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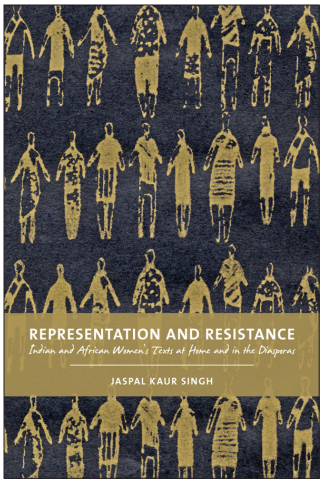

REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE: INDIAN AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S TEXTS AT HOME AND IN THE DIASPORAS

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The Indian Diaspora and Cultural Alienation in Bharati Mukherjee's Texts

PART ONE: DISLOCATION AND PSYCHIC VIOLENCE IN *WIFE*

In many transnational female-authored texts, representations of Indian culture and womanhood are riddled with conflicts and ambiguities. I argue that these conflicts and ambiguities are due to the diasporic writers' conflicted psyches, formed as they are by the ethos of modernity, and also due to their location and class status. In writing about Indian female subject formation in the West, many authors draw upon an essentialized notion of Indianness in a stereotypical and reductive manner, adding to the idea of Indian culture as backward and in continued need of reformation. In my discussion of Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*, I will demonstrate Mukherjee's Westernized consciousness and her awareness of Westernized and Western audiences, which provide her texts with interesting insights into her troubling representations.

The representations, in and of themselves, are stereotypical, which is troubling enough, but what is dangerous is that these representations add to the hegemonic notions of Indian womanhood and culture as backward and needing further modernization through penetrative globalization agendas. This idea of modernization is tied to the liberalization of the marketplace and to furthering the class divide, leading to further disenfranchisement of many women, which is becoming imminent in the Indian subcontinent.

Mukherjee, who once lived in a Westernized, upper-class neighbourhood of Calcutta, sees Indian society as tradition-bound, as can be seen in her earlier novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*. She has lived in the West since the early 1960s. In her texts, we see her rejection of the tradition-bound society of the East as she reaches out for the more empowering, individualistic society of the West. This reconstruction is not without struggle or loss, which she addresses in a number of novels, but in *Wife* we see the psychic struggle of an immigrant woman who is caught between two discursive systems – East and West – leading to trauma and violence.

However, the reality is that the immigrant's resistance to and compliance with the hegemonic discourses change with the context of oppression; this is why the immigrant comes to occupy many shifting subjectivities. Yet, such complexities are not represented in Mukherjee's texts.

The Tiger's Daughter, an earlier novel, deals with the return of the immigrant from the West to the traditional space of the old. Mukherjee's changing imagination is textualized in ways that indicate her consciousness is being redefined in and by the West. She describes her upper-class, convent-educated friends as a dying class, living lives of decadence and material comforts, signifying spiritual death. Although they appear to live liberated lifestyles of Westernized Indians, Mukherjee draws attention to the fact that they still believe in the traditional arranged marriage where parents "initiate serious talk" with foreign-educated and brilliant "boys" from the same caste and class. The protagonist, Tara, after seven years in liberal Western institutions such as Vassar and the University of Wisconsin, Madison, seems to fall prey to the "passive" and "fatalistic" attitudes of the Indian community. This novel contains many of the author's own misgivings about India and the Indian community and their inability or unwillingness to adapt to the changing times – a world she had left behind when she relocated to the West.

Mukherjee, educated at the prestigious Loreto House Convent School by Irish nuns, suggests that in early childhood, the two world views – of her home and school life – clashed. She writes about her sense of alienation from her home culture in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, stating that her "imagination created two distinct systems of cartography [where] multiheaded serpents who were also cosmic oceans and anthropomorphic gods did not stand a chance of survival" against the mapping of the "New Testament" (917). Additionally, as a child, Mukherjee had spent some time in England, and when her family returned to India, she was further alienated from her middle-class, joint-family existence. With her father's growing success as a chemist and industrialist, the family moved away from the joint-family household into an exclusive, Westernized neighbourhood, where a *durban* always guarded the compound gates, regulating and checking unwanted visitors. The isolation and separation of the upper classes from the everyday Indian culture had begun. This isolation and alienation was further complicated when Mukherjee married the Canadian writer Clark Blaise, whom she met at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the United States, and went to live in Canada, where she was "simultaneously invisible" as a writer "and overexposed" as a racial minority (Mukherjee, "An Invisible Woman" 36) until she came to live in the United States as a naturalized citizen.

Mukherjee discusses the problem of identity politics for the English-speaking postcolonial writer in *Days and Nights*:

> I am a late-blooming colonial who writes in a borrowed tongue (English), lives permanently in an alien country (Canada), and publishes in and is read, when read at all, in another alien country, the United States. My Indianness is fragile; it has to be professed and fought for even though I look so unmistakably Indian. Language transforms our way of apprehending the world; I fear that my decades-long use of English as a first language has cut me off from my *desh* (country). (170)

By the end of her year in India, when Mukherjee finally prepares to leave, she realizes she does not need to "discard [her] Western education in order to retrieve the dim shape of [her] Indian one"; in the future, she would return to India but would see it as "just another Asian country," and she

would be "just another knowledgeable but desolate tourist," believing that if she stayed on, "the country [would] fail [her] more than [she] had by settling abroad" (284). Her touristy world view about Indianness is textualized in many interesting albeit problematic manners in most of her texts.

In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara, who is visiting India, cannot wait to go back to the United States and to her white American husband, David. And in *Days and Nights*, Mukherjee, even though she acknowledges a sense of loss at not ever having a *desh*, celebrates the possibilities of the writer's ability to "demolish and reinvent" a homeland: "It was hard to give up my faintly Chekhovian image of India. But if that was about to disappear, could I not invent a more exciting – perhaps a more psychologically accurate – a more precisely metaphoric India: many more Indias" (285)? While Mukherjee may be writing to redefine herself in new terms, her unfortunate representations of India as chaotic, passive, helpless, backward, violent, and fatalistic add to the valorization of the West as rational and progressive. Such representations suggest that the author still continues to think and write in a manner which is Orientalist, adding to damaging stereotypes of the Global South.

Aijaz Ahmad's criticism regarding the position of such Anglophone Indian writers as the spokespersons of Indian culture clearly underlines this issue:

> The few writers who happen to write in English are valorized beyond measure. Witness, for example the characterization of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in the *New York Times* as "a continent finding its voice" – as if one has no voice if one does not speak in English.… The retribution visited upon the head of an Asian, an African, an Arab writing in English is that he/she is immediately elevated to the lonely splendour of a "representative" – of a race, a continent, a civilization, even the "third world." (5)

Such tokenism can be dangerous, particularly in a world polarized by world views where the East/West, primitive/civilized notions are still privileged, as can be seen by the West's rhetoric in the War on Terror and the attacks on Iraq, as well as the threat to bomb any other "rogue" nations that do not comply with the hegemonic notions of liberation and freedom.

First of all, we have to keep in mind why English was introduced as the official language in India: to subjugate the natives and to create a class of Indians who would help in the administration of the British Raj (Macaulay). The conflicted consciousness of the colonized that was constructed by imperialism due to the binary nature of colonial language continues to manifest itself in the writings of many postcolonial writers, particularly in this era of globalization.

Mukherjee's texts locate themselves within this conflicted cultural space in the category of postcolonial literature where nations construct gendered national identities. She writes about India and uses "Indianness," showing the author's affinity with the Indian nation and pointing to a colonized past, while forming a postcolonial present in the United States. As Anindyo Roy writes:

> To assign a specific tradition to the literature written by and about the new Indian diaspora is also to acknowledge that this tradition is marked by the presence of a "postcolonial" discourse. The terms "diaspora" and "postcolonial" belong to a specific historical condition that is released by India's emergence as a "free" nation and by her entry into a new transnational geopolitical sphere. (127)

Roy's terms "postcolonial" and "diaspora" point to the temporal and spatial components of Mukherjee's *Wife*, where she writes about Dimple Dasgupta, a young Bengali wife who immigrates to the United States – an opposition to Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter*, who returns to the nation of origin. Although *Wife* was published before *Days and Nights*, it can be situated around the time that Mukherjee starts to completely affiliate herself with the West. *Days and Nights* was published in 1977; Mukherjee landed in India for the year on a "Sunday morning, May 13, 1973" (10) with her husband and children. While *The Tiger's Daughter* maps Mukherjee's slow disassociation and withdrawal from the old world, *Wife* represents the possibilities of the new world for the immigrant. The reason Dimple fails to take the *advantages* offered by the new world is discussed in the following paragraphs.

While her experiences as an "invisible minority" in Canada were traumatic for Mukherjee, Feroza Jussawalla points out that Mukherjee

celebrates the "exuberance" that an immigrant feels at the melting pot theory of assimilation in the United States (591). That such assimilation is problematic in a nation that celebrates multiculturalism and difference rather than belonging is ignored by Mukherjee. Additionally, in an interview with Ameena Meer, Mukherjee affirms, "I totally consider myself an American writer.… Now my roots are here and my emotions are here in North America" ("Immigrant Writing" 28). Mukherjee's celebration of the United States and her continuing use of "Indianness" as backward and "traditional" in texts after texts, which are published and consumed predominantly in the West, continue to be a matter of a critical postcolonial debate (Feroza Jussawala; Anindyo Roy; Indrani Mitra; Indrapal Grewal; Gurleen Grewal, among others).

Mukherjee's statements regarding assimilation in the melting pot draw a strident comment from Jussawalla, who finds in postcolonial writers like Mukherjee "a new hegemonic discourse of those who see themselves as assimilated and assimilable. The irony is that in separating themselves from other South Asian immigrants and in hoping to be accepted among the mainstream of the majority, these writers only extend and perpetuate a new colonial mentality" (590). Although Jussawalla's criticism of Mukherjee is justified, Mukherjee herself, after her naturalization as a United States citizen in 1988, locates herself in the mainstream American tradition but in a special space. While claiming to speak for the "new American from non-traditional immigrant countries," she states:

> They all shed past lives and languages, and have traveled half the world in every direction to come here and begin again. They're bursting with stories, too many to begin telling. They've lived through centuries of history in a single lifetime – village-born, colonized, traditionally raised, educated. What they have assimilated in 30 years has taken the West 10 times that number of years to create. ("Immigrant Writing" 28)

Mukherjee sees the new world full of potential where negotiations for gendered and national identities occur in an alien, albeit liberating, world. Although she has written extensively about immigrant experiences of people from all over the world in her later works, the works that focus on Indian immigrants seem more popular. Additionally, while most immigrants to

the West are predominantly from urban areas and are Western-educated, in *Wife* we see a village girl who comes to the United States. Here, the village is shown as the pit of traditionalism from which the protagonist is eager to escape. Yet, even in the urban areas, the representations of Indians are imbued with the same binaries of modernity and tradition.

And although Mukherjee claims that *The Tiger's Daughter* is not autobiographical, there are moments in the text that reflect the author's own experience. For example, she states, "There were just so many aspects of India that I disliked by then. So a lot of my stories since are really about transformation – psychological – especially among women" (Connell 15). She critiques the limited space available for negotiation of gender roles for women in postcolonial India. Women's national identity, therefore, becomes difficult and, for some like Mukherjee, distant.

Why do texts such as Mukherjee's resonate with so many women, particularly Western and Westernized Indian women? Indrani Mitra, writing in connection with postcolonial women writers, examines the disillusionment felt by postcolonial Indian women within the women's movement in postcolonial India; she argues that while the constitution guarantees equal rights "designed especially [for] egalitarian sexual relations and women's access to education and professional opportunities," social reforms without "fundamental structural changes in bourgeois society" lead to continued oppression and equality remains just a myth for many Indian women ("Colonialism" 179). For the educated, upper-class woman, to whom the promise of liberation was most immediate, the experience of modern India is one of conflict and alienation. Mukherjee speaks to this stratum of society, as well as to other Orientalists, who continue to see India as traditional and backward. They do not appear to complicate the oppression of women by situating it within the historical and cultural contexts of a classed and gendered society.

Mukherjee interrogates the question of subjectivity and agency from the perspective of a middle-class postcolonial, female subject. In her earlier novels, set in the early and mid-1970s, the realities of women's material existence have changed only slightly. For middle-class Indian women, the idea of companionate marriage had expanded to include educated Indian women, although the prospect of liberation proved disillusioning for them. Postcolonial writers such as Mukherjee question the confined spaces in which educated and upper- and middle-class women play their demarcated roles.

In her later novels, written after she immigrated to the West, she explores the possibilities for liberation through transformation for oppressed, rural, and lower- middle-class women in the New World. For example, in *Jasmine* (1989), Mukherjee maps the immigrant experience of a protagonist who finds the West exciting and full of possibilities; Jyoti, a woman from rural Punjab, after a series of traumatic experiences as an Indian woman, finally transforms herself by finding an "authentic" American identity in America as Jasmine. When faced with postcolonial criticism due to such reductive constructions of gendered identity, Mukherjee defends her position:

> The kind of women I write about, and I'm not generalizing about women in the South Asian community here, but the kinds of women who attract me, who intrigue me, are those who are adaptable … and that adaptability is working to the women's advantage when we come over here as immigrants. The males function very well as engineers or doctors or whatever, and they earn good money, but they have locked their hearts against mainstream culture.… For an Indian woman to learn to drive, put on pants, cash checks, is a big leap. They are exhilarated by that change. They are no longer having to do what mother-in-law tyrannically forced them to. (Connell 32)

Though her argument is somewhat reductive, Mukherjee here points to the fact that national identity is obviously a privilege which economically independent males can lay claim to, but for Indian women, who must negotiate their identities outside of the traditional Indian family, it becomes difficult, yet paradoxically exhilarating. However, such exhilarations come after a great loss and compromise. From Tara to Dimple to Jasmine, we see a slow transformation of the female characters who must negotiate their identities in the new world, and although this transformation is not without violence, in which one self seems to annihilate another in the in-between contradictory spaces, where the new is not yet constructed, Mukherjee simply celebrates what she calls the "exuberance" of the immigrant experience.

Sneja Gunew discusses the constructions of identities and the violence that seems inherent in the construction of the Self. In the discussion on

violence and multiculturalism, Gunew asks an important question: "[I]f you are constructed in one particular kind of language, what violence does it do to your subjectivity if one then has to move into another language and suppress whatever selves or subjectivities were constructed by the first" (419)? In the act of becoming, when the old subjectivity – in the act of repression – and the new subjectivity – in the act of emergence – collide, psychological violence is inevitable. Mukherjee uses these ideas of violence which takes textual forms in many different, albeit slightly generalized and problematic, ways in her texts. We see the use of violence and its textualization in *The Tiger's Daughter* when Tara is sexually assaulted by the old politician; in *Wife*, we see it when Dimple aborts her fetus and when she stabs her husband; and in *Jasmine*, we see it when Jasmine reconstructs herself as Kali in order to avenge her rape by slicing her tongue and then killing her rapist.

We also see epistemological violence in *Jasmine* when Jasmine reinvents herself. Jasmine, an illegal immigrant, a young widow, transforms herself from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jassy to Jase and finally to Jane in the United States, moving rapidly from one locale to another: starting from rural India (Hasnapur), proceeding to a city in Punjab (Jallandhar), arriving in Florida, moving to Queens, then to Manhattan, and ultimately settling for some time in Iowa. Jasmine does not transform herself gradually; she reinvents herself by killing her old selves: "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to make oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (*Jasmine* 25).

However, Jasmine's desire to come to the United States stems from the desire to commit *sati* on the campus where her now deceased husband, a victim of Sikh terrorism, was to attend engineering school in Florida. She buys a fake visa to the United States (with the support of her brothers, one might add); when she arrives in Florida after a nightmarish journey, she is attacked by a white man who rapes her. After she stabs her rapist in the guise of Kali, she sets her clothes and her husband's clothes (which she was supposed to burn along with herself at the campus) on fire in a dumpster. At this point, she emerges, phoenix-like, from the symbolic burning and is free to find a new identity for herself in the new world. While Mukherjee investigates the possibilities offered by the New World for reconstructions of identity, her simple binary representations continue to be problematic. For example, after her husband's death, Jasmine, now living in the modern Punjabi city, arbitrarily decides to commit *sati*. Mukherjee's representation

of India and Indian customs reinforces the idea of India as backward and tradition bound. In her discussion of *Jasmine*, Gurleen Grewal castigates Mukherjee for her serious omission in situating the Western audience and trivializing the practice of *sati*. Grewal states that such "gross misconceptions" suggest that women might travel halfway around the globe to commit *sati*:

> Reading *Jasmine*, one might think sati was being practiced as a matter of routine and choice by contemporary Hindu widows.… Mukherjee's protagonist is neither coerced by relatives avaricious for her husband's money, nor so bereft of options that death is her only alternative. Extricated from relations of power and property, the practice of sati, as an arena of both oppression and of women's resistance to oppression, is rendered meaningless in *Jasmine*. ("Born Again" 188)

Grewal's criticism is valid, as Jasmine's brothers fund her trip to the United States of America, and later, as Jasmine sees the possibilities of the West, she decides to become a *liberated* American woman. Thus, in her representation of the assimilationist protagonist, who rejects tradition-bound culture, nation, and her gendered identity, Mukherjee reinforces imperialist constructs of Indian women as oppressed and brutalized (see Chapter 2). Mukherjee is clearly limited in her conceptualization of liberation due to her class status and her Westernized consciousness.

As Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests, such a representation of "third world women as a group or category … automatically defined as religious (read 'not progressive'), family oriented (read 'traditional'), legal minors (read 'they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights'), illiterate (read 'ignorant'), domestic (read 'backward'), and sometimes revolutionary (read 'their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war; they must fight!')" (*Third World Women* 72) reinforces the notion of "western women as secular, liberated, and having control of their own lives" (Grewal "Born Again" 187). While Mukherjee must surely be aware of the problematics of representation, the textualization of the oppressed Indian woman continues to proliferate in her texts.

Though "Mukherjee is … careful to suggest that America is no Eden: it is a brave new world that includes the violence of rape, murder, and suicide"

(Grewal 187), she shows Jasmine can become "American" by simply rejecting the old and claiming the new. When Jasmine burns her clothes in the trash bin, Mukherjee seems to suggest that Jasmine can symbolically trash the old traditions and, hence, her traditional identity.

Jasmine's widowhood shows her as a completely disempowered figure in contemporary Indian society. In a society where widows are seen as inauspicious, Jasmine's desire to commit *sati*, although in an alien land, changes the meaning of *sati* in the postcolonial context. A Hindu/Indian religious rite which had not only been discussed and written about in colonial India, but also has a prominent place in contemporary discourses involving national identity, *sati* problematizes the construction of a postcolonial feminist identity in *Jasmine*. Why does Mukherjee write about *sati* in this context?

Mukherjee's use of the practice of *sati* brings to mind its colonial context and historicizes postcolonial female subjectivity in terms of British imperialism. Nationalism and the "woman question" came into discourse at a period in Indian history when the ritual of *sati* became a signifier for discursively dismissing Indian national identity formation. Therefore, Mukherjee's representation of Jasmine and her desire to commit *sati* helps reinforce the construct of the monolithic image of the "third world woman" as a "religious, family oriented, legal minor, illiterate, domestic" even while it helps to constitute certain postcolonial female writers such as Mukherjee as "secular, liberated, and having control of [their lives]" (Mohanty 73).

Mukherjee blurs the differences of class between the Jyoti of the village and Jane in Iowa; Jyoti is a peasant girl from a village, and Jane appears to be a Westernized and Western-educated woman like Mukherjee. The implication for "illiterate," non-Western immigrants in the United States is that one can acquire class privileges if one so desires. Grewal claims that the life of a peasant girl, Jyoti, is "expendable": "[her] death by a symbolic burning in the trash can, and subsequent transformation into Jane is a colonial legacy; Mukherjee, however, does not acknowledge the psychic violence in the legacy she claims" (Grewal 193).

I argue that Mukherjee does acknowledge the psychic violence, but not in *Jasmine*, where she appears to be celebrating Jasmine's successful "assimilation," but in *Wife*, although, here, too, trauma is posited in troubling ways. It appears that she realizes the psychic violence one can undergo when one resists the hegemony of the Old World in order to comply with

the hegemony of the New. It is important for my argument to locate *Wife* before *Jasmine* and after *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Days and Nights*. In *Jasmine*, we see Jasmine becoming a successful "American," and in *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Days and Nights*, Tara and Mukherjee, who feel increasingly alienated in India, relinquish their "Indianness." In *Wife*, we see Dimple Dasgupta, who, although resisting her "Indianness" actively, is unable to use what Mukherjee posits as the space of transformation and liberation in the United States. She is unsuccessful in forging an "American" identity for herself because her Indian identity, which was forged in the aftermath of British colonialism, has been strongly influenced by Western binary logic. It is this conflict that problematizes Dimple's identity construction in the New World. The reductive and stereotypical accounts of young women in India waiting to be married are relevant here.

Dimple, who is waiting to have her marriage arranged with a "suitable boy," nevertheless daydreams about love. Where is the space for notions of romantic love in India where the system of arranged marriages prevail? While her parents are searching for the perfect match in the newspaper (matrimonial section) advertisement, where males seek "a beautiful, fair, tall, educated young girl of good conduct, within their caste," Dimple dreams of freedom: "Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love" (*Wife* 5). Dimple, however, is flat-chested. Her mother, in the meantime, seeing her daughter's pain, "prescribe[s] pre-bath mustard oil massages, ground almond and honey packs, Ping-Pong [table tennis], homeopathic pills and prayer to Lord Shiva, the Divine Husband" (5). We can see Westernization rearing its head in the promise of romantic love after marriage, and cocktail parties on lawns, while traditional discourse manifests itself in the arranged marriage system and the prayer to Lord Shiva. Mukherjee highlights the idea of privileging women as wives and mothers, and we can see that nationalist ideology, whereby woman is exalted as the caretaker of the inner sphere of the home, still prevails in many so-called postcolonial texts.

Jasmine's father, Mr. Dasgupta, who is an electrical engineer of modest income, cannot afford a substantial dowry for his daughter's wedding. Yet besides all the wedding arrangements, including a lavish meal ("eighty-five kilos of fish"), he is able to give the girl "the usual gold ornaments (which normally is a full set, including a heavy necklace, bracelets, ring and earrings made of twenty-four-carat gold), saris (which are normally

rich embroidered silks), watch, fountain pen and some furniture" (15). In fact, Amit, the groom, takes some cash in lieu of furniture, for he is planning to settle in the West, and the cash will come in handy. While it is accurate to state that the dowry system is extremely unfair, and dowry deaths – where brides are murdered, typically through burning, for being unable or unwilling to bring more money from their homes, and their murders generally reported as accidents or suicides – have escalated in post-independent India, such representations, rendered as they are simply in gendered terms, fail to analyze the rise in dowry deaths in the context of the scramble for middle-class status by many poor Indians in modern, post-independent India.

When she finds that married life is not what she had dreamed about – cocktail parties, fund-raising dinners and love – we see a bored and depressed Dimple. To combat her boredom, while waiting for her husband to come home, Dimple takes to reading English magazines to improve her reading skills. One day she finds the following letter from a female reader who supports the idea of arranged marriages and is opposed to divorce: "Are you forgetting the unforgettable Sita of legends? Can she recall how she walked through fire to please Ram, her kingly husband? Did Sita humiliate him by refusing to stroll through fire in front of his subjects and friends? Let us carry the torch (excusable pun) of Sita's docility!" (*Wife* 28). Mukherjee's consciousness of her Westernized audience is manifested in such representational writings, where she has to explain the ideology of "sacrificial" women; most Indians do not talk or write about Sita[1] explicitly; the message is implicit and is practised, not preached. Such representation verifies critics' accusations of Mukherjee's ongoing constructions of "Third World" subjects for "First World" consumption, for it is a known fact that Mukherjee's novels are predominantly consumed in the West (Indrapal Grewal, *Transnational* 65–79). For example, in *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara is forever referring to her absent American husband, David Cartwright, and it is through his eyes (or the eyes of Clark Blaise's camera in *Days and Nights*) that we see India, just as we see a middle-class, married woman's life through a Westernized filter.

Mukherjee shows us that Dimple has in her the makings of an independent, liberated woman, or is it really the making of a "mad" woman? We see the conflict – which is produced in the postcolonial woman's psyche – when Dimple becomes pregnant soon after her marriage. She resents it, unlike most married women, resisting the patriarchal construct

of motherhood, an indication that Dimple is not passive. "She gave vicious squeezes to her stomach as if to force a vile thing out of hiding" (*Wife* 31). The only reality at that point is her vomit, not the "reality" of motherhood. She forces herself to vomit by inserting her fingers down her throat. "[The vomit] was hers" (31). Claiming her vomit as her own and making it an empowering experience, and finding pleasure and excitement in the smell of vomit that clings to her body, she feels empowered in being able to control her own body. For her "vomiting was real … but pregnancy was not" (32). Thinking "bitterly that no one had consulted her before depositing it in her body" (33), she feels helpless, and the feeling enrages her. One day she jumps rope "until her legs grew numb, her stomach burned; then she poured water from the heavy bucket over her head, shoulders, over the tight curve of her stomach. She had poured until the last of the blood [as she miscarries] washed off her legs; then she had collapsed" (43). While Jasmine rids herself of old cultural tradition by the symbolic burning of her clothes, Dimple aborts her baby and is then ready for the liberatory possibilities of the New World (to which she is immigrating soon). While her Western audience might see her act of abortion as liberation and empowering, for the Indian audience, this act should be incomprehensible. How would a traditionally raised Indian woman read such an act – as an act of "madness"? Is it not madness not to become a mother and be valorized in the traditional family? Women acquire privilege and power through becoming the bearers of children, and by extension, the nation. Within the domestic spaces inhabited by most middle-class Indian women, such an action as Dimple's would be odd, if not incomprehensible. It might be read as a necessity due to health or monetary reasons, not as liberatory or empowering.

The tension between the traditional and the modern, between the East and the West, manifests itself when Dimple moves to America with Amit a few months after her marriage. After he gets a job as a boiler maintenance engineer, Dimple is represented as being kept isolated in an apartment all day as she does not have transportation, nor does she know how to drive. Also, she is unsure about her English-speaking skills.

Dimple meets and is fascinated by an Americanized Indian woman, Ina Mullick. However, Dimple is not allowed to make friends with Ina because Amit considers her too "Americanized"; she might give Dimple some "bad ideas." The "bad idea" is that Ina goes to night school, though Amit insists that Ina is just opening herself up for being mugged in the

subway. An Indian woman has no right to put herself in such unsafe situations, especially "with so many Indians around, a television, and a child, a woman shouldn't get time to get crazy ideas" (69). Mukherjee shows Amit's anxiety about the West and its "liberating" influences, which manifests itself in such representations.

The constructions of gender identity in most minority communities in the United States are complicated with racial oppression. In order to fight their marginalization in the dominant discourse, the middle-class, Western-educated Indians seek to validate their identity through the private sphere. While the public sphere, where success is coded in material gains, is open to educated Indians, the private and cultural spaces of America are shut off to most Indians. Thus, Indians, mostly men, can be progressive and Westernized in the public spaces, but the domestic and private space must remain Indian, therefore traditional.

In spite of all the warnings about "crazy ideas," Dimple makes friends with Ina, whose friendship with Milt, a young white American man, she envies. Even though Ina is married, she has a comfortable friendship with another man. Dimple aspires to be like Ina, who is spontaneous and funny, but must keep her friendship with Ina and Milt a secret. Feeling alienated and lonely, she spends more time watching soap operas and other programs on television and starts confusing her reality with that of the characters on television. The two hegemonies – Western and Patriarchal – are reconstructing Dimple's psyche through different ideological discursive systems at this point.

Judith Butler's explanation of "prior hegemony," which presupposes a latter hegemony, is useful in my discussion of resistance to hegemonic discourses. "Prior hegemony" in my discussion refers to the "Western" or "Colonial" discourse, while the latter hegemony refers to the patriarchal or nationalist discourse (*Bodies That Matter* 133). It is useful to remember that in the liminal spaces of oppositional discourses, according to Butler, prior hegemony often wields more power over the latter, which remains, to a large extent, a minority discourse. However, when the two discourses collide, there is a possibility that the latter hegemony can also reproduce the ideologies of the prior hegemony. In *Bodies That Matter,* Butler states, "Importantly, however, that prior hegemony also works through and as its 'resistance' so that the relation between the marginalized community and the dominative is not, strictly speaking, oppositional. The citing of the dominant norms does not, in this instance, displace the norm" (133).

Dimple tries to "cite" the dominant norms by looking for Marsha's (the woman whose apartment they are subletting) Western clothing and trying it on. She starts daydreaming about liberty and freedom. But as a caretaker of tradition and culture, and caught between two world views, Dimple starts dreading even her dreams, which she cannot share with anyone. She becomes "a small stiff lump, hair arranged like black bat wings against the sky blue pillow" (128). Caught in such a dismal situation, Dimple feels that catching a fatal disease, like leukemia, is preferable and more "glamorous." Her reality turns to dreaming, and her journey to "madness" begins. Was she a prime candidate for "madness" right from the beginning, when she resisted the cultural text by getting rid of the baby? Or does it start one afternoon when she has sex with the tall and good-looking Milt, a "genuine American," who considers her beautiful, and who finds the dimple on her cheeks charming?

She thinks that having casual sex with Milt will turn her into an American; instead, she feels disappointed and guilty:

> She has mismanaged [sex with Milt] all; she'd seen enough TV and read enough novels to know this was the time to lie in bed, to hum little songs, to pinch, pull, slap; it was not the time to reach for dark glasses and sensible undergarments and make discreet inquiries about the young man's job. She was so much worse off than ever, more lonely, more cut off from Amit, from the Indians, left only with borrowed disguises. She felt like a shadow without feelings. Whatever she did, no matter how coolly she planned it, would be wrong. (*Wife* 200)

For Mukherjee's women protagonists, identity construction entails finding out about their sexuality, which might lead them to liberation and happiness. If she can have casual sex, she must be turning "American." Yet Dimple starts to contemplate suicide as a way out: "One [way] was to stand under a warm shower and slice open a jugular.… She could see pretty jet sprays of pinkish blood.… She would like to make one extravagant gesture in her life" (154). Mukherjee claims that Dimple's contemplation of suicide is very Indian, very traditional: "Dimple, if she had remained in Calcutta, would have gone into depression, and she would have found a very convenient way out for unhappy Bengali wives – suicide" (Connell 20).

Mukherjee's rewriting of "sanctioned suicide" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 120–30) in India, where women do not commit suicide because they cannot "find" themselves, but because of severe physical, economic, and psychological oppression from greedy in-laws due to their inability to give dowry, shows her subject position as Westernized. Alienation and displacement can lead one to see oppressions differently: in India, economic difficulties are paramount; in America, where prosperity reigns, it is the "human condition" that calls for suicide! If one cannot find oneself, one can annihilate oneself!

But Dimple, whose resistance to the hegemonies of both India and the United States is not successful, decides to end her oppression by destroying the obstacle to her successful assimilation: "That night, trapped between the cold wall and Amit's heavy body, in post nightmare lucidity, she sought revenge … [Yet] her own intensity shocked her – she had not considered herself susceptible to violence – so she tried to explain it away as unnatural sexual desire. 'Love is dread,' she whispered loudly to the sleeper" (*Wife* 117). As she considers killing Amit by "applying light, rhythmical pressure" on Amit's neck, she begins "to feel that violence was right, even decent.… Her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, and insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne" (117).

Why is it that when she is thinks of death and pain, she feels airborne and light? Why does she feel violence is right, even decent? Why is death and dying, or is it killing, so full of promise? Here Dimple's feelings of violence against her husband symbolize her resistance against patriarchal ideology, where the man can adapt in the material world, while keeping the space of the home "inviolate." Violence then moves from one space to another. From contemplating killing herself, Dimple now wonders about killing her husband. Her frustration at being unable to transform her identity to that of liberated Americans in the new world is trivialized over and over again in the text. When they go out visiting other Indian friends, Dimple finds her husband's presence oppressive, for he does not allow her to taste any alcoholic drinks. If he were not there, she might have "permitted herself a sip or two" of beer, "but Amit will always be there beside her … acting as her conscience and common sense. It was sad, she thought, how marriage cuts off glittering alternatives" (127). Here, of course, Amit represents the old order, the traditional Indian world of customs and tradition, so finally, one day, she "sneaked up on him and chose a spot …

then she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times, each time a little harder" (213), and she kills her husband. Or does she?

Dimple remembers that on TV women get away with murder. But that question, whether she finally killed her husband or not, is somehow not important, for in the act of killing her husband, she is symbolically destroying the self that cannot be reconstructed. She erases one of the maddening inscriptions: the inscription of traditional Indian, and hopes to reinscribe herself as American, and therefore, liberated. The conflict between the two ideologies is necessary, according to Mukherjee, in order to remake the self in terms of the new immigrant aesthetics. When she was asked, "Do you see immigration as an experience of reincarnation?" Mukherjee answered, "Absolutely! I have been murdered and reborn at least three times" (Connell 18). Dimple kills her fractured self many times before she reconstructs herself through murder. Does that action mean that Dimple is privileging her selfhood and becoming complicit with Western notions of a liberated woman? Mukherjee sees Dimple's action as resistance and condones it as progress. "In the United States, she suddenly learns to ask herself 'self'-oriented questions. Am I happy? Am I unhappy? And that, to me, is progress. So, instead of committing suicide, turning society-mandated violence inward, she, in a misguided act, kills the enemy.… It's meant to be a positive act. Self-assertive" (Connell 21–23). The novel, while attempting to examine the conflicted space in which an Indian woman reconstructs her identity where the older paradigms are no longer functional and new ones are yet to actuate, is ultimately limiting as a model for liberation, because Mukherjee reductively suggests one can simply reject the past for autonomy and liberation. Additionally, she does not allow for multiplicities of identities in a multicultural space that is supposed to be the United States of America.

The female protagonists of Mukherjee's fiction, like many immigrant women in the United States, claims Mukherjee, are "between roles.… There isn't a role model for the 'Jasmines' or the 'Dimples.' They have to invent their roles, survive and revise as best they can" (Connell 23). Mukherjee's texts do bring to the fore the problematic space that an immigrant community inhabits where notions of traditional femininity are still imposed in an effort to minimize the colonizing influence of the dominant community, where racism rears its ugly head perpetually. In this conflicted space, the postcolonial female's negotiation for her identity

in a transnational diasporic space is riddled with conflict, a conflict represented in a "maddening" space by often alienated subjects themselves. Therefore, we must keep in mind the transnational diasporic subjects' psychic constructions when we read these so-called feminist texts. We must not duplicate a colonialist rendering of subject formation in our readings, which frames gender oppression in the Indian community in monolithic terms, but must situate these texts squarely in the cultural space where their production and consumption take place.

PART TWO: *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS* AND THE IMMIGRANT IMAGINATION

In my discussion of Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*, published almost two decades after her earlier texts discussed in Part One, I will share some interesting insights about Mukherjee's own ideas of exile and alienation coming full circle as she attempts to reconcile the psychic contradictions and conflicts of the postcolonial female subject and cultural identity formation in the diaspora. However, her text is still haunted with the construction of the modern subject in reductive ways. In this section, I will illustrate Mukherjee's continued stereotyping and misrepresentation of both the American as well as the Indian experiences of postcolonial female subjects.

Tara Chatterjee, the protagonist of *Desirable Daughters* currently living in America, divorces Biswapriya Chatterjee – "who was, and probably still is, wealthy beyond counting or caring" (23) – and was educated, like Mukherjee herself, at Loreto House, a prestigious convent school run by Irish nuns.

Mukherjee writes about her sense of alienation from her Bengali culture as early as 1977 in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. As discussed in Part One, with her father's growing success as a chemist and industrialist, the family moved away from the joint-family household into an exclusive, Westernized neighbourhood, where a *durban* always guarded the compound gates, regulating and checking unwanted visitors. Such too is the fate of Tara and her two sisters, Padma and Parvati, who are not allowed out on the street, symbolically separating the public and the private. The

narrator explains, "Our car was equipped with window shades. We had a driver and the driver had a guard" (*Desirable Daughters* 29). For true liberation to occur, these female protagonists of Mukherjee's must leave the "oppressive" Indian homes and cultures behind.

In many of her novels, Mukherjee explores the possibilities for liberation through transformation – especially for oppressed, middle-class Indian women – in the New World. From Tara Banerjee (*The Tiger's Daughter*) to Dimple (*Wife*) to Jasmine (*Jasmine*) to Tara Chatterjee (*Desirable Daughters*), we see a slow transformation of the female characters who negotiate their identities in the New World, and although this transformation is not without violence or loss in which one self seems to annihilate another, it is still seen as liberatory.

However, Mukherjee apparently realizes at this time in her life, after raising two sons in the West, that it is not easy to murder one's self off as easily as she had thought. The past seems to haunt the author, as seen in the representation of Tara in *Desirable Daughters*. The narrative begins with the mythic marriage ceremony of Tara Lata Gangooly, a child bride, whose intended dies of a snakebite even though the proper worship and rituals for the snake goddess have been made; the intended's greedy family demand the dowry money anyway, because they claim that the boy died due to a curse and that the bride was a "home-destroying, misfortune-showing daughter" (10). The father, Jai Krishan Gangooly, who is a Hindu and who believes that an unmarried daughter will not attain Nirvana and might be reborn as a woman, saves her from that fate by marrying her to a tree. She is now a married woman just like her two older sisters. She goes on to live for seventy years and gradually changes the world by becoming a freedom fighter; she is eventually killed by the British.

Tara Chatterjee considers herself the mirror image of the ancestral Tara. The narrator then proceeds with the story of the "three great-granddaughters of Jai Krishan Gangooly" (7), Padma, Parvati, and Tara. Tara is recently divorced from Bishwapriya Chatterjee, a billionaire software tycoon, and is living with her white America lover, Andy, who is an ex-hippie, and who, I argue, exoticizes Buddhism. She is raising her fifteen-year-old gay son. Tara is still friends with Bish, and the causes of the divorce seem to be fairly simple; Bish is a typical Hindu man, a householder who performs his dharma well – the dharma of the householder involves paying off the debts to one's ancestors which are discharged by marrying and having children; a debt to the gods that is discharged by the household

rituals and sacrifices; and a debt to the teacher that is discharged by appropriately teaching one's wife or children. This, however, is not enough for the Westernized Tara. She needs someone who is less serious and dutiful; she needs "Andy, good old 'boys-just-want-to-have-fun' Andras Karolyi," her "balding, red-bearded, former biker, former bad-boy, Hungarian Buddhist contractor/yoga instructor … [her] carpenter" (25), who got her with a "backrub," and who, even though a practising Buddhist, has "never taken a deep interest in [Tara's] Indian life" (46–47). She explains,

> "Love" is a slippery word when both partners bring their own definition. Love, to Bish, is the residue of providing for parents and family, contributing to good causes and community charities, earning professional respect, and being recognized for hard work and honesty. Love is indistinguishable from status and honors. I can't imagine my carpenter, Andy, bringing anything more complicated to it than, say, "fun." Love is having fun with someone, more fun with that person than with anyone else, over a long haul. (27)

Here, too, Mukherjee falls into reductive and easy binaries regarding love vs. arranged marriage, duty vs. dharma, liberated fun sexuality vs. sexual oppression and couches them in the inherited rhetoric of emancipation constructed by the elite in India during the nationalist era.

The narrator compares the lifestyles of her two sisters, who seem to be living ordinary lives as opposed to Tara's American life. Of her two sisters, Parvati lives in India in a very traditional household even though she had a love marriage; she had fallen in love with an Indian student while studying in America. The eldest sister, Padma, who lives in New Jersey, is married to a Harish Mehta, an "American," according to the narrator, as like Padma, "he'd blotted out all that was inconvenient or didn't fit" (183). Padma, according to the narrator, "had been the 'new girl' [in India] and our father had destroyed the opportunity" (179), the opportunity to be liberated and Westernized.

However, Tara discovers that Padma might have had a secret love affair in India with Ronald Dey, a Christian Bengali; she is suddenly confronted with the reality of her "nephew," Chris Day, when he appears from India, ostensibly looking for his mother, Padma. She visualizes her sister's affair

in India as liberating, for she exclaims, "Passion like Didi's is foreign in our family; recklessness unknown. She is our *true American*, our improviser …" (emphasis added, 31). She continues, "Something marked Didi as different" (31), and, of course, the difference is "genetic," just as Jasmine's transformation in *Jasmine* is represented as genetic. Because she had always been marked as different, and therefore American, Padma now lives the Diva lifestyle in New Jersey as a "fag hag" and is famous in the Indian enclave as a television star. However, she commodifies Indianness and is more Indian than the Indians in India. Tara states, "In San Francisco, I barely knew any Indians" (181). Both the sisters use the idea of Indianness for different purposes, one to "sell" it and one to reject it.

Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* contains many of the author's own misgivings about India and the Indian community and its inability or unwillingness to adapt to the changing times – a world she had left behind when she relocated to the West. The narrator of *Desirable Daughters*, too, makes similar claims:

> "Love" in my childhood and adolescence (although we didn't have an "adolescence" and we were never "teenagers") was indistinguishable from duty and obedience. Our bodies changed, but our behavior never did. Rebellion sounded like a lot of fun, but in Calcutta there was nothing to rebel against. Where would it get you? My life was a long childhood until I was thrown into marriage.… Love was a spectrum upon which [many different men] lay within a narrow, caste-bound zone of contention. In the third-largest population in the world, even a narrow range is not a constricted choice. (29)

However, this community can apparently remake itself in the West. She states that she belongs to an elite minority group and accepts that she is blessed. In her earlier novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, Mukherjee shows the same community as being tradition bound, fixed and oppressive. So how is *Desirable Daughters* different from her earlier texts? How is she redefining the passive and fixed India? She seems to be gesturing toward the essentialized core of Indianness that one is inextricably tied to.

What about the Indian communities of the New World that she had demonized as living in ethnic ghettos in *Jasmine* and *Wife?* In *Desirable*

Daughters, we see the author making an attempt to resurrect the image, particularly of the Bengali community, as well as the feminized Indian manhood of her earlier texts.

Let's examine her most recent novel a little more closely. The protagonist of *Desirable Daughters*, too, is named Tara, and we see many more specific autobiographical elements in her latest novel. Tara's ancestors are from the upper-class Brahmin community, the "Bhadra lok" and she is a descendant of a "Bhadra mahila," an educated and genteel Bengali woman; this community was one of the first communities in India to be "civilized" (*Desirable Daughters* 7). Also, interestingly enough, it is only in this novel that Mukherjee suddenly seems to become aware of the debate and discussion that has been raging in academia regarding the position of the Bhadra lok and especially the Bhadra mahilla during colonial rule in India. Partha Chatterjee, among others, has written extensively in "The Nation and Its Women" about the "women's question," which became a "central issue in the most controversial debates over social reforms in early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal – the period of its co-called renaissance" (*The Nation and Its Fragments* 116–34). While the author tackles the very complex question regarding the "new woman" and her identity construction through oppositional discourses of tradition vs. modernity/nationalism, I want to point to his assertion that "in setting up new patriarchy as a hegemonic construct, nationalist discourse not only demarcated its cultural essence as distinct from that of the West but also from that of the mass of the people [i.e., Indian Muslims, Muslim women, and the majority of the masses]" (134). In a similar vein, the narrator of *Desirable Daughters* explains,

> The Hindu Bengalis were the first Indians to master the English language and to learn their master's ways, the first to flatter him by emulation, and the first to earn his distrust by unbidden demonstrations of wit and industry. Because they were a minority in their desh, their homeland, depended on mastering or manipulating British power and Muslim psychology, the Hindus of east Bengal felt themselves superior even to the Hindus of the capital city of Calcutta. (6)

One such man is the great-grandfather of the current Tara, Jai Krishna Gangooly, a pleader in a Decca High Court, who is cast as "the apostle of enlightenment and upholder of law against outmoded customs, or the adjudicator of outrages undefined and unimaginable under British law," and is also someone who is in conflict with the "majesty of law" as he is searching "for an uncorrupted, un-British, un-Muslim, fully Hindu consciousness" (9). Strange that the narrator admits Gangooly's search for a "fully Hindu consciousness," for in the following paragraphs remaining in this chapter, I shall show that even though Mukherjee appears to want to repair some of the damaging (mis)representations of the Indian minorities resplendent in her earlier texts (for example, the Sikh "terrorist" in *Jasmine)*, and to showing a fuller picture of the New Jersey Indians as compared to *Jasmine* and *Wife*, she continues to (mis)represent and generalize the Indian diaspora and its struggle for empowerment by falling into her earlier notions of "Indianness" as either passive or excessive, and "Americanness" as liberating.

In comparison to *Jasmine*, where a member of the Sikh community is represented as a terrorist, in *Desirable Daughter*, the Sikh man, Sgt. Jasbir Singh Sidhu, B.A., M.A., Ph.D., Doctor Jack, who, unlike Sukhi, the terrorist and murderer of Jasmine's husband in *Jasmine*, is himself a victim of Sikh fundamentalists. His father, who was a policeman in India, was marked as a traitor by them and killed. He has lived in Vancouver since he was two and is now a SFPD member. When she goes to the police station to report on her misgivings about Chris Dey, she asks to see a culturally sensitive officer; to begin with, she is assigned a Bangladeshi officer, Farookh Ahmed, but she doesn't think a "Muslim would understand"; so, due to her request, she is assigned "a tall Sikh with a trimmed beard and a thoroughly American manner and accent. But for the powder-blue turban, he looked more like a college student than an officer of the SFPD" (139).

While trying to do justice to the complexity of the Sikh situation post-1984, she falls into the stereotyping of Muslims. First, she does not see Farookh Ahmed because of his Muslim background; second, the imposter, Abbas Sattar Hai, who is pretending to be her nephew, Chris Dey, viciously murders her real nephew; third, he is shown as a member of the Muslim community and, in fact, as belonging to the notorious underworld Muslim Dawood Gang operating out of Bombay. Hai ends up blowing up Tara's house with explosives, while she is being romantically reconciled with her divorced husband in a sexual fantasy worthy of our soap operas

after Andy walks out on her due to the SFPD's investigation of the Dey's case. (The audience is to assume that Andy has a criminal past, you know, as he is a "violent" Hungarian!)

While the crime situation in Bombay's underworld is no doubt complex and dangerous, the assumption that crimes committed in America are by recent immigrants, and moreover, by those "violent Muslims," lands Mukherjee's narrative from the frying pan into the fire. The increasing disenfranchisement of Asian American youths in America, and specifically in California, and the proliferation of Asian American gangs, is here trivialized and the magnitude negated. For how can there be Asian American gangs in California when the Asian students perform their dharma so well (44)? And does not everyone live a wonderfully "ethnically ambiguous life," "drinking coffee" and "walking their dogs" and being on first-name basis with the service people – Ib, Selim, Moh, Safid, Ali – who are apparently all employed and equally hardworking like the Palestinians (25)? And don't forget the laundromats and restaurants owned by the Japanese!

Yet, Mukherjee also seems to make a genuine effort to reclaim the "decadent" and "traditional" Bengalis' lifestyle of *The Tiger's Daughter* by portraying her parents' retreat to Rishikesh, to explain Hinduism and the four stages of Hindu life – *brahmacarya*, *gârhastya*, *vânaprasty, sannyâsa*, namely, student, householder, forest-dweller, and ascetic in *Desirable Daughters*. Tara explains about her extremely Westernized father at this stage of his life by stating, "My father has made connections on a cosmic level, the rest of it didn't really matter" (304). In her earlier novels, the protagonists long for sexual liberation and freedom; indeed, Tara Chatterjee of *Desirable Daughters*, too, desires and celebrates the sexual exuberance of the Americans, yet at the same time, for the first time, Mukherjee seems to valorize the Indian arranged marriage system, in her own conflicted way! She contrasts the two men in her life – one Indian, the other Hungarian:

> The two long-term lovers in my life are such opposites there are no points of comparison. [She then goes on to compare them, anyway!] Whatever one is, the other isn't. Andy isn't rushed, he isn't methodical, but sometimes his presence is his absence. Sometimes I feel I should call him back. I never had

> to do that with Bish. Thousand of years of arranged marriages had somehow habituated us even before laying eyes on each other; there would be nothing in our sexuality that was, finally, exotic. (77)

And earlier, she states that Andy was not interested in her Indian past, just like Bud Ripplemeyer of *Jasmine*; as if to say it is not the exoticness that brings exuberance to their lovemaking, it must be something else. Yet it is only in Bish that she finds complete acceptance.

Mukherjee attempts to make amends for her earlier stereotype about unfeeling Indian husbands and rescuing white lovers, but the textuality of her attempts appears contradictory. The narrator of *Desirable Daughters* continues, "Bish is generous and protective [even as a divorced man]; he has more than enough to provide. Indian men, whatever their faults, are programmed to provide for their wives and children. If I had wanted only to be provided for, stupendously provided for inside the gated community, endlessly on display at dinners and openings, I would have stayed in Altherton" (27). But, of course, she chooses liberation, represented by love and sexual freedom.

Stereotypes of immigrants in San Francisco, too, abound – no one can make out anyone's ethnicity; the narrator explains, "I am one with the neighborhood, a young woman like so many others on the street: ethnically ambiguous, hanging out in the coffee shop, walking the dogs, strolling with boyfriends, none of us with apparent source of income" (25). With the exception, of course, of the hardworking "crack-of-dawn rising, late night closing Palestinians, whose shifting rosters of uncles and cousins seems uniformly gifted in providing our needs and anticipating our desires" (25). The new immigrants wear ill-fitting clothes, "laughable clothes" (35), and illegal aliens, who are "food handlers or sales assistants," have "watchful postures," but then later she laments she cannot tell Indians apart because she's lost her "Indian radar" (118)!

In her earlier novels, Mukherjee simply rejects the past for autonomy and liberation by reaching out to the West and Western ideals. However, in *Desirable Daughters*, she seems to return full circle to *her* India of the old Bengal with its superstitions and caste-bound traditions. Tara states:

> I realized the futility of questioning fate, or blind random chance, or character. If Didi [Padma] had married, would she have stayed in Calcutta? I could not imagine it. Would she have made a loving mother? If she had acted, would she have risen to diva status? Something else, equally calamitous would have happened on the same date, at the same minute. Perhaps an earthquake, a plane crash, an automobile accident. Who are we to question God? (303)

Indians, as you know, are fatalistic!

The female protagonists of Mukherjee's earlier fiction, like many immigrant women in the United States, claims Mukherjee, are "between roles" and must "reinvent themselves" (Cornell 23). Mukherjee's texts have, to a limited extent, brought to the fore the problematic space that an immigrant community inhabits. But her texts are only useful if we, as critics and readers, complicate the issues of the politics of representations in the West as well as the author's postcolonial condition and cosmopolitanism. As we know, in the Indian immigrant community, where notions of traditional femininity are still imposed in efforts to minimize the colonizing influence and racism of the dominant community, the postcolonial female's negotiation for her identity in a postcolonial space *is*, no doubt, riddled with conflict.

In *Desirable Daughters*, the sexually liberated and fully empowered Tara, even though artificially widowed (her hair is singed off due to the blast and she is wearing a wig; the illusions point to the traditional Bengali widows and their disempowerment) tries to reconcile the conflict and contradiction of the diasporic Indian women's subject formation by returning to the beginning; instead of the earlier versions of killing one self for the empowerment of the other, she seems to nudge the subject toward the hybrid "Third Space" of Homi Bhaba for reconciliation; however, even though the attempt is recognized, the text ends up with too many contradictions, stereotypes, and broad generalizations. This shows that even though Mukherjee appears to be aware of the postcolonial criticism of her texts, she still continues to inhabit a very problematic space and her conflicted consciousness still haunts her tales.

As she is one of the most-read Indian authors (examine any Asian American Anthology and you are sure to see one of her stories), her

representations of Indians and Indianness, and particularly Indian women, contribute to ongoing paternalism of the Global South by the Global West; too, such discursive formations have also furthered the West's effort at market liberalization of India, adding to further oppression of the working class and continued marginalization of Indian men and women due to the hierarchical nature of the global economic system.[2]