CHAPTER III

THE FIRST PHASE

(1972)

THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER

A Novel

Bharati Mukherjee

Award-winning author of JASMINE.

"Mukherjee writes with beautiful prose, quietly evoking a rich Indian world.

The Village Voice"

(1975)

Wife

Bharati Mukherjee

More from an Indian family, and yet familiar to all.

The story of a young woman who challenges tradition and expectations.

The Village Voice"
CHAPTER-III

THE FIRST PHASE

Bharati Mukherjee’s creative odyssey spans a period of about four decades which witnessed the publication of eight novels and some short story-collections, besides other non-fictional writings. Mukherjee’s creative world is inhabited by people of various religious faiths, diverse ethnicities and different cultural ethos so much so that it is almost a Noah’s Ark. An instinctive urge to grapple with cultural tension, which defines her best creative impulse remarkably manifested in all her fictional writings. With a view to making an in-depth study, her career can be conveniently divided into three well-marked stages as the phase of Expatriation (from 1972 to 1989), the phase of Transition (from 1989 to 2002), and the phase of Immigration (from 2002 onwards). The first phase forms the contents of third chapter of the thesis where her two early novels *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975) which were written during her stay in Canada, will be discussed in detail with Bharati Mukherjee’s development of diasporic consciousness. The second phase, which is most prolific in terms of fictional output has been analyzed in the fourth chapter. The four novels – *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It to Me* (1997) and *Desirable Daughters* (2002) – that were brought out during this period betray the resolution of earlier cultural tension since Mukherjee has experienced complete immigration in the American set-up by now. The third phase has been discussed in the fifth chapter with her last two novels- *The Tree Bride* (2004) and *Miss New India* (2011).
Expatriation is the modern complex phenomenon of the present century when people not only from India but also from other parts of world have migrated from the colonial country to the free country like U.S.A., U.K., Canada and other European countries. The West as the non-orient had always been a source of attraction for the orients. Expatriation involves a wistful longing for the past especially the ancestral home, the pains of displacement and exile, unfriendly surroundings and the imposed identity of the adopted land on the expatriates which brings the conflict of cultures. We can witness the ongoing quest from ‘expatriation’ to ‘immigration’ in Bharati Mukherjee’s writings. Her major concern is the life of South-Asian expatriates/immigrants in USA and Canada which encounters the problems of ‘acculturation’ and ‘assimilation’. George Steiner calls them as ‘the contemporary everyman’ and Uma Parameswaran considers it as the phase of ‘expatriate sensibility’. The present chapter deals with such theme of expatriation which leads from ‘the autobiographical concern’ to ‘multiculturalism/diversity’ which is a body of Bharati Mukherjee’s diasporic experience.

Bharati Mukherjee’s early novels: The Tiger’s Daughter (1972) and Wife (1975) explore the conditions of being an Indian expatriate and that of being an American immigrant. In conceiving the character of Tara in The Tiger’s Daughter, Mukherjee had already begun to distance herself from the former role. In writing of the aborted Americanization of Dimple in Wife, she was already feeling her way into the latter. Here, we are dealing with Tara the expatriate and Dimple the immigrant.

Bharati Mukherjee’s first novel The Tiger’s Daughter (1972) is a very fine manifestation of cultural conflict. This is an interesting study of an upper class Bengali Brahmin girl who goes to America for higher
studies. Though afraid of the unknown world of America in the beginning, she tries to adjust herself to it by entering into the wedlock with an American. She returns to India after seven years, only to find herself as a total stranger to the inherited milieu. She realizes that she is now neither Indian nor truly American. She is totally confused and lost.

The actual starting point of the story dates back to a rainy night in the year 1879. It was the day of the grand wedding ceremony of the daughters of Hari Lal Banerjee, the ‘Zamindar’ of village Pachapara. Standing under a wedding canopy on the roof of his house, Hari Lal Banerjee could have hardly imagined what future holds in store for his coming generations. He “did not hear the straining and imprisoned ghost of change.”1 As she experienced that

the shadows of suicide on exile, of Bengali soil sectioned and ceded, of workers rising against their bosses could not have been divined by even a wise man in those days. *(The Tiger’s Daughter, p.6)*

After the marriage of Hari Lal Banerjee’s daughters, life continued to be pleasant in the village Pachapara and many more marriages took place and many deaths too. After two summers, Hari Lal Banerjee fell a prey to an unseen assassin while mediating a feud. All the reputation and influence of Banerjee family died with him. Nobody knew at that time that years later a young woman who had never been to Pachapara would grieve for the Banerjee’s family and try to analyse the reasons for its change. She would sit by a window in America to dream of Hari Lal, her great-grandfather, and she
would wonder at the gulf that separated him from herself. (p.9)

This young woman is nobody else but Tara Banerjee, the great-grand daughter of Hari Lal Banerjee and the daughter of Bengal Tiger, the owner of famous Banerjee & Thomas (Tobacco) Co. Ltd. Tara is sent by her father at an early age of fifteen to America for higher study. When this young Indian girl comes to terms with the American life, her reactions are one of fear and anger:

For Tara, Vassar had been an almost unsalvageable mistake. If she had not been a Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin, the great-grand daughter of Hari Lal Banerjee, or perhaps if she had not been trained by the good nuns at St. Blaise’s to remain composed and ladylike in all emergencies, she would have rushed home to India at the end of her first week. (p.10)

In Ploughkeepsie she feels homesick. She senses discrimination even if her roommate refuses to share her bottle of mango chutney. As it is typical of Indians who are proud of their family and genealogy, she defends her family and her country instinctively. At such moments when she thinks like breaking, she ever prays to goddess Kali for strength. When at the end of May, that first year abroad, girls around her prepare to go home, she is seized by a vision of terror:

She saw herself sleeping in a large carton on a sidewalk while hatted men made impious remark to her. Headless monsters winked at her from eyes embedded in pudgy shoulders…. She suffered fainting spells, headaches and nightmares …. She complained of homesickness in letters to
her mother, who promptly prayed to Kali to save Tara’s conscience, chastity, and complexion. (p.13)

Circumstances are so contrive incidentally that she falls in love with an American. Mukherjee’s description of Tara’s chance meeting with David betrays her faith:

Within fifteen minutes of her arrival at the Greyhound bus station there (at Madison), in her anxiety to find a cab, she almost knocked down a young man. She did not know then that she eventually would marry that young man. (p.14)

Tara’s husband, David Cartwright is wholly Western and she is always apprehensive of this fact. She cannot communicate with him the finer nuances of her family background and of life in Calcutta. Her failure to do so is rooted in their cultural differences. In India, a marriage is not simply a union of two individuals; it is a coming together of two families as well. But in Western countries like America, a marriage is simply a contract between two individuals. David is hostile to genealogies and often mistakes her love for family for over-dependence. He asks native questions about Indian customs and traditions and she feels completely insecure in an alien atmosphere because “Madison Square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner.”

After a gap of seven years, Tara designs a trip to India. For years she has thought of this return and thinks that all hesitations, all undo fears of the stay abroad would be crossed out quite magically if she returns home to Calcutta, but it never happens. The new Americanized Tara fails to bring back her old sense of perception and she views India with the keenness of a foreigner. Her entire outlook has changed. Shobha Shinde refers to this expatriate weakness, “An immigrant away from home
idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it, and so does Tara in America but when she comes to confront the changed and hostile circumstances of her home country, all her romantic dreams and ideals crumble down. She realizes that she has drowned her childhood memories in the crowd of America.

On landing at Bombay airport, she is warmly greeted by her relatives but her response is very cold and dispassionate. When her relatives address her as ‘Tultul’, a nick name which they always used for her, it sounds strange to her Americanized ears. Seven years ago, while on her way to Vassar “she had admired the house on Marine Drive, had thought them fashionable, but now their shabbiness appalled her” (p.18). Her reaction towards the railway station is also one of despise. She “thought the station was more like a hospital; there were so many sick and deformed men sitting listlessly on bundles and trunks” (p.19). In the train, she happens to share her compartment with a Marwari and a Nepali. She thinks that both will “ruin her journey to Calcutta” (p.20). The Tiny Marwari is very ugly, and appears insolent while the flat-nosed Nepali is also equally disgusting. Her reaction is voiced in the following extract:

I have returned to dry holes by the sides of railway tracts, she thought, to brown fields like excavations for a thousand homes. I have returned to India.(p.21)

With coming back to India, America looks like a dream land to her. Just a few days have passed since she left America but it seems to her that she had never been out of India, her old sense of pride comes back to her. “She had not thought that seven years in another country, a husband, a new blue passport could be so easily blotted out”(p.25). To her, her husband David “seemed far less real than the flat-faced Nepali with extra-
sensory perception. She watched David’s healthy face “disappear into the fleshy folds of the Nepali’s neck and the spider’s body” (p.26). As soon as she reaches Howrah station, she is outraged by “the squalor and confusion of Howrah station” (p.27). At the station, though surrounded by the army of relatives and by vendors ringing bells, beggars pulling at sleeves, children coughing on tracks, Tara feels herself completely alone. Everything looks her unreal except Bengal Tiger, her father. For a moment she thinks she might go mad. Even her father “seemed to have become a symbol for the outside world. He had become a pillar supporting a balcony that had long outlived its beauty and its function” (p.29). When she reaches home she feels momentary peace of mind:

After seven years abroad, after extraordinary turns of destiny that had swept her from Calcutta to Poughkeepsie, and Madison, and finally to a two-room apartment within walking distance of Columbia, strange turns that had taught her to worry over a dissertation on Katherine Mansfield, the plight of women and racial minorities, Tara was grateful to call this (her father’s) restful house home. (p.33)

Staying in her parental house, she records her impression of New York:

New York, she thought now, had been exotic. Not because it had laundromates and subways. But because there were policemen with dogs prowling in the underground tunnels. Because girls like her, at least almost like her, were being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings. Because students were rioting about campus recruiters and far away wars rather than the price of rice on the stiffness of final exams. Because people were agitated over pollution ....
New York was certainly extraordinary, and it had driven her to despair…. (pp.33-34)

She recalls how she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make her apartment more Indian on days when she thought she could possibly not survive.

While in America, Tara was always under stress, she was always conscious of her foreignness. She felt herself rootless but things do not appear better in India also. Her mother compels her to accompany her to Aunt Jharna’s place to visit her ailing child infected by polio. Tara tries to sympathise with Aunt Jharna but is gravely mistaken as Aunt Jharna insults her. Tara’s reaction to this is one of mutually contradictory emotions. While on the one hand, she cannot sympathise with the aunt’s religious attempts to heal her child, on the other, she thinks: “I don’t hate you. I love you, and the miserable child, the crooked feet, the smoking incense holder, I love you all” (p.38).

Tara herself wonders at the foreignness of her spirit which does not permit her to establish an emotional kinship with her old relatives and friends:

How does the foreignness of spirit begin? …. Does it begin, right in the centre of Calcutta, with forty ruddy Belgian women, fat foreheads swelling under starched white head­dresses, long black habits intensifying the hostility of the Indian Sun? Or did it drift inward with the winter chill at Vassar, as she watched the New York snow settle over new architecture, blonde girls…?(p.37)
She meets her friends but even in their company antithetical feelings beset her, “Seven years ago she had played with these friends, done her home work with Nilima, briefly fancied herself in love with Pronob, debated with Reena at the British Council.” (p.43) But now “she feared their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness” (p.43). Tara forgets the next step of the rituals while preparing for worship with her mother and at once realizes: “It was not a simple loss ....This forgetting of prescribed actions; it was a little death, a hardening of the hearts a cracking of axis and center” (p.51). Religion plays a central role in any culture. When she forgets the rituals it upsets her because at once she realizes what America has done to her. Now she has become ‘foreign’ to her native values also and it fills her with a sense of rootlessness. She starts questioning the validity of her own identity.

The Catelli- Continental Hotel on Chowringhee Avenue, ‘the navel of the universe’ becomes her favorite place and she spends much of her time in that hotel along with her friends. There were many parties in honour of Tara’s return, many teas, many dinners hosted by friends. At first Tara looks forward to these parties. She hastens to Pronob’s or Reena’s so that she can dole out remembrance with people who easily get her attitudes and mistakes. “Her friends had seemed to her a peaceful island in the midst of Calcutta’s commotion. She had leaned heavily on their self-confidence” (p.55). But gradually the beliefs and the omissions of her friends begin to unsettle her. “Her friends let slip their disapproval of her, they suggested her marriage had been imprudent, that the seven years abroad had eroded all that was fine and sensitive in her Bengali nature”(p.55). Tara feels agitated at the lack of seriousness in the group of her friends. They want to listen to stories about America about television and automobiles, frozen foods and record player but when she mentions
ghettos or student demonstrations they protest, Tara notices a lot of change in her friends during these seven years. She cannot think of Pronob being a big industrialist. How can she tolerate his fatness and his ill-tempered nature whom she had seen as a sensitive and poetic young man. Now and then her friends and relatives make her feel guilty for marrying an American. “In India she felt she was not married to a person but foreigner, and his foreignness was a burden” (p.62). Though she writes to David regularly, she fails to communicate her feelings for him because:

It was hard to tell a foreigner that she loved him very much when she was surrounded by the Bengal Tiger’s chairs, tables, flowers, and portraits. (p.63)

How can she “describe in an aerogramme the endless conversations at the Catelli-Continental, or the strange old man (Joyonto Roy Choudhury) in a blazer who tried to catch her eye in the café, or the hatred of Aunt Jharna or the bitterness of slogans scrawled on walls of stores and hotels?”(p.63) Tara is totally confused. She cannot share her feelings with her friends and relatives and she fails to share her feelings even to her foreign husband. For David, she is a foreigner and for her Indian friends and relatives, she is a sinner who has polluted herself by marrying a ‘mleccha’ (outcaste). M. Srivaramkrishna blames her American husband and western education for her feelings of rootlessness and lack of identity:

Tara in The Tiger’s Daughter finds it difficult to relate herself to her family, city culture in general since her marriage to an American, her western education are enough signs to brand her as an ‘alienated’ westernized woman. The
implicit logic is that since she is exposed to the west and has absorbed its values she must be necessarily alienated. Therefore, even when she tries to ‘voice’ her continuing attachment for and identity with India, the voice does not carry conviction for it is at variance with the usual stance-of difference and arrogance—one generally associates with the ‘westernized’ (exiled) Indian.

Tara realizes that America has transformed her completely. “Tara’s westernization has opened her eyes to the gulf between two worlds that still make India the despair of those who govern it.” In India, she sees disease, despair, riot, poverty, the children eating yoghurt off the sidewalk. Now she has started looking at the ugly aspects of India. Always in her mind there is an on-going conflict between her old sense of perception and outlook on Calcutta and her changed outlook. Jasbir Jain, thus, comments:

Tara’s consciousness of the present is rooted in her life in the States and when she looks at India anew it is not through her childhood associations or her past memories but through the eyes of her foreign husband David. Her reactions are those of a tourist, of a foreigner.

Tara visits a funeral pyre at the river bank with Joyonto Roy Chowdhury, the owner of tea estates in Assam and runs at the sight of the ‘tantric’ who stretches his hands for her palms. She fails to read his intentions and thinks that the man needs ‘bakshees’. Is it a simple misunderstanding of tantric’s intentions or Tara’s inherent fear and uncertainty of her life. It seems she does not want to show her palms to the tantric because she is conscious of her sin of marrying an American
without matching her horoscopes. Again her visit with Joyonto Roy Chowdhury to his Tollygunge Compound turns out to be painful. When Joyonto Roy proposes to show her the place and says that it is a ‘bustee’, Tara is all ecstatic like Western tourists:

> Is it a ‘bustee’? asked Tara. She recalled frustrating moment at Vassar, when idealistic dormitory neighbours had asked her to describe the slums of India. (p.113)

The circuitous and uneven road to Tollygunge troubles her a lot. She cannot bear the dust and foul smell of squalor:

> Had Tara visualized at the start of the journey this exposure to ugliness and danger, to viruses that stalked the street, to dogs and cows scrapping in garbage dumps, she would have refused Joyonto’s invitation. (p.115)

Joyonto shows her his vast compound which is now occupied by refugees and quite sentimentally tells her how he proposed his garden etc. But Tara is hardly interested in these details:

> Tara was bewildered by her first view of the large and dusty compound. She thought if she had been David she would have taken out notebook and pen and entered important little observations. All she saw was the obvious. Goats and cows grazing in the dust, dogs chasing the friskier children, men sleeping on string beds under a banyan tree. Children playing with mud beside a cracked tubewell. Rows of hovels and huts. (p.116)

Tara loses her balance of mind when she sees a little girl suffering from leprosy. She screams and becomes almost hysterical:
Don’t touch me, don’t touch me! Actually Tara has never been a part of the crowd. She has always been sheltered, as child, young adult, and woman. Each excursion traumatizes her by bringing her closer to the touch of the masses.6

In fact, disease, suffering and poverty are part of existence and a common Indian ignores it or rather accepts it as an integral part of life. Tara herself once ignored all these things but her stay in States has opened her eyes to the gulf between the lives of the poor and those of the rich in her own country. Like the people of the West, now she has started looking at India as a land of poor people living in hostile, unhygienic conditions and suffering from starvation, decay and disease. Reena’s mother entrusts her with the duty of mediating between them and the Irish-American Washington McDowell but her failure in understanding McDowell testifies to the fact that she has not been able to gratify the complications of American culture. America is a land of diverse cultures and people from all parts of the world have settled there. Though Tara marries an American she remains unexposed to the ‘other’ culture within America. McDowell, being a black, belongs to the class of ‘have-nots’ in America, so it is quite natural for him to join hands with the agitating crowd of labourers of Calcutta.

During the summer Darjeeling is the favourite holidaying place for the upper class families of Bengal. Along with the families of her friends, Tara’s family also move to Darjeeling for a holiday trip. Darjeeling is as beautiful as ever. Tara tries to enjoy the beauties of blue mountains and natural surroundings. But her trip is marred by ugly and violent incidents. One afternoon she accompanies Pronob and an American lady Antonia on horseback around the Observatory Hill but, on the way, she is stopped and teased by some young hooligans. This incident leaves Tara troubled
and ill-humoured. Not only this but she is also insulted by one of the members while she suggests something about the beauty contest organized by the hotel manager. The heart specialist who is one of the judges sarcastically remarks, “I think your years abroad have robbed you of feminine propriety” (p.187). But it doesn’t mean that in Darjeeling everything happens negative. Once at the special request of her religious mother, she visits Mata Mananbala Devi. She forgets all the malice and hatred for the time being and feels her soul uplifted by the ‘darshan’ of Mata. It is a typical Indian experience to undergo a sort of trance in a temple:

Tara found herself shouting “Ma, Ma, Mata” with the rest. She found it easy suddenly to love everyone, even Antonia Whitehead, who was the only person standing in the entire room. It was not Kananbala Mata who moved her so much as the worshippers themselves. (p.173)

For the time being Tara casts aside all her suspicions and apprehensions:

Warm and persistent tears rose in Tara’s heart. She forgot her instinctive suspicions, her fears of misunderstanding and scenes, she forgot her guardedness and atrophy in that religious moment. “Ma, Ma, Mata!” she shouted with the rest. (p.173)

Here the reaction of Antonia Whitehead, who is a representative of American culture, is noteworthy:

What India needed … was less religious excitement and more birth-control devices. She hates confusion of issues, she said. Indians should be more discerning. They should
demand economic reforms and social upheavals and throw out the Chief ‘Chela’ as pledge of future success. (pp.174-175)

Tara plans a trip to Nayapur along with her whole group of friends thereafter. Nayapur is a new township in a complex of coal mines, steel foundries and plants for hydroelectricity. It spreads across scarred little hills and forests. Tara meets the politician Tuntunwala, the same ugly Marwari fellow with whom she had shared her railway compartment while traveling from Bombay to Calcutta. Mr. Tuntunwala, the national personage, has come to plan his strategy for the elections in Nayapur. Earlier Tara has come across Mr. Tuntunwala several times. She has always felt a kind of strange attraction towards this man and so when Mr. Tuntunwala proposes to show her Nayapur, she does not decline his proposal. At last this meeting ends with her claustrophobic rape by this wretched politician. Tara’s failure to stop Tuntunwala from seducing her suggests that more or less she too is party in that amorous game or she might be only a victim. It seems Tara is just ignorant of the changes that have taken place in Calcutta because,

In another Calcutta such as scene would not have happened. Tara would not have walked into the suite of gentleman for medicine, and a gentleman would not have dared to make such improper suggestions to her. But except for Camac Street, Calcutta has changed greatly; and even Camac Street had felt the first stirring of death. With new dreams like Nayapur Tara’s Calcutta was disappearing. New dramas occurred with each new bulldozer incision in the green and romantic hills. Slow learners like Tara were merely victims. (p.199)
Tara does not tell any one of her friends about her seduction just for fear of disgrace. She realizes:

She could not share her knowledge of Tuntunwala with any of her friends. In a land where a friendly smile, an accidental brush of the fingers, can ignite rumors—even lawsuits—how is one to speak of Mr. Tuntunwala’s violence? (p.199)

The last pages of the novel are full of rapid and forceful incidents. Bharati Mukherjee brings the novel to a close with a sensational note like some Indian Hindi movie. The whole of Calcutta is burning with the violent demonstrations and riots. The labourers are rising against their masters. The entire city is losing its memories in a bonfire of effigies, buses and trams:

Tragedy, of course, was not uncommon in Calcutta. The newspapers were full of epidemics, collisions, fatal quarrels and starvation. Even murders, beheadings of landlords in front of their families…(p.197)

In such a situation how Tara can cope with one who “longed for the Bengal of Satyajit Ray, children running through cool green spaces, aristocrats despairing in music rooms of empty palaces”(p.105). Out of bewilderment, she plans to go back to David and calls her friends at Catelli Continental to let them know about her decision. In the meantime, the troop of marchers heads towards Catelli and she with her company gets surrounded by the mob. In an attempt to escape Joyonto Roy Chowdhury is caught in the messy crowd. Pronob tries to save him but is unfortunately killed by mob. The novel ends with:
Tara still locked in a car across the street from the Catelli-Continental, wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she did not, whether David would even know that she loved him fiercely. (p. 210)

This close of novel in the ‘medias res’ leaves the readers to conjecture for themselves as to what ultimately happens to Tara. Does she succeed in returning to her husband and start living happily with him keeping all her nostalgia aside or she falls a victim to the rioting mob? Once, in an interview, Bharati Mukherjee said about her first novel:

It is the wisest of my novels in the sense that I was between both worlds. I was detached enough from India so that I could look back with affection and irony, but I didn’t know America enough to feel any conflict. I was like a bridge poised between two worlds.

Mukherjee’s statement has a force of conviction behind it in that she has also married an American, and is, thus, amply qualified to articulate identical responses authentically. However, her claim that she did not feel any conflict appears far-fetched. Tara Banerjee, who is identified with a majority of critics, as the writer finds herself sandwiched between two cultures. Her America, far from being a land of promise, is a land of violence and atrocity. It is a land of strangers and all her attempts at assimilation are destined to failure due to her ‘otherness’. She breaks her family tradition and marries American David. It is also an attempt to get security in an alien land. But her marriage proves a failure because it is an emotional marriage, a decision taken impulsively. Since she has not thoroughly understood David and his society, she always remains nervous and apprehensive. In an attempt to Americanize herself,
she has lost her Indian identity miserably. Tara Banerjee is not only an immigrant but she is a woman too. It makes all the difference in the Indian context. In India, woman’s fate is decided very early in her life because the parents start discriminating between their male and female child since the very beginning. It is incessantly hammered on the girls’ consciousness that she has to move somewhere else and must be submissive and assimilative in all favourable and unfavourable conditions. Thus, she starts a life of duality and conflict since her childhood. After marriage she undergoes a traumatic dilemma enjoined upon her to belong to an entirely new set-up. This in itself is a kind of migration- a migration from one’s own former ‘self’ to an imposed ‘self’. Such conflict gets multiplied with migration to another country. Woman has to face diasporic situations even in her own country. She is a ‘Parayadhan’ and when she is married, she is transplanted into another home. Tara’s situations should be looked at from same angle as Brinda Bose rightly remarks:

Duality and conflict are not merely a feature of immigrant life in America. Mukherjee’s women are brought up in a culture that presents them with such ambiguities from childhood. The breaking of identities and the discarding of language actually begin early, their lives being shaped by the confluence of rich cultural and religious traditions on the one hand, and the “new learning” imposed by British colonialism in India, on the other. These different influences involve them in tortured processes of self-recognition and self-assimilation right from the start; the confusion is doubled upon coming to America.8
Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, however, ascribes her failure to her constant nervousness regarding her role as a Bengali wife of an American:

Tara’s petulance and constant nervousness regarding her role as the Bengali wife of an American, visiting her family in Calcutta, overshadows her well-intentioned efforts to understand her world of diverse cultures.9

In fact, Tara’s confusion results from her own ‘unstable self’. After marrying an American she should have held fast to her decision of which she is incapable. Instead of wrestling with her predicament, she visits to her native place armed with a changed perspective. Tara does not understand that ‘like the Bharati Mukherjee (the Authoress) of Days and Nights in Calcutta, she is an outsider in India because of her decision to leave India, to live in North America, to marry an American mlecchu (outcaste) husband .... Her sense of alienation in Calcutta is symbolized by her regular visits to Catelli-Continental Hotel from where she views the turmoil of Calcutta from the safe heights of a tourist, cut-off from the ‘real’ India which seethes below her.”10

In The Tiger’s Daughter, Mukherjee sets about exposing how it feels for a fifteen-year-old girl to leave a sheltered home, hedged by class privilege and wealth, come back to it grown to young womanhood – to come home after breaking all the social taboos by marrying a foreigner- and see whether she can find her place at home again. All the questions that impelled for answers at Vassar, she thinks, would be answered as she continues to witness the crowd’s use of its numbers to surround or gherao, paralyzing movement, political demonstration, street and bustee (squatter) life, at first from the security of the balcony of the fashionable
Catelli-Continental Hotel and finally marooned in a car in the middle of an angry mob. But to no avail because cultural dichotomy has snapped all ties of communication. Bracketing her with the artist, Maya Manju Sharma perceptively comments:

When Tara/Bharati goes west, she undergoes a new birth in the womb of Vassar and growth in graduate school. The new-birthed consciousness-birthed in dormitories and classrooms by a Western curriculum and consciousness-seeks to hold its history at its center where the knowledge is visionless. Like Henry James’ heroine, Isabel Archer, who goes to Europe/Britain, the source of her tradition, for vision in knowledge, so Tara/Bharati must come to the source-the omphalos of all vision—the Catelli-Continental. Thanks to Joyonto Roy Chowdhury, and her years away, Tara begins to exchange vision for insight. At the end of the novel, as she sits shivering in the Fiat, surrounded by a mob, wondering whether she will ever see her husband again, she sees the vision twinkling, pinching, pulling, slapping through the crowd that surrounds the hotel. Bharati Mukherjee is refusing to state what it is, invites a reader response in decoding the vision.11

Tara caught in the midst of the rioting mob, marking the invisible presence of her husband, David, leaves the reader stunned and wondering as the novel ends there. In a sense, the turmoil outside is but an external manifestation of Tara’s inner state of mind and by leaving her amidst the turmoil, perhaps, Mukherjee hints at the irreconcilability of such conflicts. Another significant ramification of cultural conflict appears in the novel discussed hereafter.
Bharati Mukherjee’s second novel and a finalist for Governor General’s Award, *Wife* (1975) takes up a more complex dimension of the theme of immigrant experience. It centres round the life of middle class married Bengali woman who migrates from Calcutta to New York. After a ten year sojourn in Canada, Mukherjee returned to her native country in 1973 and encountered an India which she had never anticipated: a world far less innocent than the one she remembered. During her visit to Calcutta, she got the material for this novel as she recalls, “quite by an accident, I heard the question that shaped my second novel- what do Bengali girls do between the ages of eighteen and twenty one.”

Mukherjee opens her novel in a true Indian tradition of storytelling. The simple opening line- “Dimple Dasgupta had set her heart on marrying a neurosurgeon” is quite telling and at once sets the scene that anticipates something unnatural. For Dimple Dasgupta, neuro-surgeon is a very strange choice. Mukherjee’s choice of the name of the heroine as Dimple is a deliberate one and her intentions are quite explicit from the cover page of the novel where she quotes the OED definition of “Dimple” as –“any slight surface depression”. From the very beginning, we feel that Dimple is far from normal girls. Dimple has nothing to do except thinking about marriage because she thinks that marriage is blessing in disguise. It will bring her freedom, fortune and perfect happiness:

    Marriage would bring her freedom, Cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities.
    Marriage would bring her love.

Dimple “thought of premarital life as a dress rehearsal for actual living. Years of waiting had already made her nervous, unnaturally prone to colds, cough and headaches” (p.3). Dimple is twenty but she bewails
for wasted years. Nothing pleases her more than the imagination about marrying a fellow who provides her all comforts. She is supposed to be studying for university examinations but books irritate her.

At last, Mr. Dasgupta finds a suitable match for Dimple. Amit Basu, a Consultant Engineer, is the match for Dimple. He has already applied for immigration to Canada and U.S. and his job application is also pending in Kenya. Dimple is all ecstatic about her marriage and does a lot of shopping for celebrating the occasion. She comes to Amit’s residence at Dr. Sarat Banerjee Road after her marriage. Basus are good people but their house is not so spacious and attractive and Dimple does not feel comfortable there. She does not like Amit’s mother and sister also and her mother-in-law dislikes her name ‘Dimple’ and loves to call her ‘Nandini’ which simply infuriates the bride. However, Dimple thinks that all these problems are temporary and with the confirmation for immigration they will eventually come to an end. She frequently talks with her husband about anticipated foreign trip though “Thoughts of living in Africa or North America terrified her.” (p.17)

Dimple Basu has always lived in a fantastic world which is created by herself. But when she confronts the harsh realities of life, the feathers of her imagination are clipped. All her dreams crumble one by one and she is deeply upset and lost. She feels that waiting for marriage was better than getting married and, therefore, starts hating everything:

She hated the grey cotton with red roses inside yellow circles that her mother-in-law had hung on sagging tapes against the metal bars of the windows. (p.20)

Her friend, Paramita Ray, whom everybody calls Pixie, had brought for her magazines in the days of waiting and she had seen in
those magazines how “young marrieds” were always going to decorators and selecting “their colours, especially their bed room colours. That was supposed to be the best part of getting married: being free and expressing yourself” (p.20). Dimple finds that this marriage has robbed her of all romantic yearnings so tastefully nourished.

One morning, Amit takes her to Kwality’s by taxi and orders chili chicken, chicken fried rice and chicken spring rolls. She feels uneasy handling the chicken pieces with fork and knife and thinks that it would have been better if Amit had taken her to Trinca’s instead:

He should have taken her to Trinca’s on Park Street, where she could have listened to a Goan band play American music, to prepare her for the trip of New York or Toronto. Or to discotheque in the Park Hotel, to teach her to dance and wriggle. (p.21)

Amit was not the man Dimple had imagined for her husband. When he is out of the house, she starts creating the man of her dream:

She borrowed a forehead from an aspirin ad, the lips, eyes and chin from a body-builder and shoulders ad, the stomach and legs from a trousers ad and put the ideal man. (p.23)

With the passing of time, the excitement of marriage diminishes and she becomes pregnant a state known for vomiting tendency. However, her nauseating proneness is abnormal because she deliberately vomits and never leaves any opportunity of doing so at all hours of the day and night. She feels a strange sensation:
The vomit fascinated her. It was hers; she was locked in the bathroom expelling brownish liquid from her body. She took pride in brownish blossoms… (p.30)

Pregnancy is a boon for Indian women because they are supposed to maintain the continuity of the clan and they become “Shakti-incarnate”. They are very source of ‘creation’. If a woman fails to reproduce a child she is condemned and becomes an object of hatred in society. But Dimple is singular in that “she thought of ways to get rid of… whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes.” (p.31) Her killing of the mice which looked pregnant also suggests that she does not feel at ease with her pregnancy. She becomes almost hysterical in killing that tiny creature without any rhyme and reason:

She pounded and pounded the baby clothes until a tiny gray creature ran out of the pile, leaving a faint trickle of blood on the linen. She chased it to the bathroom. She shut the door so it would not escape from her this time…. “I’ll get you” she screamed. There is no way out of this, my friend …” And in an outburst of hatred her body shuddering, her wrist taut with fury, she smashed the top of a small gray head. (p.35)

This act of killing is a manifestation of violence, smoldering inside her. Her repulsion with her own pregnancy is born out of her hatred for Amit who fails to feed her fantasy world.

Dimple is about to migrate but she does “not want to carry any relics from her old life” (p.42). She thinks that old things will remind her of frustrations and irritations. She counts her pregnancy also among the relics and ponders over the ways of getting rid of it. At last she decides to
end it by skipping ropes. The description of her self-abortion is very poignant and touching:

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

This is something which only Dimple can do and her self-abortion raises serious questions regarding her very womanhood. After terminating her pregnancy she hardly gives any after-thought to it. She never repents for the cruel deed she has committed by killing a prospective human life. She remains poised and dispassionate while it should have led her to an emotional upheaval. Rosanne Klass counts it as a serious mistake on Bharati Mukherjee’s part and questions her understanding of Indian culture. In a review of *Wife*, she comments:

For an Indian wife, childlessness is a disaster, pregnancy the achievement that seals her status. To overturn such ingrained values would involve a major emotional upheaval; yet Dimple acts on the vaguest and most undefined impulses, and thinks no more about it.14

Of course, Dimple’s reactions have not been given due attention but it should be remembered that Dimple is simply an individual and her strange actions should not be equated with the values of Indian culture. In the very beginning, Mukherjee has hinted at Dimple’s ill mental state. In the view of some critics Dimple’s act of abortion “is a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood.”
Symbolically, by revoking her motherhood, Dimple liberates herself from the traditional role of a Hindu wife by becoming a mother of a child. Like the Western feminists she asserts her will but her abortive act is kind of “moral and cultural suicide.”

When Amit’s confirmation for migration to U.S. comes, Dimple’s happiness is inexpressible. She prepares well and sees to it that nothing she misses which is necessary for a new life. She feels like being freed from the brazen fetters of servile domesticity. On the eve of their departure, Pixie organizes a grand party at which she invites only the media persons. Dimple meets Ratna Das, a middle aged modern wife of a media, brat there who does not give any importance to America. She says “It might be fun to go for a vacation …. But I would not want to settle there.” (p.46) Pixie echoes the same sentiment: “I wouldn’t want to feel foreigner all my life.” (p.46) But this hardly deters Dimple from her resolution. For her “real happiness was just in the movies or in the West.” (p.47)

The long awaited day of migration comes and Mr. & Mrs. Amit Basu set their feet at the Kennedy Airport where Jyoti Sen, Amit’s former classmate at the I.I.T., Kharagpur receives them. In the way, he talks about the triple-murder case which is the talk of the town. A guy murders three persons including the ice-cream vendor just for the simple reason that the fellow doesn’t have a chocolate ice-cream cone. On the way to the Sens Amit is unmindful of the scenes outside the car and is busy enquiring about job opportunities in America. Dimple feels excited and a little scared as well. She has never been to a city bigger than Calcutta and the magnificence of the city of New York terrifies her:
She had never seen such bigness before; the bigness was thrilling and a little scary as well. She could not imagine the kind of people who had conceived it and who controlled it.

(p.52)

The Sen apartment of Queens is all Indian inside. Dimple’s searching eyes notice a framed batik wall hanging which shows “King Ram and his court in splendid array.” (p.53) Sens are very conscious of their identity and they never try to come out of the ghetto, their “little-India” which is around them:

Because there are not chairs, we realize that the Sens never entertain Westerners in their disgust with beef eaters and American insincerity, insecurity with the English language, and projected losses on inexpensive furniture for those returning home.15

The Sens’ disgust with Americans and English language is quite in keeping with the feeling of insecurity as an ‘expatriate’. People raised in an entirely different social milieu and cultural atmosphere can hardly shed off their cherished values for one they are forced to adopt out of necessity. After all, the thousands of professionals, doctors, engineers, management professionals etc., who migrate to America or other European countries, mostly they do it for the sole purpose of earning a high salary and after a considerable period of time to return to their native land and enjoy a life of prestige and comfort. For them, the country of adoption is a temporary abode and they just try to pass their time preserving their own identity and upholding their own cultural and religious values. This is confirmed by the simple confession of Jyoti Sen:
If it weren’t for the money, I’d go back tomorrow. This is too much the rat race for a man like me. (p.55)

Getting a job in America is not an easy task especially if you happen to be an Indian. If one gets an opportunity, it is very difficult to sustain it and you have to bear all sorts of humiliation and exploitation without giving any vent to it. Jyoti Sen teaches Amit all tricks of the trade, the code of conduct as an Indian professional in America:

Work twice as hard, keep your mouth shut and you’ll be a millionaire in fifteen years. (p.56)

One day Dimple goes to the market with Meena Sen and wishes to buy a cheese cake. She is afraid to go to the shop alone but when Meena encourages her, she goes there. She is laden with fear and notices one by one inside the glass cake pickles, salads, hanging salamis, pink roost beef, roost duck and turkey etc. At last, she reaches the shop and asks for cheese cake and the shopkeeper starts looking at her with great embarrassment. Everywhere there is stench of blood which is intolerable for her nostrils to bear especially the stink of beef. Instantly, she fails to understand the shopkeeper and repeats her sentence. He asks whether she does not know the law and starts searching for something in his drawer. Dimple is so afraid, she thinks that the man is taking out his gun and she is left with no option but to be killed without crying. Here, she realizes the difference between Calcutta and New York.

In Calcutta she’d buy from Muslims, Biharis, Christians, Nepalis. She was used to marry races, she’d never been a communalist. (p.60)
But her first exposure to America leaves a traumatic effect on her mind. She fails to understand the reason why a man selling beef etc. cannot sell cheese cake. What is the law of America? Did she really insult that man by asking for cheese cake? Does this provide him with sufficient reason for killing her? She runs from there for life’s sake and forgets to buy anything for herself. Her bewilderment with America is due to her sheltered childhood. She had already ever been out of Calcutta. She did not know what might offend anybody there to cost her the precious life itself. How a boorish, an innocent Indian wife can keep her nerves in a country where murder was like flapping the bugs? Dimple thought:

She was caught in the crossfire of an American communalism. She could not understand. She felt she’d come very close to getting killed on her third morning in America. (p.60)

The party at Vinod Khanna’s place was splendid and Dimple saw Indian-Americans in flying colours. This was for the first time, Dimple happens to see so many Indians since she had left Calcutta. She realized, a “little India” had come alive. People like the Sens, Mehras, Khannas and Bhattacharya, Miss Chakravorty all are talking in familiar language. Everybody full of praise for Indian things- culture, food, habit etc. Everyone was feeling disgusted with Americans. For them, Americans are “dirty people” who bathe only once a week. Not only this they ‘use a lot of perfume’. This is just beyond Mrs. Bhattacharya’s understanding why they wash their clothes in the bath room sink in which they spit and wash their dishes? It reflects the cultural conflict between Indian and American ethos. Way back to Queens, Jyoti is full of praise for the feeling of unity among Indians abroad. Jyoti said:
Wasn’t it wonderful that Indians abroad were so outgoing and open-minded? They didn’t give a damn about communalism and petty feelings. They, personally, counted a number of Punjabis and Gujaratis and South Indians among their friends. (p.67)

Amit’s frustration is now obvious because he finds himself still jobless. In parties, his opinion does not matter. As the days pass by, he becomes more impatient and his confidence falls down. It embitters his relationship with Dimple and petty-fogging becomes the order of the day. On the other hand, Dimple helps Meena Sen in domestic works and spends her time in watching T.V. or reading newspapers. Dimple always lives under fear- and everything terrifies her. All she hears about is murder, smugglings in the basement of the building etc. She is afraid of the policeman:

She was scared of the policemen; they just did not look inoffensive, like the ones back home. (p.74)

The party at Mullicks (Ina and Bijoy) gives Dimple an opportunity to meet people both Indians and native Americans and study their behavior. Here, she meets Ina, the notorious wife of Bijoy Mullick for the first time. Sens and others are disguised with this Indian lady because “she wears pants and mascara” (p.68) and is “more American than the Americans” (p.68). She is a chain smoker, drinks, flirts and goes to night schools. She has a particular theory about Indian immigrants:

It takes them a year to go India out of their system. In the second year they’ve hungered for. So then they go back, or they stay here and vegetate or else they have got to live here like anyone else. (p.76)
But Indian society is patriarchal which does not permit a woman to talk in terms of liberation and equality. Here male members decide the fate of their female counterpart. Time and again, the Sens have cautioned Amit to keep Dimple out of touch with Ina, otherwise she will get corrupted by the latter’s crazy ideas. It is this caution which prompts Amit to restrain her from accepting Ina’s drink: “She does not like alcoholic beverages,” Amit said, “she does not even like coke” (p.77). It really astonishes the Western feminists who expect a straight answer from Dimple. It is at this party that Dimple and Amit meet Marsha Mookerji and Prodosh Mookerji –their future benefactors. For Dimple Milt Glasser, brother of Marsha is like a riddle. She is instantly attracted towards his tall and lanky personality and his courteous manners though “Dimple could not follow the way he talked, the things he talked about and the amazing leaps between his conversations” (p.83). Later in the novel, we see how Milt plays a pivotal role.

With the passage of time, Dimple starts breaking after the realization that she is deceived in marriage and a good-for-nothing husband like Amit will not cater to her dream world. She cannot tolerate his snores anymore and insomnia becomes her accustomed habit. She, suddenly, realizes that “she hated the Sens’ apartment, sofa-bed, and the wall to wall rug” (p.88). Now she gets disturbed at those habits of Amit which she ignored at Calcutta:

In Calcutta she had trained herself, not to see his hand (always the left) as it stopped carefully at each button, then slid up and down a few times before hanging limply at his side. But in New York, these little gestures had begun to irritate her. (p.88)
Amit’s unemployment was the root cause of all troubles. He was not the man, Dimple had wanted as husband:

She wanted Amit to be infallible, intractable, godlike but with boyish charm; wanted him to find a job so that after a decent number of years, he could take his saving and retire with her to a three-storey house in Ballygunge Park. (pp. 88-89)

She thinks that her marriage to Amit is a failure of her dreams:

She was bitter that marriage had betrayed her, had not provided all the glittery things she had imagined, had not brought her cocktails under canopied skies and three A.M. drives to dinzy restaurants where they sold divine Kababs rolled in roti. (pp.101-102)

Her confusion with the names of the places like Nebraska and Navada, Ohio and Iowa is only an external manifestation of the confusion growing within her mind. She is equally unhappy with her physique also because she sees herself now with the eyes of Ina Mullick, America underscores Dimple’s inferiority and she contemplates the ways of bringing an end to this painful existence. The second movement of the novel ends with Amit getting a job and with their decision to move to Greenwich in Marsha’s flat.

The third and final movement is the climax marked by intense dramatic scene punctuated with Dimple’s growing abnormality. She had always dreamt of a splendid apartment fully furnished and accomplished with all sorts of appliances. Marsha’s flat is like a dream come true to her. However, the burden of responsibilities in terms of watering the plants
and cleaning the kitchen, etc. is to her, greatly, annoying. Amit feels lonely and wishes if they could have shifted near the Sens. Quite often Dimple feels irritated even over-terrified. One day, while Amit is reading something she complains of exhaustion which he attributed to her meagre diet. She loses her temper at this instance:

I feel sort of dead inside and you can do is read the paper and talk to me about food. You never listen; you have never listened to me. You hate me. Don’t deny it; I know you do. You hate me because I’m not fat and fair. (p.110)

The furious outbursts of Dimple show her intensified and accumulated frustration. She is suffering from inferiority complex and thinks that she is not able to win her husband’s love and affection. Amit may also be blamed for his ignorance of female psychology. He thinks that comforts are enough and hardly bothers about her emotional needs. He takes her out of four-walls very rarely and goes on admonishing instead:

You must go out, make friends, do something constructive, not stay at home and think about Calcutta. (p.111)

To be fair, it can be said about Dimple that her deficiencies in English could have hardly conducted herself well in the enormous city like New York on her own.

America has outwitted her now and she is gripped by a sense of nostalgia. It is just beyond her understanding “how could she live in a country... where every other woman was a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant, exposed to ridicule in the elevator?”(p.112) Her whole world is limited to the four-walls of the apartment and media becomes her
only friend. She feels like writing to Pixie but drops the idea because she thinks:

Friendship was impossible through letters. Conveying New York, Ira Mullick, her nightmares, the ‘phase” (as Amit called it) she was going through- all impossible to talk about .... (p.120)

In leisurely hours she tries to dream about Amit but fails to do so because

Amit did not feed her fantasy life; he was merely the provider of small material comforts. In bitter moments she ranked husband, blender, colour T.V., cassette, tape recorder, in their order of convenience. (p.113)

Dimple’s bracketing of her husband with the electronic appliances evidences that Amit is just a robot and not an actual human being for her. It reflects that America has become a mechanical and technical country where human beings appear like machines.

Dimple’s disgust with American English and American system gets accentuated even by small things. She is afraid of operating the self-service elevators. Linda Sandler explains it in terms of her traditional upbringing:

Dimple emigrates to the electronic age with her traditional values almost intact, only partly modified by the pop culture of modern Calcutta, she is unable to make the transition from Before to After and chooses violence as a “problem-solving device”.16
Dimple finds life impossible “with the people who didn’t understand about Durga Pujah” (p.114). For Indians, religion is an integral part of life and Dimple’s failure at assimilation with America is due to a lack of ‘shared-faith’. An expatriate is tenaciously conscious of preserving his identity even in most trying moments of life. In America, she realizes how easy it was to live, to communicate, and to share with people in Calcutta. She never felt frightened at the sight of the policemen whose faces were so friendly, but the scene has changed completely in the new environment:

She is scared of self-service elevators, of policemen of gadgets and appliances. She does not want to wear western clothes as she thinks she would be mistakenly taken for a Puerto Rican. She does not want to lose her identity but feels isolated, trapped alienated, marginalized.  

At Queens, Dimple has confidence in Meena Sen with whom she could share her personal feelings but at Greenwich she is all alone. Her depression manifests itself in different ways. She fails to write to Pixie, though in her imagination she begins many a time. The greatest alter ego of a girl after marriage is her husband with whom she shares her inmost heart, but Dimple cannot do that. She keeps everything secret from Amit:

She does not tell him about these imaginary beginnings. She didn’t tell him about her immoderate day time sleeping either. They were unspeakable feelings. She thought of them as deformities- sinister, ugly, wicked. (p.115)

Dimple did have expected some trouble in the American set up when she came to this city because pain was part of any new beginning.
But never in her wildest dreams had she imagined ‘to be strained like this beyond endurance’:

She had expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and in the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place. But she had not expected her mind to be strained like this, beyond endurance. She had not anticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless indecisiveness. (p.115)

Asnani pertinently ascribes Dimple’s mental state to the ‘dilemma of cultures’ – “Dimple is entrapped in a dilemma of tensions between American culture and society and the traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife, between a feminist desire to be assertive and independent and the Indian need to be submissive and self-effecting.”

At times when loneliness becomes unbearable Dimple contemplates as many as seven ways of committing suicide. It seems as if she is in love with whatever is dark, evil, sinister, gruesome like murder, suicide, mugging which have become all fascinating words for her. Even her ways of getting rid of life are fanciful like a television advertisement. She cannot trust anybody but only media. Even “her own body seemed curiously alive to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless almost airborne” (p.117). Linda Sandler accounts such feeling of ‘emptiness’ as follows:

She is uprooted from her family and her familiar world, and projected into a social vacuum where the media becomes her surrogate community, her global village. New York intensifies her frustrations and unhooks her further from reality....
The dinner party arranged by Amit and Dimple is appreciated by everybody. People enjoy delicious food and share jokes but Dimple is lost in her own world of reverie. Next day, she sleeps till 4 O’clock and wakes up only when she feels hungry. She whispers to herself:

She would not discuss her dreams with anyone. One must draw the line somewhere; one must stand on principle. After the fifth spoonful, she realized she was not hungry, was, on the contrary, feeling ill and had spilled milk and cereal flakes on her clothes. (p.128)

Her mind is always full of news about mugging and rape; she always feels that someone is breaking her window. When Amit points out her foolishness as they occupy the 14th floor, she retorts: “In America anything is possible. You can be raped and killed on any floor” (p.129). In a state of nervousness, she hurts Amit with knife when he comes from behind to embrace her. She is all apologetic and blames America for her timidity:

This wouldn’t have happened if we had stayed in Calcutta. I was never so nervous back home. (p.132)

One day Ina Mullick comes to her in an utterly disappointed mood almost grasping – “I’m bitterly unhappy.” Dimple fails to understand why Ina Mullick is so unhappy despite all her apparent fulfillments. At this moment she thinks herself lucky “to be alone among Marsha’s appliances, to explore the wonders of modern American living unencumbered by philosophical questions about happiness.” (p.136) In the meanwhile Dimple’s mother Mrs. Dasgupta writes about Pixie’s marriage to a 53-year old actor and this news makes her very happy. She feels glad to be the friend of a to-be-super actress.
Ina Mullick starts bringing her American friends to her apartment for a get together. “To Dimple they all looked alike; even their clothes were similar. She felt too shy to talk to them” (p.146). Milt and Leni Anspach often come to her with Ina. One day Leni starts quarrelling with Ina and accuses her of spoiling her love-life with Milt. Dimple tries to pacify her but she flung her rhinoceros shaped ashtray on the ground and breaks it. Dimple decides “it was best to regard the broken ashtray as the end of an era in her own life” (p.148). It seems as if the broken ashtray is symbolic of freedom and servile existence for Dimple.

As the novel advances to its end, we notice Dimple anxious to settle her scores with America. Her spirit rebels, she starts going out with Ina and Milt, wears Marsha’s pant etc. and enjoys all the prohibited freedom. She seduces Milt and keeps it a secret from Amit. When she goes out, she puts on Marsha’s tinted sunglasses because the purple-tinted sunglasses are a disguise, borrowed from the West, just like Marsha’s clothes and the apartment in which she is living. This outing leaves her all the more confused. She turns neurotic and fails to differentiate between what she sees on T.V. and what she experiences herself in real life. She is now an alienated being undergoing the supposed after effects of alienation. One day while serving tea to Leni and Ina, she engages herself in a reverie:

After Leni removed her cup Dimple kept on pouring, over the rim of Leni’s cup, over the tray and the floating dentures till the pregnant- bellied tea-pot was emptied and Leni and Ina were standing and shaking her, Dimple, Dimple, stop it!(p.152)
She has numerous complaints against life:

Life should have treated her better, should have added and subtracted in different proportions so that she was not left with a chimera. Amit was no more than that. He did not feed her reveries; he was unreal. She was furious, desperate; she felt sick. It was as if some force was impelling her towards disaster, some monster had overtaken her body, a creature with serpentine curls and heaving bosom that would erupt indiscreetly through one of Dimple’s orifices, leaving her, Dimple Basu, splottered like bug on the living-room wall and rug. The cataclysm embarrassed her. (p.156)

Dimple’s gloom deepens with every passing day. She starts realizing: “Her life was slow, full of miscalculation” (p.178). Amit could only visualize the external changes in Dimple and he explains it as a case of “Culture-shock”. He even promises to take her to Calcutta. This does not prove helpful. Dimple starts contemplating the murder of her husband. The violence outside turns inside. She now fails to differentiate between what she sees on television and what she thinks. The idea of slaughtering her husband fascinates her. She thinks:

She would kill Amit and hide his body in the freezer. The extravagance of the scheme delighted her, made her feel very American somehow, almost like a character in a T.V. series. (p.195)

The problem with Amit is that “he lacked extravagance; he preserved in the immigrant virtues of caution and cunning” (p.195). He fails to mark the emotional cracking-up of Dimple. “He never thought of such things, never thought how hard it was for her to keep quiet and smile
though she was falling apart like a very old toy that had been played with, something quite roughly, by children who claimed to love her” (p.212). The trouble with Dimple is that she loses touch with reality. Guilt of seducing Milt and also of keeping everything a secret from Amit vex her. She loses her sleep and becomes a sleep-walker like Lady Macbeth and ultimately kills Amit without actually thinking about its consequences:

She sneaked up on him and chose a spot, her favourite spot just under the hairline, where the mole was getting larger and browner, and she drew an imaginary line of kisses because she did not want him to think she was the impulsive, foolish sort who acted like a maniac just because the husband was suffering from insomnia. She touched the mole very lightly and let her fingers draw a circle once, twice seven times, each time a little harder, until the milk in the bowl of cereal was a pretty pink and the flakes were mushy and would have embarrassed any advertiser, and then she saw the head fall off- but of course it was her imagination because she was not sure any more what she had seen on TV and what she had seen in the private screen of three A.M.- and it stayed upright on the counter-top, still with its eyes averted from her face, and she said very loudly to the knife that was redder now than it had ever been when she had chopped chicken and mutton with it in the same kitchen and on the same counter.... Women on television got away with murder. (pp. 212-213)

The above description shows that it is a case of “cold-murder”. By stabbing seven times it seems, Dimple frees herself from the marriage tie. This is the only act of assertion she can make. Some critics are of the
view that Dimple’s gruesome act has nothing to do with “cultural-shock”. She is not a victim of “expatriation” but is instead, “a victim of her own neurotic sensibility fed on popular advertisement fantasies.” K.S. Narayan Rao looks at it from a specific angle:

The novel raises an important question: was the Indian wife happier in India with her limited freedom and greater docility. Or does she achieve happiness in her painful search for more individual freedom and in the process of maturing?

No doubt, this is a valid question and one can easily clutch the matter by saying that yes, the Indian wife was not happy in Calcutta either. But if she could have stayed back, she should have reconciled to her frustration. She should have been made to realize that for an Indian wife, her husband is all – he is her breath and spirit and whatsoever may be his physical feature or achievement. He should be loved and respected, or utmost she should have ended her own life. But the violence that is passively lying in her spirit gets multiplied on coming to America where “talking about murder is like talking about weather” (p.161). It is American notion of freedom for women which makes her question if it is her own happiness and freedom. Her emotions which require an outlet and burst at last and she suffers feats of madness, nightmares, reveries and insomnia and what one can expect from such heroine. She, finally, gets the solution of her problems in murdering her husband. Thus, it is America which intensifies her confusion and turns the violence inside out and she ends up as a murderess.

Bharati Mukherjee concentrates on the individual eccentricities of her woman protagonists. While Tara Banerjee is more of an Indian girl,
Dimple’s character betrays an impatient and reckless trait. The end of *A Tiger’s Daughter* leaves the reader guessing as to what might happen to Tara’s fate, but in *Wife*, Dimple’s mental abnormality leads her to kill her husband. We sympathize her and feel about Tara’s state of mind. But Dimple’s actions right from her self-abortion to the murder of Amit fail to arouse our sympathy as an Indian turned American wife. But it reflects her mind of divided aims, inner conflicts and immeasurable pains.

Thus, we can find that characters are harvesting the granaries of pains, miseries, loneliness, rootlessness and boredom who have gone to America in order to fulfill their dreams, freedoms, happiness on the basis of money. But money cannot purchase happiness and it disconnects the bond of human love and pleasure that Bharati Mukherjee’s characters are lacking. They appear like an immigrant miserable creatures.

Bharati Mukherjee deals with the problems of transition which brings the state of displacement, separation, rootlessness, cultural conflict or biculturalism and it cultivates the ocean of diasporic ethos in her works. Her characters are harbingers of diasporic consciousness in shape of sufferings, pains, predicaments, loneliness, homelessness and rootlessness. The present chapter, here, highlights deeply such diasporic ethos of cultural conflict of India as well as of foreign cultures in her first two novels.
References


14. Maya Manju Sharma, op.cit., p.15.


19. Linda Sandler, op.cit., p.75.


-----------------------------