe. We are dressed in shreds of national customs, out of season, the witted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage. We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land, to pass through, to continue. (p. 101)

Jasmine is estranged by the uncertainties of her life in an unknown country:

What country? What continent? We pass through wars through plagues. I am hungry for news, but the discarded papers are in characters or languages I cannot read. (p. 101)

However, she travels to the New World on a Shrimper called “The Gulf Shuttle”. Jasmine’s first encounter with America is a kind of what Malashri Lal says, “regeneration through violence.” The captain of the ship, an ugly fellow, Half-Face who “had lost an eye and ear and most of his cheek in a paddy field in Vietnam” (p. 104) takes her to remote motel of Florida and makes before her indecent proposals. Jasmine requests him that she is a deplorable Hindu widow and her “mission (is) to bring my husband’s suit to America” (p. 114), he laughs at her idea: “Getting your ass kicked half way around the world just to burn a suit. I never heard such a fool notion”(p. 114). He remorselessly rapes Jasmine and this outrage is too much for an Indian widow. He sleeps after promising more
sexual excitement later in the night. Jasmine goes to bathroom and decides “to balance her defilement with my (her) death” (p. 117) but before she could do so she discovers that she wants to live. Instantly she realizes: “I could not let my personal dishonour disrupt my mission”. She extends her tongue once slices it, blood oozing—a perfect vengeful image of Goddess Kali out to defy and destroy the ‘devil’ who has violated her chastity. She kills the demon and for some moment remains perturbed:

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 look like a slaughter house. Blood had congealed on my hands, my chin my breasts…. I was in a room with a slain man my body blooded. I was walking death, Death incarnate. (p. 119)

Jasmine’s killing of Half-Face is a kind of self-assertion. Her decision to kill herself first is a decision of an Indian woman who lives for her deceased husband as well as the woman of chastity and commitment to wife and husband relationship, but the woman who kills Half-Face is prompted by her self-will to live and to continue her life. “In killing Half-Face”, writes Samir Dayal, “she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life-affirming transformation.”

Pondering over the agonizing as well as transforming effect of evil, Jasmine says,

For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. I was about not being human…. It was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of truth, the kind of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death. (p. 116)
After her violent encounter with the ugly world, Jasmine starts afresh; sans money, sans idea in her surroundings—hungry and thirsty, broken both in body and mind. Incidentally, she happens to meet Lillian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady who harbours her, pities her situation, calls her Jazzy and teaches her to talk, walk and dress like an American. She advises her: “Let the past make you Gordon is committed to help the illegal immigrants.” Later on, she encourages Jasmine to proceed to New York for a suitable job with an introductory letter to her daughter staying there. After reaching New York, Jasmine decides to visit her husband’s former teacher, Devinder Vadhera who has been instrumental in her husband’s admission. His home is Flushing Queens which is part of a Punjabi immigrant ghetto. With Vadhera’s decision not to come out of their four walls, the “artificially maintained Indianness” (p. 145), Jasmine remembers her five months stay at Flushing with pain and despair. “Flushing, with all its immigrant services at hand, frightened me” (p. 145). Again she recalls:

Flushing was a neighbourhood in Jullandhar. I was spiraling into depression behind the fortress of Punjabiness.... An imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into future. I was a prisoner doing unreal time. (p. 148)

Here, among the Vadheras, she is a helpless widow not entitled to enjoy life. This life is terrifying to her, “I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like” (p. 145). America has so many surprises for Jasmine in its Pandora’s Box. To her dismay, she comes to know that Devinder Vadhera far from being a real Professor is a sort of
human hair. This fact unfolds, for the first time, the reality of immigrant life to her and she rationalizes Vadhera’s act:

He needed to work here, but he did not have to like it.
He had sealed his heart when he’d left home. His real life was in an unlivable land across Oceans. He was a ghost, hanging on. (p 153)

This comprehension of reality is further confirmed by the taxi-driver who is a doctor from Kabul and confides to her, “We have to be here living like dogs” (p. 140).

In New York streets Jasmine sees “more greed, more people” (p. 140) like herself. New York seems to be “an archipelago of ghettos seething with aliens” (p. 140). Her failure in understanding the intentions of the American beggar is symbolic of confusion that cries an immigrant in an alien land. She is tossed between a desire for remembering her past and an equally pressing urgency to forget it:

I feel at time like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I’m on. Down and down I go, where I’ll stop. God only knows. (p. 139)

The freedom loving spirit of Jasmine finds it difficult to cope with the conservative India represented by the Vadheras and after spending five frustrating months at Flushing one day, she deserts the Vadheras and sets forth for another adventure.

Next, we see Jasmine in an apartment on Claremont Avenue, Manhattan with Taylor and Wylie Hayes as a caregiver to their adopted daughter, Duff. This is the best period of her stay in the States. She
discovers to her excitement that Taylor is a true professor and at once feels impressed by his humane conduct:

I fell in love with what he represented to me, a professor who served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her, and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking. (p. 167)

Taylor gives her a new name “Jase” and she is all excited about her new life with the Hayeses. She recalls, “Duff was my child; Taylor and Wylie were my parents, my family” (p. 165).

In the new surroundings marked by personal warmth, Jasmine becomes more Americanized, more confident of her proficiency in English but her instinctive Indian values do surface now and then. For instance, when she comes to know that Duff is not a natural child but an adopted one, her reactions are culturally revealing:

I could not imagine a non-genetic child. A child that was not my own, or my husband’s, struck me as a monstrous idea. Adoption was as foreign to me as the idea of widow remarriage. (p. 170)

Her Indian sense of values cannot tolerate the sight of “naked bodies combing their hair in front of dresser mirrors” (p. 171). She records her disgust:

Truly there was no concept of shame in this society. I’d die before a Sob Sister asked me about Half-Face. (p. 171)
She again feels outwitted at Wylie’s decision to leave Taylor for economist Stuart in search of “real happiness” (p. 181). She feels defeated:

America had thrown me again. There was no word I could learn, no one I could consult, to understand what Wylie was saying or why she had done it. (pp. 181-82)

It is beyond imagination for Jasmine to think of snapping her bonds with her husband. She comes to realize the “liquidity” and “transitoriness” of human relationships in America. She gets the bitterest lesson:

In America, nothing lasts, I can say that now and it doesn’t shock me but I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it was not disintegrated. (p. 181)

However, she is not unmindful of the positive side of American ethos. She appreciates the Americans for their democracy of thought and their sense of respect even for those doing insignificant works. The Western civilization has a “Work-Culture” and in this set up everybody is discharging his duty without any complex. She compares her own situation with the Mazbi woman who worked in her house at Hasnapur:

In Hasnapur, the Mazbi woman who’d stoked our hearth or spread our flaking, dried-out adobe walls with watered cow dung had been a maidservant. Wylie made
me feel her younger sister. I was family, I was professional. (p. 175)

Jasmine has experienced the best moments of stay in America in the company of Taylor and Duff who are like family for her. Taylor also starts loving her and she too wishes that her role as a “day-mummy” should never end. She is absorbed in the American world, forgetting all about her strange mission as she herself accepts:

Jyoti was now a sati-goddess; she had burned herself in a trash-cum-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida. Jasmine lived for future for Vijh and Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today. (p. 176)

She thinks that she has got an established home and now she will no longer be haunted by rootlessness, “I had landed and was getting rooted” (p. 179) but still her destination is not reached and she is forced to run from New York. She sights the assassin of her husband Sukhwinder, and runs for life to Iowa. But her escape is not a sign of her cowardice, it is ‘life-affirming’. “She (Jasmine) is running away for life not escaping from life which is a positive step.”5 Pushpa N. Parekh thinks that Jasmine’s stay at Taylor’s for two years is the most fruitful period of her life in America:

This period in Jasmine’s life is the most restful and comforting, emotionally and psychologically, intellectually, however, it is a phase of minute observations of complex inner deliberations on, and keen involvement in her new environment.6 

Again her observations on Taylor-Wylie episode are very minute:
Wylie’s apparent “reasonless” abandoning of Taylor Duff is a jolt back to the inexplicable and unexplainable nature of human action. Instead of fate or destiny or an unknown power being responsible for a family’s break-up, Jasmine witnesses an American woman, Wylie, deliberately choosing to leave. Jasmine’s inner monologues and silent reflections capture the deliberations on cultural difference and an immigrant woman’s emotional adherence to her traditional beliefs while intellectually exploring the new avenues opened to her by the modern value systems.  

Jasmine’s life in Iowa again begins with her chance meeting with Mother Ripplemayer, the Iowan counterpart of Lillian Gordon. She helps her getting a job in her son, Bud’s bank as a teller girl and after six months she is the live-in companion of Bud Ripplemayer. It seems that Bharati Mukherjee uses fate and chance as a ‘problem-solving-device’. When Jane (Jasmine) meets Bud he is “a tall, fit, fifty-year-old banker husband of Karin, father of Buddy and Vern” (p. 14) but after six months he is a divorcee living with an illegal immigrant:  

Asia had transformed him, made him reckless and emotional. He wanted to make-up for fifty years of “selfishness”, as he calls it. (p. 14)  

After one year, he is a crippled man living with his Asian wife and adopted son, Du who is a Vietnamese brought from a refugee camp by him. Nobody is safe in violence torn America. Bud falls a victim to one Harlan Kroener who shoots him leaving maimed.
Jane likes Iowa because it is very much like Hasnapur. The farmers here are very much like the farmers of her own village “modest people, never boastful, tactful and courtly in their way” (p. 11). Bud is always uneasy with her past and never enquires of it. To quote Jane:

My genuine foreignness frightens him. I don’t hold that against him. It frightens me too. (p. 26)

It is her strangeness that adds to her beauty:

Bud courts me because I am alone. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am. (p. 200)

Jasmine’s every moment is a calculated step into her Americanization and with each development a vital change is marked in her personality. Jasmine’s flight to Iowa and her renaming as Jane is indicative of a slow but steady immersion into the mainstream American culture. Here, we encounter a changed Jasmine—one who had murdered Half-Face for violating her chastity, now not only willingly embraces the company of an American without marriage but also is carrying his child in her womb. We are simply surprised at her act since every idea revolts at this form of an Indian widow. But one should never forget that she is a rebel who revolts at every step against the path drawn for her. She is an adapter, a survivor. Du is also a fighter who has survived eating worms and rodents in the refugee camp. Jasmine easily identifies herself with Du. “They” communicate silently in a no-questions asked relationship of strong identification: they come from the same “Third World” and share a common legacy of suffering and survival.”8
An immigrant’s life is in fact a series of reincarnations. He lives through several lives in a single life-time. This truth explains the condition of Bharati Mukherjee as well as that of Jasmine. As Mukherjee confides in one of her interviews:

I have been murdered and reborn at least three times, the very correct young woman I was trained to be, and was very happy being, is very different from the politicized, shrill, civil rights activist. I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States.9

This statement has a marked similarity with Jasmine’s outcry:

There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remark oneself. We murder who we were so, we can rebirth ourselves—in the image of dreams. (p. 29)

Mukherjee, by subjecting her heroine to multiple codes of society and geographical locales seems to send the message that if one has to assimilate oneself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land, one should forget one’s past. This notion finds ample support from Jasmine’s statement:

Once we start letting go—let go just one thing, like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing a tika on the forehead—the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole. (p. 29)

But this assimilation of Jasmine is not so smooth as it might appear on the surface:
Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony, humor, as well as pathos—underline her observations as she discovers for herself the undefined medium between the preservation of the old world and the assimilation into the new one.10

All is well with Jane in Iowa till Du leaves for Los Angeles to join his sister. She has started identifying herself with her son so he is an immigrant like herself. Both are in a great hurry to become American, to forget the nightmares of their early lives. But Du’s sudden departure shatters her world, she has been so delicately nursing. Her passionate cry bursts out:

How dare he leave me alone out here. How dare he retreat with my admiration, my pride, my total involvement in everything he did. His education was my education. (p. 223)

Jasmine knows that “blood is thick” but the very “prospect of losing him (Du) is like a miscarriage” (p. 221). He has been a silent companion of Jasmine/Jane in all her bright and gloomy moments. Jasmine tries “to think like Lillian Gordon” at the moment who had put her on the Bus without showing any kind of grief. She orders herself “Don’t cry don’t feel sorry for yourself” (p. 224) but this does not prove helpful. This sense of bereavement acquires intensity by the suicide of neighboring Lutz boy Darrel who has been in love with her though she never responds to his love. Though “Bud’s face, gray, ghostly, bodyless, floats in narrowing circles” (p. 239) around her she does not care for this man “who is losing his world” (p. 239). Already she has stopped thinking about Bud and at this moment Taylor and Duff come to take her to
California where the new world, the promise of America is eagerly awaiting her. In deserting Bud and choosing Taylor, Jasmine does not exchange between men but she changes her whole world. As she herself confides,

I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness. (p. 240)

All through her stay for more than three years in Iowa, Jasmine has been faithful to Bud. She has acted like an Indian wife who exults in her loyalty towards her husband. She has identified all her dreams and wishes with Bud’s. She has sacrificed all her individuality at the holy shrine of matrimony. She thinks that even the memory of the past life amounts to a kind of disloyalty to Bud because he feels frightened by her stories of Hasnapur. At Iowa, she is a perfect wife who tries to please her husband by all means. She plays the temptress at his behest and hangs up all decency to yield to the sexual passion of a crippled person. Here, she is very much like Indian women bound to the “old world dutifulness” but the woman who walks out at last with Taylor “greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (p. 241) is positively an entirely different woman. This is a woman who is ready to see ahead, to ingratiate the best that future holds in store for her. She has no normal scruples and never feels guilty of her decision:

It is not guilt that I feel, its relief... Adventure risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors though uncaulked windows. (p. 240)

She challenges the mocking astrologer who had declared her star-crossed:
Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove. (p. 240)

T. Padma\textsuperscript{11} sees Jasmine's linking with Taylor “as a validation of her avowed belief—“Treat every second of your existence as a possible assignment from God” (p. 61)—a reaffirmation of the courage she mustered in killing the mad dog saying “I was not ready to die” (p. 56). From Jyoti to Jasmine, Kali to Jazzy and Jase to Jane is a long and arduous journey “hurtled through time tunnels” (p. 240), bearing the brunt in life. From the special and unique nature of her evolving “Jasmine” self Jane becomes, as her name implies, a non-entity, even a conscienceless “gold digger” in Karin’s words (p. 195). From the “Sati-goddess” Jyoti (p. 176) to the Kali-Jasmine to “adventurous Jase” (p. 186) to “Plain Jane” (p. 26) has been an eventful, uneven odyssey; the protagonist’s name changes as well as her shifts in places of residence become metaphors for an immigrant woman’s process of uprooting and rerooting.”

Jane is expected to eventually become Bud Ripplemeyer’s wife and the mother of their expected child. She, however, is a complex blend of the “silent woman”, “the speaking person” and the “teller of tales”. As the ‘silent woman’ she accepts the almost preplanned and tailor-made itinerary of a certain predictable way of life with Bud. But her increasing sense of isolation and loss of self in this suffocating world is heightened by her inability to share with him her memories or reflections of the past, which are as much a part of her identity as the present. Bud prefers not to discuss her painful past. This is in sharp contrast to Taylor’s disposition—Taylor didn’t want to change me. He didn’t want to scour
and sanitize the foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate didn’t scare him” (p. 185).

Ready to sacrifice her own happiness and dream, Jane almost acquiesces to become Bud’s wife. It is through Du, their adopted Vietnamese son, that she wishes to sustain her identity as an “immigrant”. All the forces in Iowa would eventually freeze her to conformity or continual alienation. Bud is uncomfortable with her tales of Hasnapur. He wishes her silent while Du, driven to quickly become thoroughly American, only cursorily pays heed to her stories about her Indian life. She realizes she cannot remake herself through Du “my transformation has been genetic; Du’s was hyphenated” (p. 222). In evaluating her past and present and envisaging her future, she confronts the complexity multiplicity of her identity as an immigrant woman.

Appearing self-possessed and patient, Jane, as we discover her through her interior monologues, is seething. Likening herself to a “tornado” she wonders over the changes that are yet to reshape her destiny:

I still think of myself as caregiver, recipe giver, preserver. I can honestly say all I wanted to serve, be allowed to join, but I have created confusion and destruction wherever I go. As Karin says, I am a tornado. I hit the trailer parks first, the prefabs the weakest link. How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, how many more husband? (p. 215)

In “telling her tale”, the Jane and Jasmine selves of the protagonist seek to blend their “wants” and “dreams” into possibilities and realities. The range and the texture of the narrative voice reiterate the immigrant
woman’s personal journey as a new questing pioneer’s movement from self-denial to self-realization.

Jasmine’s restless move from one place to another betrays her gripping alienation and bewilderment. On more than one occasions, she is an “outsider” and “other” in America—an illegal immigrant without passport, living among aliens whose ways she knows nothing about. She is always apprehensive about American being and thinking, suffers humiliation and disappointment. As she mutters: “This country has so many ways of humiliating, of disappointing” (p. 29). Again her failure to understand Wylie’s decision to leave, Taylor testifies to the fact that she is a poor immigrant. She comes from the third world where experiences are always painful and it is in sharp contrast to her experience of America. As she says: “For them, experience leads to knowledge, or else it is wasted. For me (or likes), experience must be forgotten, or else it will kill” (p. 33). She dresses like an American, puts on an American name but she can trust only Asians, “I trust only Asian doctors, Asian professionals. What we’ve gone through must count for something” (p. 32). She is loved by all for her Indianness which has made her a lovable and caring wife, an affectionate mother. She echoes her sentiment again and again:

A good Hasnapur wife doesn’t eat just because she is hungry. Food is a way of granting or withholding love. (p. 216)

I’ll wait supper for you. Indian wives never eat before their husbands. (p. 213)

The above statements show that even if she is living with an American in an American household, among American appliances, her
ideal is an Indian wife who is by nature self-sacrificing. Jane does not pay heed to Bud’s entreaty to marry her because she thinks she is responsible “for Prakash’s death, Bud’s maiming.” She is “a tornado, blowing through Baden” (p. 206). Jasmine never forgets her past which impinges upon her sense like the stench of the carcass of the dog she encounters only in her life. “She perpetually haunts, and is haunted by her ghostly identities…. She shuttles between differing identities.”

Indeed, Jasmine is a rebel and revolutionary. She protests against rigours of Indian culture. Her protest, like that of Bharati Mukherjee herself, is not against Indian culture but against its relentiveness, its particular way of partially comprehending the world. She revolts against conservative attitude towards poor widows who are treated like non-entities. She resents against the “Sati” system which compels Indian women to sacrifice their life although they want to live. She rebukes the male dominating Indian society which discourages self-reliance in women. Her grudge is against the artificially maintained ghetto which bars the non-resident Indians from identifying themselves with the progressive ideal of the West. However, her native values determine substantially the quality of her life.

Bharati Mukherjee does not consider Jasmine “a good person”, she is a “black-mailer” and a “murderer” who has dumped a good crippled man. But she considers her a “love goddess” a “life-force.” She is not moral in the conventional sense but her morality is her own way of looking at life. She is a “path-finder” and pierces her way through the dense jungle of problems. Every movement adds to her self-confidence and her experience guides her future course of action. She is fluid and adjusting and justifies her each and every role. Mukherjee’s following observations border on confessional note:
The kind of women I write about... are those who are adaptable. We’ve all been raised to please, been trained to be adaptable as wives, and that adaptability is working to the women’s advantage when we come over as immigrants.¹⁴

Outwardly, Jasmine responds very promptly to the behavioural patterns of the American society and instantly inculcates it in her character. However, a tenacious Indianness seems to cling to the subsurface of her adaptations. Indira Bhatt pertinently comments:

Jasmine takes a bird view of the American life and does not touch the deeper layers of values there.¹⁵

Had she been purely guided by the American values, she would have abandoned Bud at the time of his disability. She abandons Bud later on, no doubt, but this decision is a cumulative effect of the happenings—Du’s departure, Darrel’s suicide and Taylor’s proposal:

Even Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jase and Jane may appear to be real from Hasnapur to Jullundhar to Florida, Manhattan, Iowa, may appear to be moving from old world values to the brave new world. But the person we see at the end of the novel moving away Taylor, is very much the same person, we encounter at the earlier stages in the novel.¹⁶

Sarah Curtis also subscribes to a similar view:

By the end of the book she is almost all American, but quintessentially she is still Indian.¹⁷
In Jasmine’s tug of war between ‘old world dutifulness’ and the ‘progressive America’, a perceptive reader can unmistakably mark that the ongoing conflict hardly reaches a happy reconciliation. Ingenious attempts have been made by some scholars to trace autobiographical touches in Mukherjee’s work and this is obviously a commonplace criticism on expatriate writers. Identifying Jasmine’s predicament with that of her creator, Malashri Lal observes:

A passport gives instant legal recognition; it does not determine cultural transfers. That truth explains Bharati Mukherjee’s dilemma as also her Jasmine’s restless moves.18

In attempting to resolve her crisis of identity through nomenclature—from Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jase to Jane—coupled with changes in geographical contours—from Hasnapur to Jullundhar, to Florida, Manhattan, Iowa—Jasmine tries all external alternatives but to no avail. The person one sees at the end of the novel moving away with Taylor is very much the same one encounters at the earlier stage in the book. The movement without cannot necessarily mean transformation within in respect of one with the inherited Indian ethos.

Jasmine appears to be a much more strong-willed person. She embarks on her journey to U.S.A. as a typical Indian wife to be a ‘Sati’ for her husband’s cause. But once she realizes her strength and power after murdering her rapist in the very beginning of her journey towards many transformations, she never looks back. Hers is a clear-cut journey towards her being a totally Americanized, self-assured, and self-confident woman. Moreover, going through this process, she adopts various identities in the form of being Jasmine, Jase and Jane; proceeding
westward both in location and in attitude. She recognizes herself fully, and as a result, decides to accompany her lover “greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (p. 250).

Mukherjee explores other ramifications of cultural confrontation in *The Holder of the World* (1993). It is also a tale about dislocation and transformation arising when two cultures come into contact with each other. This novel “has a wide canvas that sweeps across continents and centuries, cultures and religions. Immigration, exile, alienation and foreign lands have always been the colour of Mukherjee’s palate and with *The Holder of the World*, she uses the familiar tones and shades to create a universe of infinite possibility.” Here we witness meeting of two worlds, the puritan 17th and early 18th century American world, trying to come to terms with the Mughal view of Indian life. In a startling commingling of history and imagination, Mukherjee lights up the making and very nature of the American consciousness in this novel. The inspiration behind this “fantastic” story was an ordinary incident on an ordinary day. In an interview, Mukherjee recalled:

The novel got started because I was at an auction of Sotheby in New York…. Whatever money my husband and I save is spent on Indian miniature painting and my aesthetics for the novel evolves out of my love for Indian miniature painting.

It was here that she saw a miniature titled “A European Woman in Aurangzeb’s Court”. A Caucasian woman stood resplendent in full Mughal dress and Mukherjee “suddenly realized that I was looking at a woman who three hundred years back had taken a lot of risks, had transformed herself.” Earlier it was always the journey from East to West
and the accompanying Chameleon-like changes, but now this trip is in the opposite direction.

The novel generated favourable response from the critics all over the world and people acknowledged Mukherjee’s skill in blending imaginary creations with historical facts. *The New York Times Book Review* admired *The Holder of the World* in the following terms:

Mrs. Mukherjee draws us with vigour and scrupulous attention to detail across time—from the present to the 17th and early 18th centuries—and space—from Salem, Massachusetts to the Coast of Coromandel, in India—into the footsteps of not one but two extraordinary women… (an) extraordinary novel…

*The Holder of the World* demonstrates a consummate artistry to blend fact and fiction, head and heart, science and religion, East and West, history and imagination, the Old World and the New World. Mukherjee has dedicated this novel ‘To Ann Middleton, and all travelers to utmost shores’. Here, she creatively travels in time and space, past and present, exotic and known and this lends to this novel an extraordinary dimension never seen in her writing before. It is a quest for identity, transformation and translation of protagonist’s personality under the stress of the circumstances.

The title *The Holder of the World*, the literal translation of Alamgir, is a name for the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb. This is the story of two white women, one living in 17th century and the other in the present one, who becomes obsessed with retracing the former’s transformation from a Puritan girl brought up at Salem in Massachusetts to the ‘bibi’ of a Hindu King. For a brief, lighting quick flash, two
women face the brown-skinned Indian maidservant, Bhagmati. The artist creates a complex plot, communicating through the two main voices the dense landscape of her novel. It begins with Beigh (looks like ‘Bee’, sounds like ‘Bay-a’) Masters, an assets researcher, a job, she describes as ‘uniting people and possessions; it’s like matching orphaned socks, through time’ (p. 5). Beigh Masters is the narrator of the story. She makes the intentions and objectives of the author transparent in the very beginning of the novel:

I live in three time zones simultaneously, and I don’t mean Eastern, Central and Pacific. I mean the past, present and the future. (p. 5)

At moment, she is busy reading *Acquisitions, and Auctions*, one of the trade magazines in her field with the lover Venn Iyer, an Indian Computer Scientist sitting beside her. She learns from the book that though people and their property get separated from one another, “Nothing is ever lost, but continents and centuries sometimes get in the way” (p. 5). She is trying to locate what her client calls the most perfect diamond in the world, ‘The Emperor’s Tear’. It belonged to the last of the great Mughal Kings, Aurangzeb, and was stolen from him during a battle against Raja Jadav Singh, the Hindu lover of the 17th Century Puritan Woman Hannah Easton. As Beigh tries to trace the diamond, she gets obsessed with Hannah’s life more than the diamond itself:

It isn’t the gem that interests me. It’s the inscription and the provenance. Anything about the Salem Bibi, precious-as-pearl feeds me. (p. 5)

Beigh lives with her Indian lover for nearly three years. “He animates information. He is out there beyond virtual reality, recreating
the universe, one nanosecond, one minute at a time” (p. 5). Both Beigh Masters and her Indian lover are dealers in the thing of past. They claim “The past resents itself to us” (p. 6). Venn is of the view that “Every time traveler will create a different reality—just as we all do now. No two travelers will be able to retrieve the same reality…. History is a big saving bank” (p. 6).

The use of time travel to help Beigh (and the reader) unravel the mystery of ‘The Emperor’s Tear’ is a clever rush. Her searches around museums, East India Company documents and colonial literature, her travels to India and auctions all over the world, are commendable efforts to reconstruct a daring woman’s odyssey. She makes it seem plausible that a seventeenth century Puritan woman could have ventured into a different culture and met a Mughal ruler contemporary of the Sun King, of Peter the Great and of Oliver Cromwell. Beigh’s painstaking piecing together of Hannah’s life is like building a picture-puzzle across time. Solving the last clue through computer magic turns it into the stuff of high-tech occult. While it satisfies emotionally, one obviously remains unconvinced.

Arshia Sattar comments that Mukherjee “is at her most eloquent and intelligent when she explores the complexities of cultural confrontation and the politics of otherness.”22 Here, she presents the difference between the Old and the New Worlds, represented by America and India, as a clash of value systems, a confrontation between an austere, stark society and a culture in which nothing is more important than the celebration of beauty. As the narrator proceeds it unfolds the story of the Puritan Woman of 17th century, Hannah Easton, born in the American Colonies in 1670, “a person undreamed of in Puritan Society” (p. 59). Inquisitive, vital, awake to her own sense of self and purpose, she
is “a spiritual aristocrat in an age of common believers” (p. 59). Again she adds,

She is from a different time, the first person, let alone the first woman, to have had these thoughts and this experience, to have been formed in this particular crucible. (p. 59)

As Beigh Masters fumbles for more details about Hannah Easton, she discovers in her a remote relative of hers. As she proudly claims, “I’m part of this story the Salem Bibi is part of the tissue of my life” (p. 21). She discovers that “Rebecca Easton (Hannah’s mother) nee Walker’s grandmother was a cousin of Charles Jonathan Samuel Muster’s father” (p. 21), with whom Beigh claims her kinship though she is not sure. “Back on the scepter’s isle, three hundred years ago, we were Masters or masterer’s” (p. 10). She presents a detailed description of the settlement and adventures of the Masters on the Ellies Island and their coming to terms with the Easton:

The first Masters to scorn the strained stability of his lot was one Charles Jonathan Samuel Muster, both in Morpeth, Northumberland. In 1632, a youth of seventeen, C.J.S. Muster stowed away to Salem in a ship heavy with cows, horses, goats, glass and iron. What extraordinary vision he must have had, to know so young that his future lay beyond the waters.... At the mercy of heathen Indians and the popish French. By 1640, he was himself the proprietor of a three hundred acre tract that he then leased to an in-law recently arrived, and then he returned to Salem and the life of a
sea trade, Jamaica to Halifax. Curiosity or romance has compelled us to slash, burn, move or, ever since. (pp. 10-11)

The year that young Charles Muster secreted himself among the livestock abroad the ‘Gabriel’, a noble woman in India died in child birth. The noble woman was the wife of most lucretious Mughal King Shahjahan, Mumtaz Mahal. Three years later when Jonathan was barely twenty, “he abandoned the country and built the first of many houses on a overlook commanding a view of the sea and the spreading rooftops of Salem. For the rest of his life, he scuttled between civilized Salem and the buck skinned fringes of the known world, out beyond Worcester, then Springfield, then Barrington, gathering his tenant’s tithes of corn and beans, salted meat and barrels tracts of uncleared forest with the profit…. He was a New Emperor” (pp. 11-12).

Beigh visits the Museum of Maritime Trade and finds that ‘the curator’s note cards celebrate only Puritan pragmatism. There is no order, no hierarchy of intrinsic value or aesthetic worth; it’s a fly’s eye view of Puritan history” (p. 12). She also comes across the Mughal opulence “flashy with decoration” (p. 12) and she wonders over the gulf between two worlds:

What must these worlds have thought, colliding with each other? How mutually staggered they must have been; … (p. 12)

Beigh Masters hunts for every minute detail about Hannah and she knows “traces of Salem Bibi pop up from time to time in inaccessible and improbable little museums like this one. They get auctioned and sold to anonymous donor” (p. 14). She is an ardent researcher, full of vigour,
bubbling with confidence and having faith in her sincerity to achieve her goal. She dilates on her personality and the mental make-up at this juncture:

There is surely one moment in every life when hope surprises us like grace, and when love, or at least its promise, landscapes the jungle into Eden. (p. 15)

She is confident of finding this Eden, passing through the jungle like obscure museums and auctions around the world. As she goes through the photographic records of Hannah’s life in a museum in Massachusetts, she gets the vision of the old world, its exotic inhabitants, etc.

In a maritime trade museum in Massachusetts, I am witnessing the old world’s first vision of the New, of its natives, of its ferocious, improbable shapes, of its monstrous women, that only the Salem Bibi could have described or posed for. (p. 16)

The largest painting bears a catalogue name ‘The Apocalypse’, but the narrator calls it ‘The Unravish’d Bride’. In this painting “beautiful Salem Bibi stands on the cannon-breached rampart of a Hindu fort” (p. 17). In another painting she notices “Salem Bibi’s lover, once a sprightly guerrilla warrior, now slumps against a charred tree truck. He grasps a nephrite jade dagger hilt carved in the shape of a ram’s head and with his last blood-clotted breath pledges revenge” (p. 17). Salem Bibi becomes a co-wanderer of Beigh Masters, a constant source of vital energy, inspiration adventure, odyssey, always whispering in her ears to go:
Fly as long as hard as you can, my co-dreamer! Scout a fresh site on another hill. Found with me a city where lions lie with lambs, where pity quickens knowledge, where desire dissipates despair! (p. 19)

With this claim of Beigh Masters, sufficient ground of plausibility is prepared. Now, we are ready to plunge our head in the details of Hannah’s extraordinary life. Though, her movement has been a circular one, by no means, she remains the same Hannah on her return to Salem. India has transformed her sensibility with the resultant change in her personality.

Hannah Easton was the only surviving child of Edward and Rebecca Easton, Rebecca Walker of Brookfield, in the Massachusetts Bay colony. First the Walkers had settled in Boston, or even Rhode Island but by 1653 Elias Walker, his wife and infant daughter Rebecca, arrived in Brookfield and leased, from their distant relatives the Masters, three hundred acres of prime Quabaug River bluff and bottom land. At that time, Brookfield was a hesitant hilltop Puritan outpost deep inside Nipmuc country. Elias Walker held the usual attitudes of his time, and ours, toward the Indian; they are children, they are trusting; they are proud and generous, even capable of nobility. But at heart they are savages: bestial, unspeakably cruel. Eight years later, the Walker gained a neighbour, a sickly looking but resourceful recent arrival (from England) by the name of Edward Easton, who purchased with his English savings a brown ribbon of a field, a rickety shed, a cabin with privy and two barns. At the age of 15 in 1668, Rebecca Walker got married to Edward Easton. Hannah was born of this marriage after two years.
In Old World, Easton had been an East India Company man with a sedentary occupation. Beigh searches for more details about Edward’s life and gets plenty of clues to reconstruct his life. She goes through East India Company ledger books, letters, books and papers stored in the India Office in White Hall. Beigh’s twenty-year old girl, really contemplating her place in the universe and the ways of the world had appropriated an ancestor, a man who had gone before her, and though he was writing of strangers, she cherished his observation like an intimate letter from home:

A petty ruler on the Coromandel Coast of India is given the gifts of armour, a wool coat and a spying glass. A ship on its way to Masulipatnam is stocked with 420 hogs and 250 oxen. (p. 23)

What is known about the life of Edward, Hannah’s father is that he headed for the outer rings of settlements stopping over first in Billerica, then in Chelmsford, then in Lancaster. He was offered a modest book keeping job by John White’s son-in-law, the Reverend Joseph Rowlandson, Lancaster’s first minister—then in Worcester, and finally either running out of energy or finding in Brookfield the dreamscape for starting over. Beigh is proud of her discovery and boasts:

I was perhaps the only scholar in the world who had traced the work of an obscure clerk from London to Massachusetts. I could sense all the movements in his life, his determination to remark his life before it was too late, to go west to the colony instead of east, where surely his East India Clerkshop could have led him. I felt the same psychic bond with Edward Easton that Keats did with the revelers on the Grecian Urn. (p. 25)
On September 29, 1671, Hannah turned a year old and first toddled for enough away by herself to be brought back by a Solicitous Nipmuc. On that very day, Edward Easton died of a bee sting while savouring the poetic paradox in an imported, treasured copy of Paradise Lost and the physical paradox of constipation’s painful pleasures in his outdoor privy. Hannah lost her mother Rebecca a twenty-two-year old widow when the Nipmuc laid siege to Brookfield in the month of August in 1675. Rebecca loved to sing. The little daughter had a disturbing memory of her mother which haunted her wherever she went. Her mother had deserted her in a Brookfield forest to run away with her American-Indian lover. To preserve above all the orphan’s tragic tale above the wicked woman’s demonic possession” (p. 30). Hannah, a Puritan child was overburdened. “She had witnessed the Fall, not Adam’s Fall, Rebecca’s Fall. Her mother’s Fall infinitely more sinful than the Fall of a man” (p. 90). But one thing is without question that “Hannah Easton, whatever the name she carried in Massachusetts, in England, in India or even into history to this very day, loved her mother more profoundly than any daughter has ever loved a mother” (p. 30).

Mukherjee has quite skillfully brought together the 17th century Puritan American society with the more liberated present day American society. Here, we see Beigh Masters, a modern American researcher claiming her affinity with Easton family, comparing the circumstances of her own life with that of Rebecca and Hannah Easton:

Like Rebecca, I have a lover. One who would seem alien to my family. A lover scornful of our habits of self effacement and reasonableness, of our native or desperate clinging to an imagined continuity. Venn was born in India and came over as a baby. His family are
all successful; there was never question of anything different. He grew up in a world so secure I can’t imagine it, where for us security is another kind of trap, something to be discarded as dramatically as Rebecca stepped out of dog-blooded widow’s weeds into a life of sin and servitude. (p. 31)

Hannah ‘the somber orphan’ (p. 39) is brought to Salem by Robert and Susannah Fitch. They rear her up with love and affection. Hannah has an extraordinary skill for needle work and soon her reputation reaches the masses:

Temptation dogged the sensuous Hannah everywhere: in rich clients halls as she delivered her handiwork of velvet gowns and quilted underskirts, coats flirty with ladders of bowknots and lingerie under sleeves, and caps of sheerest white muslin; at the baker’s as she passed by selves of German fried and sugared breads…. (p. 42)

Even at the age of twelve, Hannah Easton’s work is known and families who would not have admitted her step-parents to their parlours insist on showing her inside, offering her cakes and tiny tokens of additional payment. Susannah, her stepmother, praises her needle work skill, but fears the wantonness of spirit it betrays. However, such is the fame of Hannah’s work and such is the charm of her magical personality that soon a marriage proposal comes for her from the pynchons one of New England’s upstanding families. But Robert Fitch politely refuses the offer. The narrator thinks that after all it was for her own good as well as for the good of the country because “if Solomon Pynchon’s marital
Overture had been accepted, the history of the United States would have been profoundly altered” (p. 57).

Hannah marries Gabriel Lege, the same man who had been courting her intimate friend Hester Manning who was found one day dead, fully recognizing the fact that he is unworthy. May be she is unconsciously imitating her mother’s behaviour—running off with a treacherous yet exotic alien. “He claimed to be the son of the owner of the ‘Swallow three hundred and twenty tons. He had come from London, but hailed from Ireland, to Scout the colonies for investment, for new forms of imports and exports to the New World to mark its growing stature, its great wealth and taste for finer things” (p. 62). The tall and dashing Gabriel Legge has an eye patch. But there is no doubt that he has an extraordinary capacity for making stories: “Tortured? Punished/ Heroic? No one knew for sure. He had a thousand stories of imprisonment by Turks; banishment to forests; brigands, highway men, pirates” (p. 63).

Hannah’s acceptance of Gabriel Legge, a man of dubious character raises a lot of questions in the mind of the narrator and at last she comes to the conclusion that, unconsciously, she imitates her mother by this act:

Why would a self-possessed, intelligent, desirable women like Hannah Easton suddenly marry a man she recognized as inappropriate and untrustworthy? Why would she accept Hester Manning’s castoff, or betrayer? Guilt, perhaps, a need to punish herself for the secret she was forced to carry? Unconscious imitation of her mother, a way of joining her by running off with a treacherous alien? Gabriel Legge with his
tales of exotic adventure was as close to the Nipmuc lover as many man in Salem. She sought to neutralize her shame by emulating her mother’s behaviour. (p. 69)

Later on, the narrator takes recourse to philosophy and rationalizes her act:

> We do things when it is our time to do them. They do not occur to us until it is time: they cannot be resisted, once their time has come. It’s a question of time, not motive. (p. 70)

Hannah finds to her dismay that Gabriel’s father far from being a ship owner is an indebted drunk from Morpeth. Gabriel’s life too is a mystery. “He could describe the interior of a Mongol tent, the smell of camels, the pink flesh inside the trunk of Raja’s elephant; but he could not or would not, answer the simplest question about the ships he sailed or the captains he served” (p. 71).

However, Hannah is inquisitive and tries to drink every draught of the life’s cup. When Gabriel goes to his mysterious missions, she finds a good engagement in the duty of a nurse. She can now use the same needle efficiently to the skull of men which she once used on clothes. Gabriel Legge proposes her to accompany him to India where he works as a junior factor in East India Company. Such is the curiosity of Hannah that she instantly accepts the offer and sets for India leaving aside her fortune and reputation in Stepney, England. While in England Hannah’s perceptive eyes are quite alert to notice the attitude of American colonies towards the English Crown. She notices mutually contradictory feelings in two groups of people. On the one hand, there are colonists who are “not grateful or respectful enough to the Crown and the Mother Country;
the colonists were ignorance personified and insufficiently ashamed of their backwardness” (p. 72). For them ‘England was refined and cultured’ and colonies were ‘soiled and sinful’ (p. 72). On the other hand, there are colonists who are “proud of their backwardness… they revealed in using and broadening their American accent, which had already ironed out the multifarious wrinkles of British” (p. 73).

Hannah’s arrival in India in 1695 is set against a period of tumultuous political and economic activity. Here she as well as we the readers confront the surly realities of British Industrialists in India. “They had not come to India in order to breed and colonize or even to convert. They were here to plunder, to enrich themselves” (p. 99). But Hannah’s primary concern in this new world appears ‘to peel the superficiality and social grace and dwell beneath it in a quest for a meaningful life. In fact, as soon as she steps on the shores of the Coromandel Coast, she feels an instinctive sense of belonging and decides that she did not “aspire to return to England upon the completion of Gabriel’s tour” (p. 104). Hannah knew “she’d been transported to the other side of the world, but the transportation was more than mere ‘conveyancing’, as it was for Gabriel and the others. Many years later she called the trip, and her long residence in India her “translation” (p. 104). Hannah is alive to the life around her. She is not afraid of the ‘exotica’ instead she is thrilled. It is this curiosity and enthusiasm towards life which makes her a contemporary of the narrator who cannot withhold her sense of admiration:

Of all the qualities I admire in Hannah Easton that make her entirely our contemporary in mood and sensibility, none is more touching to me than the sheer pleasure she took in the world’s variety. (p. 104)
She knows that she has come half-way round the globe and the life in the Indian sub-continent is entirely different. She cannot use her own western parameters for measuring this world. Her reactions are that of a tourist:

She was, in some original sense of the word (as a linguist is to language), a tourist. She was alert to novelty, but her voyage was mental interior. Getting there was important, but savoring the comparison with London or Salem, and watching her life being transformed, that was the pleasure. She did not hold India up to inspection by the lamp of England, or of Christianity. (p. 104)

During their voyage, her husband endlessly talked about the life and society in India. He had tried to explain her that everyone on Coromandel, belonged to a caste, if he was Hindu, a right-hand or left-hand caste, and everyone was either Shia or Sunni if he was Muslim. They all spoke different languages, they owed fidelity to different masters, they worshipped different gods, and their ancestors had come from different countries. It was all nightmarish for her. The immense variety was thrilling and exciting but it had been inconceivable to a Puritan soul like Hannah’s. Her world was not so varied, not so diverse. So she wondered that here are “not just pagans and Muhammadans, but different Gods and different ways of worshipping the same God” (p. 100).

Right from the moment Hannah sets her feet on Indian soil, she is aware of the fact that she belongs to the land and people of this country are her brethren, and that she has got nothing to do with the race of those
Britishers who have come here to plunder, to lead a life of comfort, lechery and convenience. Her encounter with English women, the wives of other factors, furthers her impatience with their pretensions to nobility and their self-conscious superiority among the local community. These were women who led ordinary lives in England but claimed command and respect here, always eager to display it in all its vulgarity. Martha Ruxton and Sarah Higginbotham are both examples of English snobbery and disdain characteristic of the women in the colonies. Their life of reason and etiquette is sharply opposed to the adventurous and morally ambivalent lives of their husbands whose ‘bibis’ become the primary topic of conversation among these women:

Any servant with a new sari, any cheekiness detected, anything missing, meant a good serving girl had passed over to bibihood. (p. 131)

Hannah senses this obsession with bibis early during her stay in Fort St. Sebastian: “It seemed to Hannah that bibis, suspected and real, were at the center of female conversation in white town” (p. 131). The bibis are characterized by their sheer fleetingness and inability to tie down the English man for a lasting commitment. From the women’s point of view, the bibis was an object to be at once ignored and overlooked but also to be suspiciously avoided. Theibi Hannah is told to be admitted as a natural consequence of married life for “accommodation was synonymous with expatriate femininity” (p. 134). Hannah’s bemused reception of this ordained truth testifies to her open-mindedness and capacity to view a situation from a perspective other than that of conventional society. She treated her situation as much redeemed:
Hannah felt herself exempt from the bibi jealousies of a Sarah or Martha.... She had not led the desperate sort of life, like Sarah that substituted gratitude for tolerance. She was a faithful wife who had attracted her share of suitable beaux and suitors, and who resisted courtings and temptations even when expectations and opportunities presented themselves. (pp. 43-44)

For the freedom loving spirit of Hannah, India is an ideal place. The narrator contrasts the house in Fort St. Sebastian with her former houses she lived in:

In Brookfield, in Stepney and Salem, a house was a barricade to stop encroachment. Outdoors was the prowling ground for Satan and his companions indoors was furnished, tamed and therefore safe. But the house that she was to live in, like all houses in Fort St. Sebastian, was built to entice crystal-bright tropical starlight, spume-slented breeze, bugs, birds and butterflies through its huge barred windows. There were, terraces shiny as marble, balconies made of hardy woods, a flat roof for evening walks—ground level at night being considered unsafe—and turreted parapets. (pp. 118-19)

This description at once gives us a clue to the life of luxury and comfort led by the East India Company men during the Mughal period. To Shakuntala Bharvani, “It is very much a colonial novel at one level, with several details of colonial life woven in.”
While fusing history with fiction, Mukherjee never shirks from reflecting post-colonial anxiety. The lucretious life style, cruelty, lechery, the Britishers’ feeling of disdain towards the natives are contradicted with the deplorable plight of the Indian masses. “The Fort in which the Britishers lived was Little England. The Fort St. George Council’s penal code encouraged straight and narrow living. Uncleanness, lying, cheating, drunkenness, swearing missing morning or evening prayers, using seditious words mutinying, dueling, all were punishable with whipping, mountings of the “wooden horse”, confinement and fines. When caught. When admitted.” (pp. 127-28) The factors believe that their life in India is extraordinary, and they are the very angels sent by the British God, the British Crown. They feel that they have a licence to commit whatever atrocities they like in view of their ‘White Superiority’. Self-pity, unaccountability and hypocrisy were recast as virtues and renamed forgiveness solidarity and tolerance” (p. 128). The novel also focuses our attention on the mysterious deaths of these factors who were more or less victims of intrigue planned by their own counterparts. The chief Factor Cephus Prynne’s body was recovered in deplorable condition. However, Hannah “looked on Cephus Prynne’s murder as emancipation… the workings of an alien providence”(p. 163).

Hannah has an altogether different experience with the first manifestation of a bibi that she comes across in the form of Bhagmati. Pulling herself down from the terrace of Hannah’s house, she is dressed in sheer muslin white which mesmerizes Hannah’s consciousness. It is an image that persists in her mind as suggestive of the sensuality, magical attraction and passionate representation of this land:

She was not ready to entomb herself in Morpeth or London. She didn’t feel bereft—of roots, of traditions,
as Martha and Sarah professed to feel. Instead she felt unfinished unformed. (p. 163)

Now “Hannah felt herself no more at home in England than she did in the Coromandel. She was deficient in that genetic impulse toward teary-eyed patriotism” (p. 163).

With Gabriel Legge turning to piracy and becoming ‘the Robinhood of the Coromandel Coast’ (p. 167), she is not left with much option. Circumstances of her life start changing at a frantic pace in the year 1700. First, she leaves Gabriel on grounds of faithlessness and next sees his ship sinking. She herself should have been drowned when a bridge collapsed but she is saved by Jadav Singh, the Raja of Devgad only to become his bibi afterwards. Is it not ironical that the same Hannah who leaves her husband for keeping a ‘bibi’ in the end becomes a ‘bibi’ herself carrying an illegitimate child? However, this incident is imperative for the total transformation of her personality, because her yearning for a kind of passionate salvation as a way of recreating her mother’s choice in the forest is largely fulfilled in her encounter with Raja Jadav Singh. “Her courtship with the Raja indicates a relationship based entirely on Indian, ‘Eastern’ values and morality with little reference to the life left behind.”24 He offers Hannah a life of limitless possibilities and sensuous pleasures undreamed of in the English world. It is this experience of being overwhelmed in love, of being possessed to the point of distraction that Hannah embraces with the totality of her being and little moral speculation. “In Massachusetts Bay, life had been so hard, the summer so short, that the freaks of nature were given less opportunity to emerge and no comfort to thrive” (p. 173). But India opens new avenues of life for her:
She is now ready to embrace like her mother ‘Ravana’, her alien lover. She identifies herself completely with her Indian lover. She has seen ‘Firangis’ plungering the Indians but what mesmerizes her not the profit-hungry motives of ‘firangis’ but “the sturdiness of a religious faith that allowed hundreds of thousands of devotees to worship a god-head that chose to reveal itself as a scarlet-faced. (p. 170)

She is very afraid before coming into actual contact with Raja Jadav Singh. She cannot hide her skepticism towards the Eastern faith:

The idea of Hinduism was vaguely frightening and even more vaguely alluring to Hannah. English attitude saw Islam as a shallow kind of sophistication; Hinduism a profound form of primitivism.... Muslims had restrictions which were noble and manly: Hindus had taboos, which were superstitious and cowardly. Hindus were unreasonable, and unreachable, so tradition-bound that their minds were considered undeveloped, except for a wily ruthlessness among the trading castes. (p. 219)

She has “a Christian’s skepticism about other faiths, bolstered by a Muslimized intolerance for idolatry” (p.220). On entering the new world, the world of Hindus, she discovers in herself an urge “to be able to name and memorize the new” (p. 225). She wants to embrace this world only to sacrifice herself at the altar of true love.

Jadav Singh continues to court her one quarter of each night for a fortnight. This alters the sensibility of Hannah. The Eastern love makes
her more emotional. She is aware of the transformation of her mentality, her whole personality:

With Gabriel she had clung to Salem’s do’s and don’ts. She had pulled and pummeled the familiar rules, hoping they’d help make sense of her evolution. With Jadav Singh, she’d finally accepted how inappropriate it was in India—how fatal—to cling as White Towns tenaciously did, to Europe’s rules. She was no longer the woman she’d been in Salem or London. The ‘qasbas’ and villages of Roopconda bore no resemblance to the fading, phantom landscapes where she’d lived in Old and New England. Everything was in flux on the Coromandel Coastline. (p. 234)

Ultimately Hannah discovers that “the survivor is the one who improvises, not follows, the rules” (p. 234). This comes as an indirect message of the author herself. She stresses now and again in almost all her fictional writings that only those people can survive in an alien world who are elastic and who can shape themselves according to the availability of space by improvising upon their native rules.

Jadav Singh’s death and Hannah’s encounter with Emperor Aurangzeb mature her experiences in terms of her journey to the world of the mysterious East. She is ready to protect her Indian lover in spite of his dissociation from her. The suspension of morality and the openness to new experiences make Hannah confront Aurangzeb and even bow to his gifts of pearls as a symbol of his superiority and power. Her duty finally accomplished, Hannah returns to Salem but not before paying her deepest tributes to Bhagmati her Indian Hester Manning. However this
rechristening of Bhagmati is viewed as “the ultimate colonization” by Hema Nair.

Hannah’s journey to India is fraught with images of adventure, action and passion. She returns to her native land not as a reformed American but a rebel living on the fringes of society. Like Jasmine, Hannah finds final contentment and joy in the adapted land and it is the morality of this land that Hannah carries along with her. Bharati Mukherjee describes *The Holder of the World* as a “post-modern historical novel,” but at its most basic level, it is a novel of expatriation, of a quest not only to geographically diverse lands but to culturally variant societies as well. Hannah’s life succeeds in questioning and discovering new ways of defining reality in a world which was essentially orthodox.

The novel ends with Hannah’s return journey to Salem where she locates her mother from a mental asylum and brings up her “black” daughter Pearl Singh and fearlessly stays in Salem all her life—along with her mother’s five half-Nipmuc children; and Beigh Master’s tracking the most perfect diamond in the world the Emperor’s Tear.

Thus, *The Holder of the World* portrays an entirely different picture of jostling of cultures—the Eastern and the Western and the result thereof. Hannah Easton’s voyage is mental and ‘interior’ rather than physical. It seems that the movement of the narrative is circular since the story ends in the same vein as it opens but the person (Hannah) does not remain the same. Her whole personality goes under a sea-change during her restless moves from Salem to Stepney, Coromandel to Devgad and then back to Salem:
In one rainy season, Hannah Legge had gone from woolen clad English married woman on the Coromandel Coast to pregnant sari-wearing bibi of a raja; a murderer (she murders Morad Farah, one of the Great Generals of Aurangzeb) a widow, a peacemaker turned prisoner of the most powerful man in India…. She wasn’t Hannah anymore; she was Mukta, Bhagmati’s words for ‘pearl’. (p. 271)

Hannah Easton buries her Puritan past and emerges as a real fighter for life. The love she has got from Raja Jadav Singh makes her reckless and daring. Now she can face the holder of the world, the ‘Alamgir’, the Great Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, with courage and confidence. Her plea before the Emperor to stop the war against her lover is a superb piece of oratory:

I have come late in my life to the feeling of love. Love for man, love for place, love for people. They are not Devgad people or Roopconda people, not Hindu people or Muslim people, not Sunni or Shia, priests or untouchable servants of Kings. If all is equal in the eye of Brahma as the Hindus say, if Allah is all-seeing and all-merciful as you say, then who has committed atrocities on the children, the women, the old people? Who has poisoned the hearts of men? (p. 268)

Ultimately, she wins the heart of ‘Alamgir’ who hails her with a very precious title: “For your white skin, for the luster of your spirit for the one-in-a-lack’, I give you these pearls. I call you Precious-as-Pearl” (p. 270).
Beigh Masters, the narrator, possesses the final judgment about Hannah’s character and personality when she acknowledges:

Where she stayed…. She would have changed history
for she was one of those extraordinary lives through
which history runs a four-lane highway. (p. 189)

Bharati Mukherjee’s next novel *Leave It to Me* appeared in 1997. This work continues the theme of immigration in a way which completes her triology beginning with *Jasmine* (1989). Reviewing it in *The Hindu*, Shalini Gupta writes:

In her novel, “*Leave It to Me*”, about hitting the hippie-trail in post-hippi America, Mukherjee views life from the outside. Behind plastic, unauthenticated facades, the reality crumbles into a Karma-Cola as tacky as ‘cosmic glue’.27

The protagonist is a Eurasian orphan, Debbie Devi who is adopted by an upstate New York family of Italian origin. Born in India and raised as an adopted child, Devi Dee travels through America to find her biomom. By the time she has arrived in San Francisco and taken up with a band of ageing ex-hippies and a psychotic Vietnam Vet, her identity crisis looms large. It leads her to track down her bio-parents in Laxmipur Devigaon, India, and the orphanage where she was raised—the Gray Sisters—“Soeurs Grises”—Sore Sore Grease—in Mount Abu. She learns from Fred, her hired detective, that her mother was the Hippie follower of a sex-age-guru, and her father the founder of the ashram, serial killer Romeo Hawk/Haque. The offspring of this unlikely liaison, Devi Dee—presumed missing or dead—is saved by nuns and shipped abroad to America, where she is raised as the adopted child of the Di Martino
family. Twenty-three years later, having graduated from Suny, Albany, she sets out to seek her bio-mom in off-beat California:

“Who but a foundling has the moral right to seize not just a city, but a neighbourhood and fashion a block or two of it into home? When you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything.”

The above statement quoted from the novel makes the predicament of the protagonist crystal-clear. Again here Mukherjee deals with the reality of “Time-Travel”. An individual grappling with different culture around the globe to find his real identity. As a foundling, she seeks a city, a neighbourhood and a home and finally inherits nothing while she is entitled to everything. It is a story of great culture shock of a foundling as a creature to nowhere land which is full with immense feelings of rootlessness, homelessness, alienation and depression as a part of diasporic consequence which is beautifully created by the novelist. Shalini Gupta observes:

A Kaleidiscopic wheel of a book, *Leave It to Me*, reveals the scars of the beat generation, whose legacy to its survivors is as dangerous as shifting continental places. Mukherjee shuttles between time and space zones to create a dichotomy “as wise as the San Andreas fault.” The novel’s sex and violence rip from the grandstand to centre-stage and the maelstrom engulf all.28

Krishnamoorthy Aithal, in his review of Mukherjee’s novel *Leave It to Me*, points out: “Whereas most of the minority writers of the U.S. have sought to define the separate cultural identities of their people, their
In brief, *Leave It to Me* is a novel of globalization where the bio-mom’s search for identity in the world of genes, of parentage in Bharati Mukherjee’s innovation in the world of diasporic fiction. If the diasporean characters are seeking their cultural and geographical ‘location’ and ‘dislocation’ in the sense of their countries, and belonging to ‘no where’ but ‘everywhere’ which is a sign of globalization and it can be said as Mukherjee’s forte as an artist.

In all the fictional writings of Bharati Mukherjee, the impact of expatriation and immigration on the complexities of gender relations has been taken up against divergent ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Her novels exhibit how in more egalitarian societies traditional gender roles and relations are transformed often leading either to churlish situations, categorical refusals or subterfuges to initiate fundamental changes in traditional mind-sets. The process of cross-cultural transaction involves “complex negotiation and exchange,” and is “an interactive, dialogic, two-way process rather than a simple active passive one.”

It also contextualizes, modifies and changes—like all other societal environments—the gender-based relationships. Mukherjee’s fiction convinces us that gender is a multifaceted category open to change and variation, and reinforces, what Ann Lowenhaupt Tsing had suggested—that “particular forms of female marginality must be examined in relation to the conditions of women” lives—as immigrants minorities, wealthy, poor, black, white, sex workers, maids or academics (quoted by Rayaprol, P., 135). Mukherjee’s depiction of women and their different relationships portrays to dominance of
patriarchal practices in traditional society as well as the forms of liberation and empowerment which are available to women in their diasporic situation. Isabel Armstrong has beautifully commented on this aspect of Mukherjee’s writing:

You seem to feel when you come into a Mukherjee novel, a kind of flurry and complexity in the writing. It’s rapid, darting, intense and energetic. Mukherjee is fascinated by people who are constantly on the move, who have to live a life in transit, who have to destroy their former identities in other countries in order to live fully in another. It’s an astonishingly ruthless understanding of the personality—that the personality has to travel light and move across countries and assimilate other country’s culture and idea and practices—like putting on another skin.32

Mukherjee’s next novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) revolves round the life and adventures of its protagonist, Tara Chatterjee. The novel begins with the description of the bridal procession of Tara Lata, an ancestor, whose life history becomes a focal point of Tara Chatterjee’s family chronicle and symbolizes how weakness can also lead to real life choices. “Bedecked in her bridal sari, her arms heavy with dowry gold, five year old Tara Lata is being carried in a palanquin borne by four servants to marry a tree.”33 On her wedding day, the groom had died from snakebite—perhaps Jaikrishna Gangooly, Tara Lata’s father had not sufficiently appeased the Goddess Manasa! Jai Krishna Gangooly decides to marry her daughter to a tree, as otherwise she will be a person to be avoided, “a despised ghar-jalani” a woman who brings misfortune and death to her family” (p. 15). Married to a tree she will at least “remain a
wife, a wearer of vermilion powder in her hair part, and not a widow” (p. 15). Tara Lata spends her life in her ancestral house in Mishtigunj, an imaginary town in Bangla Desh, till attracted by the revolutionary fervour of freedom fighters. She is taken away by the British soldiers after she organizes famine relief for villagers and is never again seen. Journeying to her roots, Tara Chatterjee visits this ancestral house and can feel the chilling loneliness of the childbride:

I cannot imagine the loneliness of this child. A Bengali girl’s happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrow of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her. Even constructing it from the merest scars of family memory fills me with rage and bitterness. (p. 4)

Tara Chatterjee, the narrator of the story, had always treated this family story with a distant dread. Only after her divorce from her Bill Gates—like genius of an Indian husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee, she becomes curious to know more about the trauma of the Treebride. She comments in the beginning of the novel, “Untill last year when I finally yielded to that most American of impulses, or compulsions, a “roots search”, I had never seen Tara Lata’s house in Mishtigunj.” (p. 17)

Tara and her two elder sisters had spent their childhood and early youth in Calcutta—their affluent background of Calcutta’s Bhadra Lok had guaranteed a privileged life style to them. In their insulated world, to be a native born Calcuttan was to be a Londoner, a Parisian, a New Yorker, at the Zenith, but to be Calcutta Bhadra Lok was “to share a tradition of leadership, of sensitivity, of achievement, refinement and beauty that was the envy of the world” (p. 22). The three sisters—Padma,
Parvati and Tara—have been described as being incredibly beautiful. They were featured on the annual “Miss Brains and Beauty” cover of *Eve’s Weekly* (p. 22). Padma, the eldest was coerced by her father to turn down Satyajit Roy’s movie offers. They were sent to prestigious convent, groomed to attend parties, to entertain people, passion and recklessness was unknown to their family till they grew-up” (p. 27). The sisters, however, follow divergent paths when they grow up. Parvati lives in Bombay after her love marriage, while the other two move to the modernist society of the West. When Tara becomes nineteen years old “holder of a B.A, Honours and M.A. First Class from the University of Calcutta” (p. 23), she is married to a software genius, a first son from an outstanding Bengali family to the same caste. After her arranged marriage, Tara is shifted to a segment of American society; viz. Atherton, California, where her husband Bish tries to carve out a semblance of Indian traditionality in all respects. They settle down, have a son, Rabi and live like several other Indian couples. Her conventional background compels Tara to admit that she isn’t, perhaps never will be, “a modern woman” (p. 27).

Tara and her sisters were protected from any probable indication that the sheltered existence they had led was suddenly turning into a fragile myth (p. 26). The naivete of a nineteen-year-old traditional Indian girl is absolutely unpalatable and amusing to her American friends. Looking at the contemporary version of Tara, “a thirty-six-year-old divorced kindergarten teacher, “they wonder” how could any woman, even a nineteen-year-old submit to someone else’s choice, even a loving parent’s” and label it as a “recipe for disaster” (p. 27). Bharati Mukherjee constantly juxtaposes the images of Tara’s adolescent life (“My life was one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage”, [p. 28]) with her
impressions of a liberated society. Jopi Nyman comments in the context of *Desirable Daughters* that Bharati Mukherjee’s fictions “rewrite the traditional immigrant story, imagining new spaces and forms of identity as a result of travel and dislocation.”

Tara’s husband Bish represents the traditional psyche of an Indian male who thinks that gender roles within marriage should not be affected by social changes or difference of perceptions. Though he along with a friend, has developed a system of electronic communications called CHATTY without which “nothing in the modern world would work” (p. 24), he is unfazed in his uncompromising preference for traditional Indian values and a life-pattern dictated by them. Like many of his Indian friends, he also believed that America made children “soft in the brains as well as the body” and weakened the moral fibre” (p. 154). He also wants his son to be an exact replica of him, in terms of his choice in food, dress, and discipline. Unable to find a school like the one he had known in Calcutta, he creates one as another example of his repudiation of modernity:

Rabi spent his first six years of education in an Atherton School, a California School, that prided itself on the English model, with a “commons” for lunch, prayers in the morning, Greek and Latin, and hard-fought sports whose rules, vocabularies, and passions were unreplicated anywhere on this continent, and perhaps any time in this century. Indian millionaires were the new monarchs of snob, and the old school masters took note, spiking their vocabularies with Indo-Anglicisms of the 1920s (“Let’s take a dekko, shall we”) and their lunches with “curries”. (p. 152)
Tara starts having her first misgivings around this time. Her anxieties for her artistic son mingle with anxieties about her own self. The existence of distinct personal and social slots in life which Bish has taken for granted in his attempts to recreate tradition against modernist background first bewilder her and then reinforce her resolve to lead an independent life. She does not want to treat her American experience as an extension of the traditional role of a daughter or wife. In an imaginary conversation with Didi, Tara comments:

I don’t blame Daddy and I don’t blame Bish and Calcutta, and the nuns might not have equipped me for San Francisco but they are all gone, that world is gone, we’re here, we have to stop pretending, we have to stop living in a place that’s changed on us while we have been away. I don’t want to be a perfectly preserved bug trapped in amber. Didi, I can’t deal with modern India, its changed too much and too fast, and don’t want to live in a half-India kept on life—support. (p. 184)

One of the major drawbacks of the studies which talk about changes in immigrant “women’s lives is that they do not place gender roles in a meaningful context.”35 Sydney Stahl Weinberg has also commented that many of such studies leave unexamined the texture of women’s lives.36 Bharati Mukherjee’s Desirable Daughters in a way fills up this gap by providing an intimate glance into women’s life, albeit from the viewpoint of the upper middle class Indian society. Tara wants to create her own mistakes, gain her own experiences. In order to reconstruct her identity, she leaves her husband, shifts to a not-so-fashionable-area, chooses a school for her son which is “slanted to the arts” (p. 153), and shares her house with her lover Andy, a Zen quoting,
Hungarian-American retrofitter. This process also generates anguish and uncertainty, which she tries to overcome by regularly writing and talking to her family members in India. She tries to keep herself busy by doing some voluntary work at a local primary school. She has at least symbolically rejected her old cultural values, yet one can sense the presence of a deep-rooted nostalgia in her narrative. The past becomes a constant refrain not only to compare things, but often also to pass judgments. The loneliness, which is mentioned as a causal factor in her divorce, has not been filled up by any other overpowering emotion. Her home in San Francisco does not become an image of autonomous selfhood to her, rather it reminds her “not unhappily of mountain resorts in India” (p. 24). While she enjoys her American invisibility that frees her to make herself over by the hour (p. 78), she is unable to really belong to its society. Torn between the demands of two cultures, she comments:

The moment I step outside the bookstore on to crowded Haight street, I lose the heady kinship with the world that I feel through me reading…. I am not the only blue-jeaned woman with a Pashmina shawl around my shoulders and broken down running shoes on my feet. I am not the only Indian on the block. All the same, I stand out, I’m convinced. I don’t belong here, despite my political leanings; worse, I don’t want to belong. (p. 79)

At moments Tara is uncomfortably conscious of this schism, “Out of structure, Bish created greater order. Out of order, I created chaos. Out of chaos, one hopes, Rabi will create something resembling a new American consciousness” (p. 155).
The portrayal of Tara’s estranged oldest sister whom she simply calls Didi also exhibits the rupture between tradition and modernity. While Bish wants to perpetuate gender roles within the family and retain a traditional identity for himself, and Tara challenges his proclivity for the status quo; Didi changes her gender and identity as a Bengali Bhadra Lok into a community channel television programme “Namaskar Probasi” and uses the newly created cult figure to sell her products. She also involves Tara in her venture, all the time astutely ignoring the presence of an illegitimate son. Instead of trying to redefine her role as a woman in different relationships in an open society, she uses her gender and background to sustain herself.

Tara represents the dilemma of an average migrant. The demands of tradition and their hold on one’s psyche are never ultimately rejected, the temptations to accommodate in the new culture are also painful. She tries to create a personal space for herself through compromise. Rejection of her husband and associated security is a bold step for an Indian girl of Tara’s background, but she is equally conscious to hide it from her ailing and retired parents and other Indian family friends. Despite an obvious diffidence she questions, at least for some time, traditional notions and shuns the clichéd answers provided by conventions. She wants to redefine herself and create fresh gender relations according to her new experiences. Nyman has quoted Susheila Nasta’s Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain (2002) to authenticate similar argument in her essay, “For diaspora does not only create an unrequited desire for a lost homeland but also a ‘homing desire’ a desire to reinvent and rewrite home as much as a desire to come to terms with an exile from it” (Nyman, 56). Nyman herself has termed Tara’s struggle as a “desire of constructing hybridity and forming new forms of identity and culture in
space” (p. 56). Strangely though, Tara’s struggle to redefine her gender role ultimately sounds hollow. Despite a conscious fight, liberated attitude, acceptance of her sons’ gay sexuality and live-in relationships, she is unable to transcend the traditional priorities of an Indian woman. In her interview with Dave, Bharati Mukherjee has termed Tara as a “very cosmopolitan character,” who somehow “doesn’t have the focus”. The Indian traditions do not support her at all during her struggle to redefine herself. Tara has left Bish in “a huff”, as Mukherjee herself comments in her interview with Dave: “because she has fabricated an image of him as a kind of father figure, and she’s decided in her quest for freedom that the gated community in Atherton is a prison. I had no idea when I started out that she would try to woo him back in that scene in Rivoli street.”

The scene in Rivoli street categorically suggests that Tara’s rejection of traditional gender-roles is incomplete. When Tara meets Bish after nearly three years, her first reaction is that he is “desperately in need of a makeover” (p. 259). During a reminiscence of her divorce settlement, she feels amused and indebted to Bish’s “generosity”, as he had paid all the bills of household repairs, even though he had no legal obligation. She broods:

Bish had not taken the simplest corporate precaution against personal liability. American contingencies like divorce simply had not occurred to him. You married, you had a son, you provided for the family, and if you provided very well, everyone was happy. Or at least unhappily bottled up. As for me, the traditional Hindu marriage ceremony did not include preen up. (p. 260)
Tara also finds his “roundabout acknowledgement” of his curiosity about her being “unimaginably charming” (p. 262). The previous complaints are forgotten and she finds that it is impossible not to love him, “How can you not love such a man?” (p. 263) Bish’s admission that he has failed in the “basic duty of a man in the householder phase of his life, to support and sustain his marriage” (p. 265) evokes the hopes of compromise in Tara’s heart:

I might very well have been the only appropriate woman in the world for him. And because of his rectitude, if only I could bend it ardent it just a little bit, he might have been the only man for me. I think we recognized that. All we had to do was reach across an ever narrowing gulch. He would know to include me in his world. I would know not to expect from him things he couldn’t deliver. (p. 268)

The constant refrain of *bishey bish khai* (only poison delivers us from poison) which she takes up after her house has been bombed, and which is also a pun on her husband’s name which suggests that she is trying to seek emotional sustenance through her attempts to revive a gender relationship on traditional lines.

In her interview with *bookreporter.com* (on 28 March, 2002), Bharati Mukherjee has remarked that she writes “in the tradition of immigrant experience rather than nostalgia and expatriation.” However, the conclusion of *Desirable Daughters* has been made nostalgic by the fact that Tara is not completely able to restructure conventional gender roles—cross-cultural transactions have not equipped her with the strength to eschew eschatological gender roles postulated by traditional norms.
Bharati Mukherjee in *Desirable Daughters* has tried to portray the cultural conflicts of tradition and modernity, the difference between Indianness and Americanness, *deshi* and *videshi* through three sisters of Indian background especially from Calcutta Bengali background through which she emphasizes on “the tradition of immigrant experience rather than nostalgia and expatriation.” But it is her statement when she starts her novel writing, she is gripped in the nostalgia, search for home where her experience of immigration fails and she becomes ‘a divided self’ torn between ‘home’ and ‘adopted land’. But, in brief, the diasporic self of the novelist continues in search of another self which results in ‘fractured identity’ or ‘a fluid identity’.
References


28. Ibid., p. xx.


