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**DESIRABLE RELATIONS: DIASPORA AND GENDER
RELATIONS IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*
AND *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS***

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Faculdade de Letras

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DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS***

by

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ABSTRACT

The globalized and transnational world of contemporary times is marked by the movement of people, goods and information around the world which is defined by Spivak as “the new diaspora”. In literary works, one of the first writers to discuss such phenomena is the Indian-born writer Bharati Mukherjee. In her works, the writer usually portrays women who leave India in order to settle in North America. Several critics have examined a variety of topics such as immigration, violence and culture clash in the writer’s novels and short stories. Critics do not commonly investigate, however, the relationship between contemporary diaspora and gender in Mukherjee’s writings. In this thesis, I analyze two of Mukherjee’s novels, *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*, to prove my hypothesis that the women characters undergo a major change in the way they develop their gender relations mainly as a consequence of their diasporic experience. I investigate each woman character’s process of leaving India – Jasmine’s, Tara’s and Padma’s – and relocating themselves in the United States and their consequent subversion of the gender roles of daughter, sister, mother, wife and widow. I discuss the women character’s complex position as subjects in-between cultures and their exposition to new behaviors in their host-land as a way of trying to comprehend their reaction to the liberal and so-called feminist ideas that they encounter in their new homes. I also compare and contrast their experiences of migration as they are marked by issues of gender, class, caste, education and are connected to the types of transgression they are capable of enacting. Finally, I analyze the characters’ perceptions of home and investigate how their displacements at home and away from home are also responsible for their disruptive attitudes. My work is informed by the critical framework of postcolonial, diaspora and feminist literary studies and aims at highlighting the role of women in the new diaspora. My analysis of Mukherjee’s women characters fits into such approaches as it focuses on the importance of gender in literary works that are set in diasporic contexts.

RESUMO

O mundo transnacional e globalizado dos tempos atuais é caracterizado pelo intenso movimento de pessoas, produtos e informação descrito por Spivak como a nova diáspora. Na literatura, uma das primeiras autoras a retratar tal fenômeno foi a escritora Bharati Mukherjee. Em seus romances, a autora nascida na Índia frequentemente retrata histórias de mulheres que abandonam o país de origem para se estabelecerem em países da América do Norte. Vários críticos têm examinado tópicos como imigração, violência e choque cultural presente nos contos e romances da escritora. Tais críticos normalmente não discutem, contudo, a relação entre gênero e diáspora nos trabalhos de Mukherjee. Nesta dissertação, analizo dois de seus romances, *Jasmine* e *Desirable Daughters* a fim de provar minha hipótese de que as personagens femininas sofrem uma significativa transformação em suas relações de gênero principalmente como consequência de suas experiências diaspóricas. Investigo os processos pelos quais Jasmine, Tara e Padma deixam a Índia e se fixam nos Estados Unidos e suas consequentes subversões dos papéis de gênero de filha, irmã, mãe, esposa e viúva. Discuto a complexa posição de entre-lugar entre culturas ocupada pelas personagens e sua exposição a novas possibilidades de padrões de comportamento no país de destino para compreender o modo como reagem às chamadas idéias liberais e feministas que elas encontram nos EUA. Também comparo e contrasto suas experiências de migração que são marcadas por questões de gênero, classe, casta e educação e as relaciono com as formas de transgressão que elas são capazes de cometer. Finalmente, analizo as diferentes percepções de “lar” das personagens e investigo como seus deslocamentos ocorridos dentro e a partir do “lar” são responsáveis por suas atitudes disruptivas. Meu trabalho se baseia na crítica postcolonial, diaspórica e feminista e tem o objetivo de enfatizar o papel da mulher na nova diáspora. Minha análise das personagens femininas da autora se encaixa nessa perspectiva que enfoca a importância das questões de gênero em obras literárias que se passam em contextos diaspóricos.

INTRODUCTION

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century was and has been marked by transnationalism and globalization. As a consequence of a post-colonial configuration of the world, the constant flow of goods, information and people has modified society in different aspects. Not only have the global economy and cultural formations been altered, but also the configurations of nation-states have been redefined (Almeida, "In and Out" 317). The increasing movement of people around the globe since the 1980s, defined by Gayatri Spivak as a new diaspora for its cultural specificities ("Diasporas" 246), has been examined by writers from varied backgrounds. One of the first authors to address such issues in literary works was Bharati Mukherjee.

Born in Calcutta in 1940, Mukherjee left India at the age of twenty-one. She lived in Canada and in different parts of the United States of America, finally settling in California. Currently, she is a professor at the University of California at Berkeley. Similar to her own experience, the author often portrays in her fictional work stories of Indians, especially women, who undergo the experience of leaving their country and relocating mainly in North America. In *Jasmine*, published in 1989, and *Desirable Daughters*, published in 2002, Mukherjee portrays characters that reflect critically on the experience of diaspora. Analyzing the main women characters in the two novels mentioned, it is apparent that, because of their diasporic experience of moving from India to the USA, these characters go through significant changes in their gender relations.

In previous novels and short stories by the author, it is possible to observe that the characters are still struggling with culture clash and assimilation into USA culture, as happens with the women characters in *Wife* (1975) and *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971). Although in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* the women characters Jasmine, Tara and Padma still have to adapt to a different culture at some point in the narratives, they question aspects of their

subjectivities as they go through a diasporic experience. In the two novels I work with, Mukherjee tells the story of four women who leave India to live in the USA. Jasmine, from the homonymous novel, is a dark-skinned widow from a low caste who moves illegally to the USA claiming she is going to perform *sati*, the Hindu practice of widows' self-immolation. The sisters Tara, Padma and Parvati, from *Desirable Daughters*, are highly educated young Brahmins who have the opportunity to live legally in the USA. In spite of their differences, these women characters share the condition of being inserted in the new diaspora as well as facing the necessity of redefining themselves in relation to the spaces they inhabit. My analysis of *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* aims at discussing the outcome of their experience of diaspora from a different perspective, specifically, the ability of the women to question and alter the way they perform gender roles and establish gender relations.

Some critics have approached Mukherjee's work through perspectives other than the one I adopt. In a selection of essays entitled *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, published in 1993, for instance, several authors discuss the author's fiction focusing on issues such as cultural clash, identity, agency and violence. Although several of these articles provide insightful arguments that support my own claims, they either do not focus on the transgression of gender relation as a consequence of diaspora experience or their approach is somewhat different from the one I take. Moreover, the articles on Mukherjee's work deal mostly with *Jasmine* and hardly ever with *Desirable Daughters*.

Brinda Bose, for instance, in "A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race, and America Meet in Bharati Mukherjee," discusses three novels by the Indian-born author: *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, and *Jasmine*. Bose focuses on the main women characters in these works claiming that their process of finding their identity in the United States is a matter of intense struggle. She claims that although the characters' fluid identities are to be celebrated, their immigration process is marked by a two-sided marginalization: that is, "by virtues of their ethnicity and their gender" (47). Although I believe that several of Bose's statements

about the women characters do apply to the women in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*, my focus is not exactly the marginalization of the characters as they relocate to America, but rather their subversion of gender roles and relations. It is true that the characters' diasporic journey is not free from oppression and pain; however, marginalization does not work in the same way for all of them. As I argue in chapter 2, characters such as Tara, Padma and Parvati are much more privileged in terms of class and caste than Jasmine, and, therefore, have a less traumatic immigration experience.

In "Creating, Preserving, Destroying: Violence in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*," Samir Dayal investigates violence in the novel claiming that it is a recurrent problem in both India and the USA. He discusses the violent acts involved in Jasmine's leaving Hasnapur and arriving in the host country. According to Dayal, Jasmine's violent immigration journey of self-discovery is a "parable for the social transformation of the Indian postcolonial" (66). The critic sees similarities in Jasmine's difficult immigration experience and India's own transformation as a postcolonial country: "In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee may not be explicitly concerned with violence in *historical processes*, but the political is always in the background, and violence is never far from the threshold of the postcolonial's consciousness" (78). Dayal's main theme is present in several passages of the novel, and I believe that it is indeed important to discuss the way Jasmine reacts to violence as a way of asserting agency, as seen in the way she reacts when she is raped by Half-Face. Although violence, both physical and psychological, is a topic that marks Jasmine's journey to the USA, this is not the main interest of this investigation. Differently from Dayal's article, my work focuses on discussing the way the characters destabilize gender relations, be their transgressions violent or not.

Also in the collection of essays on Mukherjee's works, Pushpa N. Parekh discusses narrative voice and gender roles in *Jasmine*. The critic explains that traditional oral stories, myths, and folktales centered on women usually begin, rather than end in marriage. The female protagonist mostly has to earn her husband, and her married state, by going through a

period of unmerited suffering (109). The protagonist never challenges the assigned gender roles in marriage and actually internalizes the prevailing definition of a woman's role in marriage as one of suffering and endurance. It is only in the end that she changes from a "silent woman" to a "speaking person" by telling her story, although she does so through the voice of the "teller of tales." Parekh argues that in *Jasmine* Mukherjee reinvents and subverts the woman-centered oral tale: "She unravels the triple voice-strands in the complex triad of the Jyoti-Jasmine-Jane persona" (110). In her analysis Jyoti is "the silent woman," who is bound to and told a certain kind of existence and identity. Named Jasmine, after being widowed and immigrating illegally, she gradually becomes the "speaking person" of her own tale. As she escapes Iowa and its imprisoning milieu, at the end of the novel, Jane becomes "the teller of her tales." Once more, Parekh's comparison of Jasmine's narrative voice to the narrative voice of traditional Indian tales is not the focus of my work. Her insights into the way Jasmine gains voice as she challenges traditional gender roles, however, does indeed contribute to the development of my analysis of the novel.

Brazilian critics Peônia Viana Guedes and Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira have also raised relevant discussion topics on Mukherjee's work, especially in relation to *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*. Guedes, for instance, in "Rewriting Paradigms of Social and Cultural Identity: The New Indian Immigrant in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction" discusses the notion of hybridism in relation to the women protagonists of both *Jasmine* and "A Wife's Story." Concerning *Jasmine*, the critic explains that, through the portrayal of the main character, the Indian-born writer presents a different view of a globalized country in which the Indian immigrant is represented as a global cosmopolitan individual. Hybridism is indeed a relevant issue that I discuss in the first chapter, and Guedes's insights into Jasmine's hybrid condition can be connected to the way the novel's protagonist perceives gender relations throughout the novel.

Oliveira, in “A ficção de Bharati Mukherjee: representações de imigrantes nos Estados Unidos e na pós-modernidade,” discusses issues of visibility of the post-colonial subject when represented in post-colonial fiction. Focusing on two short stories from Mukherjee’s *The Middle Man and Other Stories*, the critic uses the metaphor of the mirror to talk about how the subject may create an image of “the other” that, at the same time, is constructed in opposition to and is dependent on this “other”. She exemplifies her point examining the love relationship between Maya, an Indian immigrant woman, and Fred, a man without arms, in “The Tenant.” Although Oliveira does not write about the novels and the characters I focus on in my analysis, her reflections on the gender relations between these two characters helped me envisage the way I would analyze the gender relations I investigate in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*.

Mukherjee has also received harsh criticism of her works, especially *Jasmine*. Critics such as Anu Aneja and Sangeeta Ray usually reject the author’s most popular novel accusing her of compliance with a so-called project of re-colonization of third world people living in the first world. In general, both critics claim that the novel’s protagonist participates in the process of othering herself in order to belong to a mainstream society in the host country. *Jasmine*, according to Aneja and Ray, helps reinforce the idea of the superiority of the West over the East. Mukherjee is accused of portraying the protagonist as the stereotypical subaltern woman, suffering with patriarchy and misery. Once she moves to the United States, she somehow experiences a “betterment” in her life and, then, becomes a much happier woman. Even though Aneja’s and Ray’s work is respected among scholars, their ideas are also subject to criticism. Since I particularly disagree with most of these critics’ claims, in my thesis, I respond to their criticism of *Jasmine* by providing evidence from the text and contrasting it to *Desirable Daughters*.

If *Jasmine* is widely discussed in academia and receives a large amount of criticism both negative and positive, the same cannot be said for *Desirable Daughters*. During my research I was able to find few relevant articles which focus on the examination of this novel. On one hand, Brazilian critic Cleusa Barbosa, for instance, discusses the women characters in both *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*, a novel published in 2004, claiming that they do not exist as unified beings, but rather as multiple subjects that suggest numerous possibilities of identity constructions. Along the same lines, Katherine Miller argues that the mobility generated by diaspora allows the women characters to move beyond the traditional boundaries of female identity. Miller argues, however, that an examination of Tara's story proves that it is possible but complicated for her to challenge some of the social and ideological markers that determine her identity (64). Although I agree with Barbosa's description of the characters' identity as malleable and always in process, I also recognize, as Miller points out, that the character's process of transforming their identity, especially Tara's, is not such an easy task.

Miller's article is, in fact, the one that comes closer to the claims of my thesis, since it discusses gender roles, identity transformations and the concept of home. Most articles I found throughout my research, however, do not precisely approach the women characters' subversion of gender roles in the context of diaspora. The authors of these articles, however, provide me with valuable comments and discussions on *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*, as I shall point out throughout my work. My major claim is that, once they migrate to the United States, the women characters suffer alterations in their subjectivities and in the traditional way they are used to viewing and enacting the gender roles and relations that they learn in their home country.

Having presented my hypothesis, it is important to clarify some of the terms that I use and choices that I make throughout my work. First, even though I am aware that "America"

does not exclusively refer to a specific territory in North America, I often choose to use the term to allude to the United States since this is the word widely used by characters to talk about the country. As a consequence, I also choose to use American, instead of the less used term Unitedstatian, as an adjective and to describe nationality. Another term that I utilize when I refer to Indian gender roles and relations is the adjective traditional. It is necessary to make clear that, when I use the term, I by no means intend to essentialize gender roles and relations in India. By traditional, I refer to idealized prescriptions of gender roles that are supposed to be presented by Indian women. My idea of traditional gender roles and relations is not my own creation, but is rather based on the character's description of the way women were and are expected to behave in their specific class and caste. Additionally, when I use the word liberal as to describe the United States, I am generally referring to the quality of being tolerant or not completely limited by authoritarian and traditional views and attitudes. I am aware, however, that not all regions of the USA can be described as being marked by liberal or tolerant attitudes. Finally, when I use the term identity, I do not refer to a stable and fixed concept. In this sense, Avtar Brah's discussion provides a significant understanding of the term identity that is used in my thesis:

The idea of identity, like that of culture, is singularly elusive. We speak of 'this' identity and 'that' identity. We know from our everyday experience that what we call 'me' or 'I' is not the same in every situation; that we are changing from day to day. Yet there is something we 'recognise' in ourselves and in others which we call 'me' and 'you' and 'them'. In other words, we are constantly changing but this *changing illusion* is precisely what we see as real and concrete about ourselves and others. And this *seeing* is both a social and a psychological process. Identity then is an enigma which, by its very nature, defies a precise definition. (20)

Even though it is difficult to establish a singular and precise definition of identity, it is important to regard it as a process rather than as a fixed concept. In the field of postcolonial and diaspora studies, identity is not only understood as a process but also as hybrid, that is, it is the product of cultural grafting (Friedman, *Mappings* 24). Similar to Brah and Susan Friedman, Sandra Almeida claims that “identities or the formation of subjectivities become, in our contemporary world, a process in flux, a temporary belonging rather than a unifying concept” (“In and Out” 318). The overall conceptualization of identity as a process of the formation of subjectivities and having the feature of being hybrid is the one I refer to when I talk about the characters’ identity. Even though a character such as Padma seems to have reached a sense of supposedly stable identity, a careful examination of her portrayal shows that her identity is more a matter of appearance and performance than of authenticity. Having elucidated the use of the terms above, I can now turn to the theoretical framework adopted in my thesis.

Since the two novels by Mukherjee are set at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, their background is the contemporary configuration of the so-called postcolonial world marked by transnationalism and globalization. Since the diaspora experience is the main focus in the analysis of the characters, I base my investigation on the theoretical framework of cultural studies, specifically diaspora studies as defined by critics such as Spivak and Brah.

Spivak’s definition of the new diaspora is significant to my work since it describes precisely the contemporary migratory phenomenon in which the characters are inserted. She establishes a distinction between old and new diasporas claiming that while the new diaspora is related to transnationalism and globalization; the old ones resulted from religious oppression and war, slavery and indenturing (“Diasporas” 246). Similarly, Brah also sets up a distinction related to diaspora, pointing out the difference between the theoretical concept and the experience of diaspora itself. She argues that the concept may imply an ideology of return,

whereas the diaspora experience may actually be related to a homing desire (179). Such differentiation is relevant to my work because most of the women characters in Mukherjee's novels present a diaspora experience in which there is no desire for a homeland, but in fact a homing desire, that is, a desire to transform the host country into home, as I discuss in chapter 3.

Another useful differentiation that Brah establishes in terms of the diaspora experience is the notion that not all journeys can be said to be diasporic. Diaspora is, according to Brah, about settling down and putting roots elsewhere (182). With Brah's argument in mind, one of the main women characters in *Desirable Daughters* is not diasporic. Parvati moves to the United States in order to study, but soon feels homesick and returns to India. Her immigration experience, thus, involves only temporary permanence. Interestingly, it is during her short trip to the United States that Parvati is able to commit the only transgression in gender terms throughout the novel. She is actually the least transgressive of the characters and most of the time she conforms to the traditional roles prescribed for Indian women of her social class and cultural background. Her only transgression, that of choosing her own husband and marrying for love, is performed exactly when she is not in India, that is, when she experiences some type of dislocation from home that migrant experience somehow provides her with. Since Parvati cannot be said to be diasporic and mostly does not show disruptive behaviors in terms of gender roles, I do not focus my attention on her portrayal. I refer to her characterization at times as a means to contrast her traditional behavior with the way her sisters and Jasmine act after they move to the USA.

Definitions of diasporas, old and new, however, do not constitute the only preoccupation of my analysis. More important than this differentiation is the argument often present in diaspora studies, postcolonialism, and feminist literary criticism that gender is the main aspect of the new diaspora. James Clifford argues, for instance, that although there is the tendency of normalizing the experience of diaspora as being male, it is always gendered

(258). Clifford states that the displacement caused by diaspora may have different implications for the subject. It may renew patriarchal structures, for example, but it may also create new gender roles and political questionings (259). Spivak also highlights gender as the main aspect of the new diaspora. In the new diaspora the most important aspect is the use, abuse, participation and role of women (“Diasporas” 250). Furthermore, Brah refers to a phenomenon she calls the feminization of migration. She explains that women constitute a growing segment of migration all over the world, and that globalization has fostered a new international division of labor that depends mainly on women workers (179). Since I am working with women characters that experience diaspora and are able to question or transgress traditional notions of gender relations, the arguments of these critics that gender is the main aspect of the new diaspora indeed support my major claims.

Since Mukherjee locates her characters in a postcolonial configuration of the world marked by transnationalism and globalization, my thesis also refers to postcolonial theory. Postcolonialism is an umbrella term which is usually associated with a variety of issues but postcoloniality can be defined as “that condition in which colonized peoples seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical agents in an increasingly globalized world” (Boehmer 3). As the critic Elleke Boehmer points out, since the 1990s postcolonial theory is increasingly describing the postcolonial as migrant and relating postcolonial experience especially to women migrants (11). Boehmer also mentions how postcolonial women writers often aim at challenging preconceptions of third-world women as uniformly degraded and passively oppressed (218). The writings of these postcolonial women often portray experiences that dismantle generalizing concepts about women, especially subaltern and black ones “as the overreaching, universal sign of oppression” (225). Along the same lines, the postcolonial critic Gina Wisker points out the danger of generalizing the experience of postcolonial subjects simply as “a product of being ‘Other’ than European” and “seeing all women writers solely in terms of speaking from a subaltern position, speaking out against

oppression” (9). Boehmer’s and Wisker’s awareness of the differences among postcolonial women informs my analysis of Mukherjee’s characters, since Jasmine, Tara and Padma can be seen as dealing with oppression and otherness in very different ways. The characters’ experiences of diaspora are all different, since Tara, Padma and Parvati belong to a high social class and a prestigious caste, whereas Jasmine is a low-caste village girl. As these characters come from distinct social backgrounds, they have diverse experiences of diaspora and, regarding the performance of gender roles, respond differently to these experiences. Thus, although the characters may all be women inserted in a globalized world experiencing transformations to their subjectivities generated by their geographical dislocation, they do not constitute a homogeneous group that could be labeled as postcolonial women.

Dangerous generalizations and essentialisms are not the exclusive preoccupations of postcolonial critics. In my first chapter I look at the women characters’ position as in-between cultures. I describe their destabilization of gender roles and try to determine if their choices of subversive behaviors can be associated with some notion of feminism. I refer to critics in feminist literary criticism and postcolonialism in order to show that the experiences of women such as Tara, Padma and Jasmine cannot be read in light of Western feminism. Thus, I turn to Spivak’s, Wisker’s, Friedman’s, Chandra Mohanty’s, Brah’s and Ella Shohat’s critiques on the ideological constructions of third world women and global theories of feminism. Then, I proceed to an examination of the characters transgressions bearing in mind their exposure to a more liberal environment in the United States. I start by investigating Tara’s subversive behavior as daughter, sister, wife, lover and mother. In order to describe Tara’s in-betweenness I use Phillipa Kafka’s, Susheila Nasta’s and Bose’s discussions on the overall situation of women in a globalized context as well as on Mukherjee’s women characters in general. Next, I investigate Padma’s transgressions, pointing out her ambiguous position as both transgressive and in compliance with tradition. After that, I focus on the disruptive

attitudes of Jasmine as mother, daughter, lover, wife and widow. I point out how her role as widow is her most transgressive behavior and investigate her attitude in light of the discussions of widowhood and sati provided by critics such as Spivak and Kafka. I then discuss the arguments of Carmen Wikramagamage, Kafka and Paul Brians that Jasmine's attitudes are feminist, and I confront Aneja's and Ray's criticism of the protagonist's supposed uncritical desire to be part of mainstream USA. Finally, I conclude the chapter by referring to Shohat's relational feminism and Friedman's feminist theory based on the contemporary discussions of identity as appropriate theoretical frameworks to investigate women character's such as the ones portrayed by Mukherjee. I also make reference to hybridism to explain the in-between condition of the women characters using the ideas of Guedes, Homi K. Bhabha, Ashcroft et al, Boehmer, Shohat and Friedman.

As I argue in the first chapter, the characters' exposition to a more liberal environment and to feminist concepts is not the only reason for their subversive attitudes. In the second chapter I compare and contrast the women characters, arguing that, even though they all go through diaspora and destabilize traditional gender roles as they move to the USA, their experiences are quite distinct. In order to explain how postcolonial and diasporic subjects have different experiences which depend on their gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, color, sexuality and education, I use the criticism provided by Ania Loomba, Boehmer and Brah. These critics argue that it is inappropriate to regard postcolonial individuals as forming a homogeneous group since the issues of gender, class and ethnicity, among others, make their experience quite diverse. Based on these discussions, I proceed to an examination of the identity construction of women characters as mainly marked by the determinants of gender, class, caste, ethnicity and education. I start by examining Tara's identity as changing from overdetermined to more malleable. I look at the means by which Tara learns to perform the roles of a traditional Indian woman, highlighting her indoctrination into gender roles through school education and family. I point to the importance of Indian myths and history in teaching

women appropriate ways of playing gender roles through the discussions provided by Miller and Loomba on the use of the figure of women in Indian national symbols. Moreover, I examine the characters' ethnicity as a complicating factor in their diasporic experience, referring to the notion of visible minorities as discussed by Eleanor Ty. I, then, examine Padma's portrayal, investigating how issues of class, caste and education place her and her sisters in privileged positions while gender does not. I finally examine Jasmine's life in India and in the USA and show that matters of class, caste, education and mainly gender make her quite unprivileged in both India and the USA. I also respond to the criticism of Aneja, Ray and Kristin Carter-Sanborn that the protagonist of *Jasmine* is a caricature of third world women. Finally, I examine Friedman's claim that the diasporic experience opens space for disruption, and I allude to the notion of agency, as discussed by Donald E. Hall, Ashcroft et al and Miller, as a way of explaining the disruptive attitudes of women characters in diasporic contexts.

In the third chapter, I discuss the relationship that the women characters have with the places that they inhabit, that is, India and the United States. I associate these places to the notion of home as discussed in postcolonial, feminist and diasporic theories and examine how the characters make themselves at home, reject and accept places as home and suffer displacements from and within home. I talk about the notion of a marker of identity as discussed by Bidy Martin, Mohanty and Rosemary Marangoly George and about how one's identity is complicated once one moves away from home, as Friedman argues. I also refer to the different connotations of the term – from security and comfort to violence and confinement – as developed by Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Carole Boyce Davies and Brah. Furthermore, I make reference to the arguments of Karen Caplan, hooks and Friedman that moving away from home offers subjects possibilities of change. Finally, I discuss the metaphor of luggage, both spiritual and material, as argued by George. I, then, proceed to an examination of Jasmine's experience of home arguing that her identity changes as a

consequence of her movement across locations. I examine each of Jasmine's experiences of home in detail, showing how she deals with her psychological and material luggage and focusing on the United States as the place where she is given more opportunities of disruption. I also investigate Tara's notion of home and argue that her identity is transformed as a consequence of her displacements from it and of the enforcement of gender relations within that location. Padma's dissatisfaction with the confining and limiting configuration of her home in India is discussed as her main motivation for her displacement. I also discuss Padma's attempt to reproduce some aspects of her Indian home in New York and creating an exotic image of herself and her native country. Moreover, I examine Padma's interest in exoticizing herself by associating her attitude to the theories of performance as presented by Bhabha. Finally I investigate the relationship between home and diaspora by connecting Brah's argument that not all diasporas foster the desire of return to the character's behavior in the novels. The characters' displacement from home offers them the possibility of agency as well as of subversion of gender roles.

As this work aims to show, the contemporary movement of people around the globe has created all sorts of subjects and identities. Although these subjects usually share displacements from home as well as a homing desire, there are many differences among diasporic experiences. As Mukherjee argues:

With the pietistic formula "we are all immigrants," I have to disagree. We are not, and never were. We have reinvented the myths of our founding so many times, and for so many audiences, that we've probably lost all trace of a unifying narrative. Many never had the chance to immigrate; many never wanted to. Did we come seeking religious freedom? I didn't. Did we come to escape oppression, the shackles of dictatorship? I didn't. Did we rejoin the remnants of our scattered family? I didn't. Have we come seeking happiness and fortune?—for both, I should have stayed where I was. We are expatriates,

exiles, slaves, and dispossessed, we are conquerors, plunderers, refugees, and amnesty-seekers, we are temporary workers, undocumented workers, visitors, students, tourists, we are joy seekers, claim-jumpers, parole-violators.

(“Imagining Homelands” 85)

The author indeed has a point in stressing the variety of experiences of immigrant people from all over the world. As the critics examined in this thesis show, it is inappropriate to categorize people under monolithic groupings such as “the postcolonial subject,” “the postcolonial woman,” or even stating that “we are all immigrants.” It is important to call attention, however, to the role of women in the new diaspora and to the effort of diasporic women writers in telling the stories generated by such a phenomenon. *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* are examples of narratives that disclose not only the suffering and displacements of women in diaspora but also their potential for change, transformation and agency. Hence this work expects to contribute to the investigations on the role of women in contemporary gendered diasporas as well as to the study of Mukherjee’s pioneering and instigating work.

CHAPTER 1

“I wasn’t, perhaps I’ll never be a modern woman:” Diasporic Women and Feminism

In the so-called new diaspora, as Spivak (“Diasporas” 246) points out, subjects move across national borders and as a consequence come in contact with different cultures.

Discussing diasporic literary works Almeida claims that:

[c]ross cultural movements very often take place in the form of migrant and diasporic literatures, either through the migrant that looks inwardly at the new culture, the one that looks outwardly to the place of so-called origin or the one that is caught in-between, in transit between worlds, spaces, languages and perceptions. (“In and Out” 318)

The displacements and relocations generated by the movement of diaspora open space for different relationships that the migrants may have with the specific spaces they inhabit, their homeland and their host land. Almeida argues that several contemporary writers often produce fictions that “negotiate new possibilities of locations and positioning, new identities in translocal and transnational movements” (“In and Out” 318). Mukherjee’s fictional works are consistent with the critic’s argument given that in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* the women characters’ diasporic displacements and their consequent contact with a different culture are responsible for modifying their sense of identity as well as for offering them possibilities for their redefinition of gender relations. The capacity of the diasporic women characters to assert their agency in these two literary works alludes precisely, as discussed in the introduction, to the importance and presence of women in the movement of the new diaspora.

Jasmine, Tara and Padma, the women characters who go through a diasporic experience¹, not only are in-between languages and spaces, but they are also in-between different constructions of gender relations. On the one hand, as they move away from India, they try to leave behind patriarchal and conservative gender roles and relations which have limited their life choices. On the other, as the women characters' benefit from a more liberating social configuration, they need to adjust to new possibilities of perceiving gender relations in the United States. Tara's, Padma's and Jasmine's destabilization of gender relations, however, cannot be understood as a simple assimilation into American culture. The characters do not seem to merely replace the way they used to play the gender roles of wife, daughter and mother, for instance, in India with an American way of playing these gender roles. Their complex position and their exposition to the new possibilities of behavior in their host land can be comprehended through an examination of the manner in which the characters cope with the more liberal notions that they encounter in their new homes. It is mainly through their contact with American women and the media that the characters come in contact with a supposedly feminist discourse which seems to exhort women to be "modern." When Tara says, as quoted in the title of this chapter, that she is never going to be a modern woman, she means that the behavior of the women she witnesses in America does not reflect her reality or her necessities.

In this chapter, I discuss the diasporic women's exposition to different configurations of gender roles as they come in contact with American culture. Generally speaking, not only do they question the gender roles they used to play in India, but also the roles that they observe and are confronted with in the United States. The claims of so-called feminist behaviors that Tara, Padma and Jasmine face may not exactly be appropriate to their experience. Thus, in the first section of this chapter, I refer to literary feminist criticism to

¹ As explained in the introduction, Parvati is also an important character in *Desirable Daughters*. Nevertheless, as she is not diasporic and does not perform significant subversions of gender roles, I choose not to discuss her portrayal here.

discuss how some forms of feminism, especially the ones which are said to be based on the interests of a monolithic group labeled “woman”, may be inappropriate to the diverse realities of women around the world. Then, I turn to each character’s transgressions of gender relations, examining whether their decisions or attitudes are complicit with the supposed feminist ideology of their host land. Finally, I return to the discussions on feminist literary criticism and address the issue of hybridity in order to determine if it is possible to establish which form of feminism best describes the experiences of these diasporic women.

1.1. Criticism of the Universal Category of “woman”

Postcolonialism, diaspora studies and feminist literary criticism have often criticized and warned against the pitfalls of conceptualizing a feminist project which would represent women’s claims in both global and local contexts. Spivak, Wisker, Friedman, Mohanty, Brah and Shohat are some of the critics who vehemently criticize the construction of homogenizing notions of a third world woman and a global feminism as usually imagined in the West. A more appropriate feminist project for them should take into account the different realities of women’s lives.

In “Diasporas Old and New” Spivak argues that in both north and south, that is, in developed and underdeveloped countries, “women are the super-dominated, the super exploited, but not in the same way” (249). She explains that, although women are not exploited in the same way, there is the tendency to generalize the demands of women from different contexts. According to Spivak, the USA is mostly responsible for a process that she calls “the universalization of feminism” (249), which would serve transnational interests and does not reflect the particularities of distinct realities.

Wisker also refers to Spivak when she discusses the tendency in some postcolonial criticism to homogenize experiences of different women. She argues that Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is contrary to an essentialist concept of a third world woman since the women behind this notion have to negotiate a variety of subject positions under patriarchy and imperialism and, therefore, their lives and writing cannot be read in light of Western feminism in a straightforward manner (22). Wisker herself claims that the assumption of a homogeneous post-colonial woman or the impositions of Western feminist individualism on these women’s lives “are all dangerous, replicating a kind of patriarchal appropriation” (23).

In “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, Mohanty also discusses the problems in the construction of third world feminisms as created by some Western feminist critics. She argues that such a construction must be submitted to two distinct projects: a critique of Western feminism and the formulation of “autonomous, geographically, historically and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies” (51). The third world feminism that Mohanty denounces bases itself upon the concept of the “third world woman” as a singular monolithic subject. As the author explains:

The relationship between “Woman” – a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.) – and “women” – real, material subjects of their collective histories – is one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. This connection between women as historical subjects and the re-presentation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity, or a relation of correspondence or simple implication. It is an arbitrary relation set up by particular cultures. (53)

Mohanty believes that the Western feminist texts she examines in her article do not attempt to make the connection between the so-called “woman” to women’s realities. The texts, which are part of a collection called Zed Press Women in Third World Series, do not attempt to establish such a relation because they participate in the colonization of “the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world” (53). Colonization here is understood as the production of a particular cultural discourse which aims to suppress and dominate the heterogeneity of the subject, that is, the realities of actual third world women. Although the singular construction of a third world woman is built arbitrarily, such notion carries the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse and, in that case, is uncritically seen as a legitimate one (53).

Mohanty does not suggest that Western feminism is singular or homogeneous in its goals. Western feminism, for her, in all its complexities and contradictions cannot be that uniform. It is possible, however, “to trace a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of ‘the West’” (52). Her criticism is directed at Western feminism specifically in texts by writers who use strategies to codify others as non-Western and themselves as implicitly Western (52). Such feminism uses the inappropriate notion of “third world difference”, a construction based on sexual difference, “in the form of cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance” (53). This alleged petrified patriarchy would be responsible for the oppression, in the same way, of most, if not all, women in third world countries. Thus, it is exactly against essentializing views about third world women and against a supposed third world solidified patriarchy as defined by several Western feminists that Mohanty is arguing in her article.

Brah also acknowledges the problematic construction of the universal category of “woman” as she says that “[i]t is now widely accepted that ‘woman’ is not a unitary category” (89). She reminds the reader, for instance, that the feminist slogan “sisterhood is global,” used in the women’s movement in the 1970s, failed because it did not acknowledge the

heterogeneity of the condition of being a woman (84). Even though such a homogenizing concept is rather problematic, at that time, such generalization was useful in the sense of what Spivak terms “strategic essentialism.” As the critic defines it, to essentialize or present oneself in simplified terms may, at times, be helpful as to achieve certain goals (Morton 74). Thus, it is important to have in mind that the assertion that sisterhood is global, common in the 1970s, was at the time important to the development of feminism in general. Nevertheless, as feminist movements mature, Brah reminds the reader that it is crucial to understand that the position of women “depends on a multiplicity of factors, such as gender, class, color, ethnicity, caste, whether we practice a dominant or subordinate sexuality, and whether we live in rich industrially advanced society or a poor country of the Third world” (84). That is why, she argues, it is important to attempt to imagine “woman” not as a homogeneous category, but as a diversified one. The critic believes that it is possible to develop a feminist politics that is simultaneously local and global (Brah 89). Such political practice, however, would have to address “how and why the lives of different categories of women are differently shaped by articulating relations of power; and how under a given set of circumstances we ourselves are ‘situated’ in these power relations *vis-à-vis* other categories of women and men” (Brah 90). Brah explains that subjects are positioned differently within social hierarchies and power relations. They may be, for instance, privileged by class while unprivileged by race and ethnicity. Therefore, they must deal with their positions within those hierarchies and relations in a variety of ways.

Brah also addresses the issue of difference that Mohanty points out. She explains that the global configuration of the world has at the same time led to the “homogenisation of cultural consumption across transnational boundaries” (90) often disregarding the assertion of difference. She argues that:

Under such circumstances it is important to identify when “difference” is organized hierarchically rather than laterally. We need to distinguish instances

when “difference” is asserted as a mode of contestation against oppression and exploitation, from those where “difference” becomes the vehicle for the legitimation of dominance. (90)

The complex question of cultural difference may, then, be understood through different perspectives. Nationalistic discourses can be used by liberation movements, for instance, as well as by racist and sexist groups (91). Brah proposes that cultures should be understood as processes rather than as a fixed category, and that cultural difference should be comprehended without essentialism. This way, she argues “it would be possible to challenge a particular cultural practice from a feminist practice without constructing a whole cultural group as being inherently ‘such and such’” (92). Such a perspective would enable us to question the practice of *sati*, for instance, without endorsing the view that the practice is a symbol of the inherent barbarism of Indian culture (92).

Like Brah, Shohat claims that feminist critique should avoid cultural relativist approaches and should dispute the notion that traditions are coherent, static and uninterrupted in any culture. She argues that the question of difference ought not to imply an assumption of the cultural superiority of the West or to “became associated with the idea of Eastern or African superiority over Western culture, virtually inverting Eurocentric hierarchical discourses” (“Area Studies” 74). Instead, she claims:

I have not been interested in difference for the sake of difference, but rather in dialogical encounters of differences. My argument is not that “we’re all different,” a truism that forms the basis of cultural relativist arguments. My point is rather that multicultural feminism is a situated practice in which histories and communities are mutually coimplicated and constitutively related, open to mutual illumination. (“Area Studies” 75)

Through such a perspective, the question of difference among women has to move beyond the dangerous assumptions of cultural essentialism. Shohat proposes a relational understanding of

feminism, as will be further explored in this chapter, which is concerned with looking at different positionings of women, bearing in mind different histories and forms of power relations.

In *Mappings*, Friedman also criticizes the essentialist feminist projects exemplified by Spivak, Wisker, Mohanty and Brah. Like Shohat, she states that critics should look for a different type of feminist criticism. She argues that it is time to go beyond a false notion of universal feminism “that obliterates difference”(4), as well as to abandon its past pluralization based on difference among women. For her, it is time to “reinvent a singular feminism that incorporates myriad and often conflicting cultural and political formations in a global context” (4). Even though the pluralization of feminism has greatly contributed to its development, since it invalidated the feminist impetus of the 1970’s of speaking for all women, Friedman believes that it is now time to consider a notion of feminism in the singular, that is, a locational feminism which “encourages the study of difference in all its manifestations without being limited to it, without establishing impermeable borders that inhibit the production and visibility of ongoing intercultural exchange and hybridity” (5). Since Mukherjee’s novels present characters who undergo processes of intercultural exchange and hybridity, Friedman’s claims will be discussed later as an alternative to an essentialist notion of feminism.

The critique of some forms of feminist criticism provided by Spivak, Wisker, Mohanty, Brah, Shohat and Friedman offers an intriguing discussion when compared and contrasted to the fictional experience of the women characters in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*. As Tara, Padma and Jasmine experience culture clash as a consequence of their geographical displacement, they come in contact with configurations of gender relations and supposedly Western feminist attitudes which complicate their process of identity construction and place them in a position of in-betweenness. The examination of each character’s subversion of gender roles in light of the review of the critics above shows that a professed

acritical Western or global feminism indeed is not enough to explain to the characters' specific experiences.

1.2. Tara: "Dancing through the Minefield"²

The protagonist of *Desirable Daughters* is the character who is the most aware of her exposure to different forms of women's behavior and often to feminist discourses in the USA. Through friends and the American media, Tara has an idea of what it is to be a supposedly "modern woman" in that culture. She explains that American publications aimed at women are her source of forbidden knowledge about conceptions of gender relations that are alien to her. She and her Indian friend Meena amuse themselves while reading the topics discussed in the magazines:

Does your husband know how to satisfy you? ("First time I have heard 'husband' and 'satisfy' in the same sentence," giggled one of us.) *Are you his breakfast, his snack, the main course – or the dessert?* ("Definitely his Alka-Seltzer!" we giggled again. These American magazines and American marriages were not geared to the lives we led.) *Do women marry the best lovers they ever had?* ("I think, unfortunately, we can all say yes"). (86)

As this quotation shows, a woman's sexual pleasure seems to be a significant issue for American women as presented in these magazines. They often encourage women to experiment with "sexual positions, and pointedly meaningless one-night stands" (86). Besides sex, these publications also stimulate women to talk about their problems and "share their disappointments" (86).

If we consider the way gender relations in traditional Indian societies such as the one Tara belongs to are configured, it is evident that the values behind these magazines do not match hers and her friend's reality. First of all, as the protagonist herself states, women in her

² See Annette Kolodny's groundbreaking essay "Dancing through the Minefield", published originally in 1980.

family are not used to talking about their feelings or thoughts. When she calls her sister Parvati or her parents in India, they do not discuss such issues since they assume that their “personal defeats are too banal to waste money on” (55).

Sexual fulfillment is an even less likely topic to be discussed. Before Tara asks for a divorce, she can never accurately answer if Bish is the best lover she has ever had since he is simply the only one that she is allowed to have a relationship with. As Kafka explains in describing the situation of Indian women in general, sexual pleasure “especially a woman’s, is still not an acceptable topic for public (or, in many cases, private) discourse” (28). Therefore, the question posed by the American publication which asks if a husband’s wife is satisfied with him can probably not be answered by the novel’s protagonist either.

The inappropriate content of such liberal or feminist claims seems to be very clear to Tara. She states that she and her Indian friend try to apply these concepts to their own experiences and situations, but it is not possible since “[t]he magazines weren’t writing about [them] and for [them]” (87). Although Tara cannot seem to identify with the magazine’s claims, Kafka argues that in contemporary times, for instance, “the media is beginning to influence and expand women’s sense of choice in sexual matters” (28). The critic further explains that “[t]his is the case because sexuality is socially constructed, and what they see in the media enables women to strive to free themselves from a society that has enculturated them into a repressive idea of what female sexuality is, to ‘decolonize their mind’ and bodies” (28). It is indeed true that alternative gender relations presented to Indian women can help them escape from some repressive models of sexuality; however, as Tara’s example shows, such a situation may not apply to all Indian women. Keeping in mind the criticism of women and global feminism discussed in the previous section, when we contrast it with the protagonist’s narrative, it is possible to say that a feminist project which would represent the claims of women in general is inappropriate to distinct realities of women, such as diasporic

Tara. By the standards of the feminist and liberal ideas the protagonist encounters in the American magazines, she believes she “will never be a modern woman” (27).

Even though the protagonist does not fully assimilate the liberal behavior to which she is exposed to in the USA, she does subvert the traditional configuration of gender roles prescribed for her class and culture. While she is in India, she basically fulfills the obedient and passive role of daughter and sister. It is in America, however, “after crossing the dark waters to California” (24), that she is able to destabilize the traditionally assigned roles of daughter, sister, wife, lover and mother.

The most significant alteration that Tara acts out is related to her role as a Brahmin Indian wife. She slowly starts enacting minor transgressions, such as calling her husband by his first name or nicknames, and major ones such as when she asks for a divorce. As Miller observes, “although she claims that she is not a ‘modern woman,’ Tara inhabits a world that her more traditional sisters criticize and reject” (68). Once again, the protagonist may not seem to affiliate herself to the discourses about modern and liberated women she finds in magazines, but she does challenge gender relations as a consequence of her diasporic experience and living in the USA. It is because she is exposed to different forms of gender relations and experiences a certain freedom in that geographical and social space that she feels that she has the option of asking for a divorce.

Tara’s divorce and her subsequent relationships with other men such as Andy imply her rejection of some forms of gender roles that are traditionally acted out by Indians of her social milieu. She explains that when she married Bish and moved with him to the USA, she thought she was going to live a more liberating life and marriage and that she was going to travel around and expand her horizons as well (85). As a dozen years go by, Tara notices that her husband has actually become even more traditional and that he seems only interested in displaying his wife around to his family, showing off that he has transformed Tara into a well-trained and attentive wife and daughter-in-law (86). In other words, she realizes that she is

playing a role that she does not particularly want to, and that “the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled” (85). As a result, she asks for a divorce.

After she divorces Bish, Tara experiences love relationships that she had never had before. The novel’s protagonist for the first time has the opportunity to date, since dating was something out of question for girls of her caste and class back in India (45). Tara reveals the several relationships she has after her divorce as she rehearses a conversation with her eldest sister Padma:

I may be alone right now, this week, but these past three nights are the first time I’ve been without a man or the attention of many men, most of it unwanted, in seventeen years! You thought that my world ended when I left Bish? You think I’m so unattractive, so uncomplicated, and so unadventurous that I’ve been sitting at home alone for five years just raising a son? I never told you about Andy, or Pramod or Mahesh or Donald – but could you not have guessed? (193)

The male names mentioned in this passage and Tara’s description of Andy as her “balding, red-bearded, former biker, former bad-boy, Hungarian Buddhist contractor/yoga instructor” (27) points to one of her several destabilizations of gender relations as she actually does play the modern girlfriend/lover role. She is not only being subversive as she has relationships with men out of wedlock, but she also dates men she is not even supposed to relate to. Some of Tara’s boyfriends are not Indian, were not approved by her father as tradition demands and, therefore, are not considered to be appropriate for her Hindu Brahmin background.

Although she mentions several names of former boyfriends, it is her affair with Andy that is described in more detail. It is through her relationship with him that she becomes aware of the differences between the ways each one of them understands love. The protagonist explains that:

“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 one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage. The qualities we associated with our father and with god were not notably divergent from the respect we accorded the president of the country, the premier of the state...great names in history, science and literature, older uncles, cricket players, movie stars and – of course – the boys our fathers would eventually select for us to marry. (29)

While Tara learns in India that love ought to be associated with duty and obedience, for Andy, love is “having fun with someone else, more fun with someone than with anyone else” (29). In contrast, for Bish love 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” (28). In conclusion, as Miller observes, “[t]he differing definitions emphasize that Tara chooses between duty, family and community represented by Bish, and the appeals of ‘free choice’ and ‘romantic love’ as represented by Andy” (68). Therefore, as the protagonist asks for a divorce and chooses to become Andy’s lover, she confirms that, after her diasporic experience, a more suitable relationship for her would be based on a concept of love that has more to do with feelings and freedom than with duty and tradition.

Tara’s divorce and her ensuing relationships with other men in the novel also make her an untraditional mother. Since marriage is supposed to last forever, being a divorced mother with eventual boyfriends posits her in a very untypical situation. She also has trouble raising and relating to her son, since she is more in-between cultures than he is. As Rabi was born in the United States and is much more assimilated to the country, it is difficult for Tara to raise him according to Brahmin traditional ways. On the other hand, the protagonist feels pressured

by her family members and ex-husband to provide their son with a conservative education and upbringing. Bish wants Rabi to have in the United States the same form of rearing that he had in India. As Tara explains:

I cannot remember a night at home when Bish did not complain of Rabi's careless appearance, his sloppy penmanship, his slouching posture, his shuffling walk, his talk, his manners, and his limp handshake. "Remember, people are judging you by what they see. They can't look into your heart, into your soul, into your brain. Is your shirt tucked in? Are your shoes polished?" *I know*, he'd say with a certain glee. *Let them judge, what do I care about people like that?* To Bish, Rabi was too dependent, except when he was too adventurous. He was too fanciful, but not sufficiently bold. Life was all a matter of shaping up and hitting one's mark, satisfying expectation, achieving a quota. Repudiations of reality were destined to die a dishonorable death. (160)

Rabi's mother explains that Indian fathers, such as Bish, think that America makes their children "soft in the brain as well as in the body" (161). In order to correct such undesirable situation, immigrant fathers invest in creating degrees of difficulty for their children so that they can have an idea of the stress and deprivation that those fathers once went through as children in India. That is why, for instance, Tara's ex-husband makes sure that their son goes to a school much like the one he went to as a child. He sends him to a conservative British school in California which "prided itself on the English model" (159).

After the divorce, Tara destabilizes the so-called traditional Indian mother role as she does not force Rabi to study in Atherton School. Instead, she sends him to the Academy of Atherton, a more liberal school in which he can develop his artistic abilities. Even though she is not such a demanding mother, her relationship with him is not an easy one. Her conflict with Rabi is well exemplified in the passage in which she feels like slapping him when he

asks her why she hates her sisters. Considering his question disrespectful, she reacts in the following manner:

“Shit!” I scream, and that gets his attention. It’s a parent-child thing I never went through, a teenager, single-mom scenario I never thought I’d have to live through, or something every immigrant goes through, so much we want to communicate, so much that they don’t want to hear? So much we can’t let go of. Shit, shit, Shit! (43)

Her inability to deal with her son does not seem to be exclusively a matter of generation conflict, but also a matter of cultural conflict. In spite of their clashes, Tara proves to be an understanding mother since she does not demand that Rabi becomes a traditional Brahmin son and nor does she react with prejudice when he tells her he is gay. The protagonist becomes, therefore, a very untypical mother, especially by Indian standards, as she destabilizes the traditional role of mother that she had learned in India.

Although Tara is courageous enough to act in a way that goes against the expectations of her family and the society she belongs to in India, she is not exempt from feeling guilty about her attitudes. Actually, her process of subverting gender relations and, as a consequence, altering the constitution of her identity is not an unproblematic task. In addition to her own uneasiness with the situation, her attitudes and choices are also judged by her sisters Parvati and Padma.

Women such as Tara, who were born and raised in a conservative and patriarchal milieu, and are subversive enough to challenge some traditions, may indeed become marginalized in their homeland. Nasta, for instance, discussing the development of Black and Asian women’s feminism, argues that:

In countries with a history of colonialism, women’s quest for emancipation, self-identity, and fulfillment can be seen to represent a traitorous act, a betrayal not simply of traditional codes of practice and belief but of the wider struggle

for liberation and nationalism. Does to be “feminist” therefore involve a further displacement or reflect an implicit adherence to another form of cultural imperialism? (qtd. in Wisker 31)

The way Parvati accuses her youngest sister of becoming too Americanized (109) can be seen, as Nasta argues, not only as a preoccupation with maintaining tradition, but also as an opposition to the idea of feminism as a form of cultural imperialism. Wisker herself also explores women’s impasse stating that “[f]reedom from tradition, discovering one’s role, re-examining its constraints, establishing identity, all relate to feminism but can conflict with national identity and the love of children and men” (180). Although Wisker’s argument may not apply to all women since feminist attitudes does not necessarily change the way a woman may feel love for children and men, it may be used to describe Tara’s case. Her challenging attitudes are in conflict with, on the one hand, her necessity for freedom, and, on the other, her love for her sisters, parents and her respect for family history.

Bose describes the situation of characters in other Mukherjee’s novels such as *The Tiger’s Daughter*, *Wife* and *Jasmine*, in a way that is analogous to Tara’s situation. She states that these women “have grown up in Indian families, which, in the wake of the British Raj, amalgamated Western ideas with traditional beliefs; [therefore, such condition] often finds the young women emancipated but confused” (48). Tara’s situation is even more complex because not only does she grow up in a family which cares about educating women to be sophisticated brides and then exposes them to Western ideas, but she also lives in Western society because of her experience of diaspora. Although Miller states that by making the choices Tara makes, she “responds to the promise offered by American mobility and modern feminist idioms”, meaning that she becomes affiliated to them, I believe that the protagonist’s situation is not as clear cut as Miller presents. Since she is not completely at ease with her choices and admits that she will never be the modern woman that the American magazines advertise, Tara cannot be said to have simply assimilated the so-called American liberal and

feminist attitudes; neither can she be said to have rejected all of her understanding of gender relations learned from her family and social class. However, through the depiction of Tara's experience, the novel seems to be providing a critique of the expected universalization of an early version of a Western feminism.

1.3. Padma's Transgressions

Since Tara narrates *Desirable Daughters*, we do not have access to Padma's story directly from her. All the references about her and the sentences she utters are mediated by her youngest sister's narration, so it is important to bear in mind that the information provided in the book which helps characterize Padma comes from an indirect source. Some information about her, then, mostly related to her destabilizations of gender relation and roles, cannot be confirmed in the novel, either by her sisters or by Padma herself.

Even though it is not possible to verify if some of Padma's disruptive attitudes really take place, it may be argued that she indeed subverts gender relations. In spite of her own unconventional behavior, she ironically condemns Tara for her transgressions. Tara mentions, for instance, that her eldest sister's reaction to her divorce is to say that it "had brought shame to the Bhattacharjee family" (98). Although she judges her sister's behavior, it may be said that the way she questions gender roles in her new home is also quite subversive. Padma goes through a similar diasporic process leaving India and relocating in the USA. The main difference in the sisters' attitude is that, while the youngest has to cope with feelings of alienation and in-betweenness, the eldest projects an image of being comfortable with the ruptures she chooses to enact.

Padma's disruptions of gender relations are quite significant to the novel since it is actually around her supposed and most radical subversion that *Desirable Daughters* revolves. Out of the blue while living in San Francisco, Tara is introduced to a young man, supposedly called Christopher Dey, who claims to be her eldest sister's son. According to him, his father

is Ronald Dey, a Christian, who met Padma back in India at the time they were both teenagers. The protagonist's hypothetical nephew shows her a letter which is supposed to have been written by his father and whose content holds the statement that "[h]e is the child of Christian orphanages, subsidized by payments from his father, Dr. Dey of Bombay whose identity was never kept secret. But now he is planning to marry and he wants to meet his mother and secure her blessing" (39). Later on in the novel, the police find out that the man who is alleged to be Dey's son is actually a criminal who has taken up a false identity and is after Tara's ex-husband's money. Furthermore, after a long investigation, the police do find the real Christopher, but as he is already dead, it is impossible to confirm if the information contained in Ronald Dey's letter is actually true.

If the story could be confirmed, it would prove that Tara's eldest sister is able to commit a major transgression in gender relations. Padma's supposed attitudes imply that she does things she is not supposed to, that is, she disrupts the rigid and traditional configurations of gender relations she learns in India. Chris Dey's account suggests that Padma's liaison with Ronald Dey is inappropriate in different ways. First of all, not only does she have a relationship that was not allowed by her father, but she also does that with a man who does not share her religious and cultural background. Second, a pregnancy out of wedlock is unacceptable for a girl of her class and caste and might ruin her family's reputation and hers. Finally, giving a son up for adoption is also very inappropriate and unnatural to a Bengali mother. As Tara claims: "How can a mother deny her son? It's unnatural, especially a Bengali mother, whose possessiveness makes all Jewish and Italian mothers of books and movies as remote and bloodless as English mothers packing their children off to boarding school" (41). Padma's disruptive past behavior would attest to her subversive attitudes in relation to the roles she was taught, but they can never be actually confirmed since, as far as the novel shows, the police do not find enough evidence to prove the story true and Padma herself never confirms it.

The episode involving Chris Dey, however, does not constitute the only disruption that Padma is capable of enacting. Her behavior in the USA, as observed by Tara, proves that she does not play the gender roles of wife, sister, daughter and mother as she is supposed to (and as she makes herself believe she does) in accordance with her Hindu Brahmin background. Even though she judges her youngest sister for her divorce and so-called Western behavior, after her diasporic experience, Padma knows how to make herself comfortable with her own disruptive attitudes.

Playing the role of daughter, she acts both in a subversive way and in compliance with tradition. First of all, she is transgressive because she marries Harish Mehta, “a non-Bengali businessman previously married, and with grown children” (54). As her father is not able to find a boy who is good enough for his daughter back in India, it is possible to say that she breaks the rules by marrying a man like Mehta, who is not chosen by her parents and who does not even belong to her caste. On the other hand, Padma knows how to play the part of the traditional daughter away from home, by calling and writing to her parents often. In a passage in which Parvati wants to make Tara feel guilty about living away from India, she compares the way that she and her sisters try to keep in touch with their parents:

You know how they long to hear from you and Didi. In fact, Didi is more considerate than you are in this respect. She even remembers their wedding anniversary each year. They keep all the letters and greeting cards, including the Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and Valentine cards, in shoeboxes in a trunk. Didi’s pile is five times bigger than yours. I hope that makes you feel guilty, Tara. In any case, why don’t you redirect your energy writing them – better still, visiting them, and us – instead of digging into whatever did or did not happen when Didi was seventeen. (104)

Padma, in this sense, unlike Tara, keeps the tradition of being in close connection with her family.

As a sister, however, Padma shows several conflicting attitudes. Based on Parvati's narrative, it is possible to see that when a relative or sibling travels to the place you live, the appropriate attitude for Indians is to offer them your home. In spite of this traditional attitude, most of the times Tara goes to New York, Padma does not offer her house for her sister to stay. As the novel's protagonist says, "The idea that I should have a sister within a hundred miles of the city and be forced to stay in a hotel is unimaginable in our culture, but somehow I've never found it bizarre" (98). Keeping your family around seems to be a characteristic of their culture and an expected behavior, but Padma is not completely open to that. Before actually meeting Harish, Tara comments on her sister's behavior: "Harish Mehta, my brother-in-law, is a man I've never met. Didi has never sent me his picture, although they've been married twenty-years" (181). When she decides to spend some time in her sister's house, she travels to New York by plane and when she arrives, she expects to be picked up by Harish in the airport. She waits for him for three hours, but finally has to take a taxi to go to her sister's house because he never comes (181). On the other hand, in New York Padma is quite attentive to her sister. She takes her around and makes sure her sister is properly fed, dressed and taken care of according to Indian tradition.

As a wife, Padma also seems to present some kind of disruptive behavior. As we learn from Tara, Indian husbands are supposed to be the providers of their wives and children. Although neither Harish's nor his wife's occupation is well defined, she seems to be the one who earns the money. Her occupation is defined by Tara as that of an actress who performs for local schools and community centers shows that are usually about Indian culture (98). She also works for the owner of a community channel and has plans of filming a "vernacular soap opera for North American thirtysomething Bengalis, full of vicissitudes of American life from an Indian perspective" (183). Acting, however, is not the only occupation she has. Padma also

has her own clothes design with saris and Indian outfits in general and is involved in home shopping service. As her friend Danny Jagtiani explains:

Padma Mehta is a television personality. She is an icon among Bengalis of the tristate area. What she wears and what she recommends are taken as fashion statements in the community. They are high-rollers, but their wives don't get out that much, and the men don't like to waste time coming into the city on Sundays. So Padma thought up these parties as a kind of home shopping service for upscale Indians. There's an economic benefit for participating merchants, but the social values far outweigh it. And so, from time to time, we throw these parties so that the community can sample these styles in saris and jewelry that they might be missing by being out of Bengal. (243)

Padma, then, is a type of Indian celebrity in New York who embodies the so-called high classed Indian way of life and profits from maintaining this image.

While she has multiple occupations, there are no references to her husband's means of earning money. Tara describes Harish as living in Padma's shadow:

Her radiance helped him wipe out his past, her past, India, his former marriage, his children in Texas and California, and his multiple failures to establish himself as entrepreneur, consultant, money manager, and venture capitalist. (192)

Harish, then, does not seem to have an occupation. As Tara describes it, he seems to be so unsuccessful that he would certainly not be the appropriate husband for a woman such as her sister or the appropriate son-in-law to the demanding and conservative Motilal Bhattacharjee. As Padma's husband does not seem to work, there is even an inversion of the gender roles of wife and husband in traditional Indian terms, for she is the one who works outside the home. As Padma states, trying to downplay the significance of her disruption of traditional gender roles: "Harish was so lucky, she repeated, louder than before. 'How many Indian families do

you know, Tara, where the wife goes out to work and the husband stays at home?" (190).

Harish and Padma indeed are a non-traditional family.

Although her marriage does not look like a traditional one, that is, the one that she was learned to desire when she was a girl in India, Padma does not think twice in judging Tara for her divorce. As the novel's protagonist says, her sister:

had chosen to echo our mother and our aunts – things are never perfect in marriage, a woman must be prepared to accept less than perfection in this lifetime – and to model herself on Sita, Savitri, and Beluha, the virtuous wives of Hindu myths. (140)

It may be true that she accepts less than perfection in her marriage since she accepts Harish's unsuccessful life, but she cannot be said to be a typically virtuous wife. That is why Tara considers her sister a hypocrite for making such comments. Considering her destabilizations of gender roles exposed above, Padma cannot be said to practice what she preaches. As Miller states:

Padma has escaped the gendered identity of daughter, wife, and mother: as a teenager she moved to Britain and then America, never returning to her parents' home; her marriage to a much older man seems a sham, designed to hide the fact that her closest emotional relationships are with homosexual male protectors. (69)

She is not the model daughter, wife and mother she claims to be as she escapes and destabilizes the gendered identities mentioned by Miller. Padma is indeed, as the critic states, much closer to her gay friend Danny than to her own husband. Thus, the way she plays the wife role to Harish cannot be said to mirror the virtuous wives of Hindu myths.

Padma seems to be aware that she is playing the gender roles of the traditional Brahmin woman in the United States. It is through this conscious performance of gender roles and ethnicity, as it is discussed in chapter 3, that she is able to lead her life in New York. Like

Tara, she never mentions that she desires to assimilate particular liberal attitudes or feminist behaviors. In her statements, she actually rejects the way some women behave in American society. As she believes Tara is not taking care of herself in America, she questions her sister:

You're worn out and skinny, Tara, what kind of life are you leading out there? Are you starving yourself? I know, I know, these so-called experts are always going on about too much fat in the diet and girls like you who should have more sense must be listening. I tell you, they should all be locked up, all those skinny so-called experts in white coats, they're killing our girls. (194)

Her criticism of the stereotypical way women in the USA are concerned with body weight and with being thin can be regarded as a rejection of some cultural aspects of American society.

Therefore, Padma advocates in favor of the maintenance of tradition criticizing Tara's divorce in spite of her untraditional way of managing her own marriage with Harish. Her defense of tradition is contradictory because she does not effectively do the things she claims women of her background should do. She does not have a conventional marriage, she works outside the home and her relationships with her sisters and friends are not traditional ones. On the one hand, she does not seem to express the so-called interests that women may have as displayed by the American magazines that Tara mentions. On the other, however, Padma's transgressive behavior in the United States seems to make her a modern woman since she does not behave like a conservative wife, daughter, sister (and perhaps mother) of her class and caste.

After her diasporic experience, Padma, like her sister, does not express a desire to simply assimilate the American way of life. Although she is smart enough to take advantage of the freedom she has in the USA, she also tries to maintain the appearance of being a traditional Hindu Brahmin woman by taking advantage of that exoticized image. Unlike her youngest sister, Padma does not seem to be in conflict with her choices. She seems to be both

comfortable with her transgressions and satisfied with her performance of traditional roles for American audiences.

1.4. Is Jasmine a Feminist?

Although the three women characters leave India and settle in the USA, the cultural encounter that the diasporic experience offers them has different implications for their future lives. While Padma seems to criticize and reject most of the American way of life she sees around her, Tara feels she is more in-between. Jasmine, in contrast, is the woman character that is more open to adapt to American culture. She is not only more willing to belong to that new home, but she is also more willing to transgress gender relations she learned in India.

Although Jasmine migrates to the United States claiming that she is on a mission of committing *sati*, once she realizes there are other options for her, she becomes somehow open to American culture. After living in many different locations in the United States, the novel's protagonist claims that her cultural transformation has been genetic (222), that is, that she believes that she fits into America now. As I discuss in chapter 3, however, her willingness to belong does not exactly match her real condition as an illegal immigrant and her acceptance within that society. Jasmine may not be able to enact such an identity transformation that masks her ethnicity and provides her with a sense of belonging in the United States. She is able, however, to transform her sense of identity through a destabilization of gender roles and relations and, thus, enlarge her possibilities in life.

As mentioned previously, the protagonist of *Jasmine* is certainly the most subversive diasporic woman character in my corpus. She demonstrates such power of transformation that she agrees when Karin, the ex-wife of one of her partners, calls her a tornado. As she changes names, locations and husbands, the protagonist admits that she “has created confusion and destruction wherever [she] go[es]” (215), and she wonders how many more shapes and selves

are in herself (215). Her subversions in terms of gender relations are related to her role as widow, daughter, mother and wife/lover.

Living away from home, she is able to destabilize the roles of daughter and sister that she is supposed to play according to Indian tradition. Even though her mother is living a very unprivileged and constricted life in India as a widow, once Jasmine moves away from home, she does not express the desire to go back and visit her. In spite of the several references that she makes about her mother throughout the novel, she does not seem to keep in touch with her. Even though the protagonist mentions she receives letters and aerograms in “strange lettering” (33), she never makes reference to them as coming from her family in India. The same applies to her relationship with her sisters and brothers. Jasmine does not seem to have any contact with them, nor does she express a concern about their living conditions in India. Instead of leading the familial life she is taught in India, the novel’s protagonist, therefore, becomes quite detached from her Indian relatives’ lives.

As a mother, Jasmine is also quite transgressive in the way she plays this role in the United States. For her adoption seems to be something quite unnatural. As she states: “Adoption was as foreign to me as the idea of widow remarriage” (170). Even though the notion of adoption sounds “monstrous” (170) to her, in Baden she becomes the adoptive mother of the Vietnamese immigrant Du. Furthermore, besides Du, she also develops a maternal relationship with Duff, the girl that Taylor, perhaps Jasmine’s most important lover in the novel, adopts.

Being an adoptive mother, however, is not the only destabilization of the role of mother that she acts out. First of all, Jasmine gets pregnant by Bud by unnatural means, as she explains:

It wasn’t hard to get pregnant, but it wasn’t very natural either. It shames Bud that now, for sex, I must do all the work, all the moving, that I will always be on top. I will do this. But for having this baby, I required Dick Kwang’s

assistance. Bud was nervous, made jokes about “Dick and Jane” that Dong-jin Kwang and I didn’t understand. Bud said he’d watched the inseminators do their job a thousand times, but he never thought he’d be so involved. (35)

Because of Bud’s physical condition after the shooting, that is, the complications involved in his inability to move around without a wheelchair, she, thus, needs the help of a doctor in order to be able to conceive the baby. Moreover, by the time she is about to give birth to his child, she abandons him and moves to California with Taylor and Duff. Her attitude is quite subversive since not only does she abandon the father of her child and the home they build together, but she also takes away from him the opportunity to be around his own baby.

Jasmine never marries Bud officially and it is actually in India that she first experiences playing the role of wife. While still a teenager, she marries Prakash and leaves the village of Hasnapur to live with him in the city. Even though the protagonist is quite happy with her husband and wants to play the role of the traditional devoted wife, her happiness is interrupted when Prakash is murdered by Muslim extremists. As a widow, Jasmine’s life is defined by confinement and restriction, as she lives in a retreat in the company of other widows.

The situation of widows in India in the past and even nowadays is a quite a controversial issue. In her famous “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak describes how both British colonizers and Indians historically engaged in a dispute over the abolishment and maintenance of the Hindu ritual of the widow burning in her husband’s funeral pyre known as *sati*. She explains that in ancient Hindu religious texts, the practice of *sati* is regarded as an exceptional sacred practice, instead of an act of suicide (299). Taking your own life according to Hindu religious law is actually forbidden, but it is allowed to men as a privilege, when they engage in sacred pilgrimage. In exceptional situations women are also allowed to perform such a ritual, but in that case, killing themselves aims to represent the repetition of the husband’s death in a sacred place. As Stephen Morton highlights, Spivak emphasizes that “the

practice of widow self-immolation is not prescribed or enforced by Hindu religious codes, but is an ‘exceptional signifier’ of the woman’s conduct as a good wife (63). In examining the origin of the term *sati*, Spivak explains:

I have written above of a constructed counternarrative of woman’s consciousness, thus woman’s being, thus woman’s being good, thus the good woman’s desire, thus woman’s desire. This slippage can be seen in the fracture inscribed in the word *sati*, the feminine form of *sat*. *Sat* transcends any gender-specific notion of masculinity and moves up not only into human but spiritual universality. It is the present participle of the verb “to be” and as such means not only being but the True, the Good, the Right. In the sacred texts it is essence, universal spirit. Even as a prefix it indicates appropriate, felicitous, fit. It is noble enough to have entered the privileged discourse of modern Western philosophy: Heidegger’s meditation on Being. *Sati*, the feminine of this word, simply means “good wife.” (“Can the Subaltern” 305)

As it means “good wife”, *sati* is, thus, supposed to evoke a positive connotation. *Sati* would describe a woman who plays her gender role in an appropriate way according to traditional Hindu culture. Spivak explains that the word *sati* or *suttee*, as the British translated the word, however, does not have the meaning of “good wife.” Instead, the word *sati* is understood to mean self-immolation on the husband’s pyre. Because of this cultural mistranslation of the word, the British colonizers contend that *sati* is a barbaric practice and use it to justify their civilizing mission in India. Although the British prohibition of the ritual called *sati* did save some widows’ lives, it was also used symbolically as a means of showing British superiority over Indian barbarism, being seen “as a case of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’” (297).

Even though originally the word *sati* in Sanskrit has the positive connotation that Spivak points out, the implications of this cultural practice as presented in Mukherjee’s

Jasmine, however, are quite negative. For *Jasmine* and most of the widows living in Hasnapur, the cultural imposition of *sati*, even if chosen to be enacted, results in submitting their existence either to sacrifice or to social retreat. Since none of these options seem to benefit women in any way, in the novel this ritual proves to be a quite cruel patriarchal practice as the protagonist shows.

Concerning the traditional condition of widows in India, Kafka explains that in 1856, Bengali Hindus passed laws which among other things, permitted widows to remarry and to take part in other social gatherings. Spivak points to the ironic nature of such decisions by observing that: “Both the vestigial possibility of widow remarriage in ancient India and the legal institution of widow remarriage in 1856 are transactions among men” (“Can the Subaltern” 313). The decisions related to the widow’s situation, then, were made without the participation of those who were the most affected by them, that is, the women who were subjected to such practices. Furthermore, Kafka explains that such changes were luxuries that “the lower classes and castes did not have” (13). The Hindus and the British abolished *sati*, a practice which nowadays is actually not common anymore; however, it is not completely absent from Indian culture for “the practice continues on in rare spurts to this day” (Kafka 16). Even though measures which attempted to improve the situation of widows were taken, there is still a traditional stigma related to widowhood, “and widows lead even more constrained lives than they had as wives” (13). In spite of the historical effort to generally elevate the status of Indian women and make their lives a little better, the oppression inflicted on them is still present in Indian society and it is in this context that *Jasmine* takes place. The protagonist is an eyewitness to the widows of Hasnapur committing *sati*, being stigmatized and being prohibited to remarry. *Jasmine* learns about this configuration of gender roles and, once she becomes a widow, she has to go through the same process as well. She even considers suicide by burning herself together with Prakash’s suit in America, but eventually

she decides not to do it and opts instead to lead a life that will be marked by a series of disruptions of gender relations.

The character's subversion of her role as a widow is easy to explain if one considers how much cruelty and suffering is involved in the status of widows. As Wikramagamage explains:

Jasmine may present her desire [for *sati*] as a supreme manifestation of love, but in leaving Hasnapur she is undoubtedly escaping the form of "non-life" or living death that awaits the conventional widow and an example of which we have already observed in her mother's widowhood: shaved hair, coarse white cotton sari, frugal diet. (73)

Indeed, once she migrates to the USA, Jasmine is able to see that there are other alternatives in life for her besides confining herself to such limiting role. Critics such as Wikramagamage and Kafka see in her subversion of the role of widow a feminist attitude.

Kafka, for instance, states that Mukherjee usually "attempts to integrate or reference classics of Indian mythology and American literature into her works, always from a strongly feminist perspective" (94). She points to the episode in *Jasmine* in which the protagonist kills Half-Face, the so-called coyote who brings her to Florida and rapes her in a motel room, as an example of such feminist behavior. According to her analysis, Jasmine uses the attributes of the goddess Kali in order to murder her rapist and then applies Kali's destructive power in a feminist attitude of fighting against sexual violence.

Wikramagamage also sees Jasmine's attitude of murdering Half-Face as a feminist use of Indian mythology. In her article, she responds to Anindyo Roy's, Alpana Sharma Knippling's and Gurleen Grewal's negative criticism on Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. She does so by summarizing these authors' criticism as they accuse the novel's protagonist's metamorphosis in the USA of representing a "neo-colonial endorsement of the idea of the 'west'" (63). She disagrees with Roy, Knippling and Grewal and she states that:

As a post-colonial novel, *Jasmine* contests a certain stereotypical profile of the “ethnicized” woman as victim – the “Hindu” woman, the “Third World” woman – a profile that has an enduring legacy in “western” feminist writings on “other” women. As a feminist novel, *Jasmine* presents itself as a challenge to the patriarchal definitions of feminine subjectivity and life-options that seek the protagonist’s compliance in the two national-cultural locations in which she finds herself. (64)

Making reference to Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes,” Wikramagamage argues that *Jasmine* challenges the stereotypical victimized third world woman as they are usually represented in Western feminist writings. According to her, one of the ways in which *Jasmine* challenges this stereotype can be found in the passage in which the protagonist reacts to her rape.

The critic reminds the reader that the rape scene challenges the “image of the white man as the ‘savior’ of brown women” (73) as mentioned by Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. All the violence and suffering involved in *Jasmine*’s rape by an American man while arriving in the USA undermines the criticism of *Jasmine* as a novel describing a romanticized diasporic adventure into the superior territory of the United States of America. The rape scene weakens, for example, Aneja’s description of *Jasmine*’s process of immigration as taking steps “on the road of the American Dream of a narrowly defined happiness” (73) or Ray’s statement that *Jasmine* “celebrates the pluralist ideal of America where the immigrant can attain health, wealth and happiness” (193). Furthermore, the character’s reaction to the rape also challenges the stereotypical representation of the victimized third world woman by Western feminists, as Mohanty discusses. Wikramagamage refers to Mohanty’s claim that Western feminists at times take part in the discursive colonization of postcolonial subjectivities to make a connection with *Jasmine*’s situation. She says that Western feminists usually assume third world women to be “without agency and voice, and the object of privileged white feminist discursive interventions” (75). The critic

argues that “Jasmine, however, refuses to remain a silent raped body” (75). She “saves” herself because she refuses that racialized and gendered designation of herself that makes the rape possible (75).

In the motel bathroom, holding a knife in front of the mirror, Jasmine can easily end up with all the physical and psychological violence inflicted upon her by killing herself. Instead, as Wikramagamage explains, she decides to save herself by murdering Half-Face:

To respond to the violation of her body with the self-violation of suicide would be to willingly reduce herself to the dimensions of the racialized and gendered body that had undergone the rape. It would be, moreover, to confirm herself in the role of a vulnerable and passive Jyoti who had been unable to signify her dissent before the rape, and make literal that largely metaphorical self-effacement so admired in the normative (caste) Hindu woman. To pay with her life for what she calls her “personal dishonor” is to trace the path taken by the ideal heroines of dominant patriarchal lore – Sita and Sati – who preferred death to dishonor. (75)

In order to cope with her rape, Jasmine could perfectly personify the models of femininity and good wifehood as represented by Indian goddesses such as Sati and kill herself in order to erase her dishonor. The protagonist, however, chooses to embody Kali, “the avenging goddess of the Hindu pantheon” (75) and uses violence to fight against her victimization. Choosing murder instead of suicide, Jasmine embraces the possibility of self-empowerment and is able to distance herself from the fragile submissive young girl that she learned to be in Hasnapur.

For Wikramagamage, Jasmine’s attitude reveals more than an individual accomplishment. Her ability to search for strong female figures in her own culture actually proves that a postcolonial woman does not depend on either brown men or white women to save herself:

Jasmine's strategic retrieval points the way to indigenous modes of feminine empowerment and resistance which contest the relationship of dependence that is presumed to exist between metropolitan feminist discourses and their counterparts in post-colonial space where the flow of ideas – modes of feminist intervention and resistance – is assumed to duplicate the flow of goods and technology – from the “west” to the non-“west”. Jasmine's timely retrieval suggests that intellectual/political leadership for the feminist struggle need not always originate in the metropolitan “west.” (76)

Her reaction to the rape by using an Indian mythological female figure to identify with, as suggested by Kafka and Wikramagamage, can indeed be seen as a sign of feminist struggle against the gendered violence inflicted upon her. In other words, the character once more subverts the stereotype of the submissive third world woman – often adopted in Western discourses – and is able to fight for herself.

The other major subversion of gender relations that Jasmine enacts is related to her attitude of leaving Bud at the end of the novel. Critics such as Kafka, Wikramagamage, and Brians provide different explanations for the motivation behind the way that the protagonist acts and usually explain her attitude as being feminist. Although the episode is described by Brians as a “seemingly heartless act of abandonment” (117), a careful examination of the narrative proves that it is something more complex and profound than that.

Brians reminds the reader that the relationship that the protagonist has with Bud is not so much based on romantic love. The critic describes his feelings for Jasmine as one of pathetic gratefulness for her presence in his life. As he states: “pathos is not romance, and Jasmine has already known romance and yearns for it again” (5). According to Brians, once Jasmine leaves the farmer in order to reunite with her past boyfriend, she has the opportunity to finally live the romantic love story that she previously initiated with Taylor in New York

Along the same lines is the explanation provided by Kafka about Jasmine's motivation for leaving Bud:

Mukherjee's heroine no longer wants to spend the rest of her life caregiving, caretaking, recipe giving, preserving food and lives. Instead, she wishes to experience life to the fullest, to achieve her own goals. Jasmine is going to express her love for Taylor sexually and with a passion that will be reciprocated by him, which no doubt reflects her creator's feminist demands in relationships with men. Jasmine simply will not settle any longer for nurturing and caretaking without passionate love and sexual fulfillment, as well. (214)

According to Kafka, Jasmine's feminist attitudes are therefore mainly connected to her wish for sexual freedom. Although the farmer is now living in a wheelchair and is somehow physically limited, he can still provide Jasmine with "economic security – a home, food on the table, a decent life in an Iowan community" (214), but those things do not match the sexual and romantic fulfillment mentioned in Kafka's analysis.

Jasmine's motivation for leaving Bud and joining Taylor is indeed debatable. The farmer's love for Jasmine, as she describes it, is based on her exoticism, that is, his attraction for her foreignness and beauty. Her feelings for Bud, on the other hand, are not described as love because, as she states, what she feels "for Bud is affection" (211). Jasmine has truly experienced the excitement of living in America when she lives with Taylor in New York, and she wants to live that again. So to consider a life as a perpetual caregiver in which she would forever have to take care of Bud seems, in contrast, hugely unappealing.

Kafka's explanation that her motivation is a question of sexual pleasure, however, is an argument that cannot exactly be confirmed in the novel. Jasmine describes her sexual relationships with Bud by stating the following:

When we first met and began making love in my rented room and in the motel rooms of neighboring towns, he was active and inventive, very sure of himself, he loved games. Now I must do all the playing, provide the surprises. I don't mind. His upper body is enormously strong, the bench press of love. It isn't the preparations (for all their awkwardness and crudeness) that I rage against.

What kills me in this half-lit bedroom is the look of torture, excitement, desperation on Bud's face as he watches me. (36)

This passage shows that she is not exactly sexually dissatisfied with him, but rather uncomfortable with all his suffering and desperation involved in her sexual relations with him. Jasmine's impulse of leaving her baby's father can indeed be considered a feminist attitude - as stated by Kafka and Brians - but in the sense that she is rejecting to be stuck in a relationship which seems to restrict her life choices. Her attitude cannot be said, however, to be necessarily motivated by the desire to fulfill sexual needs. Her yearning to fulfill the "promise of America" (240) that will provide her with the freedom to make her own decisions about her life is enough to explain her attitude of leaving Bud.

Bose, for instance, explains the character's choices by stating that: "In America she has learned that nothing lasts forever, so she needs not to condemn herself to a life she does not particularly want" (60). Along the same lines, Wikramagamage argues that "[i]f Jasmine speaks of both possibility and desirability of transformation, she does so in defiance of a dominant patriarchal discourse that speaks of its impossibility" (65). Mukherjee's protagonist, thus, may simply make her life decisions based on her desire to have the right to choose and, as a consequence, she destabilizes traditional gender roles.

Brians further tries to explain the feminist tone in Jasmine's transgressive attitudes by making a connection with Mukherjee's personal views on the United States and the characters she portrays by arguing that:

Mukherjee is frank in her admiration for a country that is so much more favorable to women than her native India, contrasting mother Ripplemeyer with a girl from Hasnapur who had committed suicide at twenty-two when her husband died of typhoid fever. (118)

The protagonist's admiration for women such as Mother Ripplemeyer and Lilian Gordon is indeed present in the novels, as they are goodhearted independent women. Those two American figures can be said to be role models to Jasmine, not the ones she should copy, but rather examples of possible ways of presenting women's roles in a more liberal society. It is important to note, however, that the content of Brian's criticism is problematic because he bases it on the assumption that Mukherjee admires the USA as a country more favorable to women than India. Once he chooses to refer to the writer's supposed beliefs, he conflates the view of the author with that of the narrative voice and, thus, runs the risk of basing his critical views on an intentional fallacy.

If Mother Ripplemeyer, Lilian Gordon and even Wylie are considered to be inspirations for Jasmine, Brian argues that the protagonist, on the other hand, cannot be regarded as a role model for other immigrants. According to him, she is presented as an intensive and inventive survivor, but she can be seen "neither as typical nor as a role model" (117) for other immigrants. He claims that Mukherjee has already been criticized for having presented gender roles in a way that "rubbed feminists the wrong way" (113). As an example, he claims that in the second half of her career, the writer often portrays sexual relations "as a vehicle of liberation" (113), but that she has chosen inappropriate examples to illustrate it. One of the examples the critic refers to is related to Jasmine, that is, "a pregnant woman deserting her loving but wheelchair-bound father of her child for an old lover passing through" (114). Although Brian's description of Jasmine's attitude sounds indeed negative, an examination of her relationship with Bud, as discussed above, shows that her reasons for leaving the farmer are not as simple.

Her decision to leave Bud in the end of the novel can also be used to dismantle some negative criticism that Mukherjee's novel received. Ray, for instance, criticizes the way the writer presents her protagonist as willing to embrace the United States as the stereotypical land of opportunity. For Ray, instead of subverting the hegemonic social formations of America, Jasmine presents a contrary attitude, that is, she expresses "the desire of the immigrant woman to function effectively within the institutional limits dictated by a dominating nationalist ideology" (194). The protagonist then is accused of resting her very survival as an immigrant "on a violent othering of herself as an Indian woman" (194). Although Mukherjee presents her main character as willing to be part of America as she feels she has the right to do so, Jasmine's desire to belong is not as radical as Ray suggests. If her only interest was to function effectively within American society, she would never leave Bud. As Wikramagamage further explains, "[i]f not morality, prudence should compel her to marriage; [for] with Bud, a middle-class male, she would have the opportunity to constitute the normative American family and, hence, to belong" (82). Contrary to Ray's argument, if Jasmine were so open to assimilation and acceptance of America, even at the cost of othering herself, she would marry her baby's father and as a consequence become a member in the normative civil society of America (83).

Ray, however, is not the only critic to accuse Mukherjee of compliance with hegemonic ideologies. Kafka, for instance, also describes the criticism of the writer's women characters and her so-called use of feminism as argued by some Indian feminist critics. Kafka refers to Sayantini DasGupta and Shamita Das Dasgupta, for instance, saying that they read Jasmine's feminist behavior as inspired in Wylie's attitude of leaving her first husband for another man, as a proof of the protagonist's assimilation of Western feminism. The authors, however, argue that "Indian women immigrants did not need Western feminist movement to free and emancipate them" (Kafka 100) as the feminist movements in India would be enough to raise such impetus in them.

The major problem with the discussions provided by the critics above is that they worry about trying to establish whether Jasmine affiliates herself with Western feminism or not, and if such form of feminism is suitable for her needs. The probable answer is that it is impossible to state what kinds of feminisms she is attached to or if she ever consciously does that. It is possible to argue, however, that the protagonist is given the opportunity to destabilize gender relations as she moves to the United States and break free from the patriarchal oppression she suffered in India.

1.5. Feminism, Hybridity and their Discontents

As discussed above, the cultural encounter generated by diaspora exposes Mukherjee's women characters to configurations of gender relations that contrast with the ones they learn in India. Their subversion of gender roles is more complicated than a simple matter of choosing Western behavior over Eastern behavior, or of choosing among varieties of feminism.

In *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, Shohat argues for the necessity of seeing feminism from a different perspective. According to her, there is actually no single feminism; instead, there are conflicting feminist perspectives that should be understood through a relational perspective. As she further explains:

Here I want to reflect on a relational understanding of feminism that assumes a provisional and conjunctural definition of feminism as a polysemic site of contradictory positionalities. Any dialogue about such fictive unities called "Middle Eastern women," or "Latin American gays/lesbians," for example – especially dialogues taking place within transnational frameworks – has to begin from the premise that genders, sexualities, races, classes, nations, and

even continents exist not as hermetically sealed entities, but, rather, as part of a permeable interwoven relationality. (2)

Thus, from such a perspective, critics should not be worried about understanding different forms of feminisms, such as so-called Western and Eastern feminisms, as completely separate or opposing theories. She argues that they should be critical of other tendencies of feminism as well, that is, “a globalist feminism that disseminates its program internationally as the universal gospel, [and] . . . a localist feminism that surrenders all dialogue in the name of an empowering relativism” (7). Shohat’s arguments, then, are similar to the ones mentioned previously by critics such as Spivak, Wisker, Mohanty, Brah, and Friedman. If feminist attitudes are considered to be rebellious actions against patriarchal models which restrict women’s freedom, then, Jasmine’s actions are feminist. Her feminism, however, does not necessarily have to match a particular trend in feminism, whether Western or not.

The same conclusion can be drawn from the other women characters mentioned in this analysis. For both Tara and Parvati, the subversive changes in gender relations that they enact cannot be defined as being Western or not. It is possible to state that the issues discussed in the magazines Tara mentions in her narration are not appropriate for any of the characters, not even for Jasmine who is the most transgressive of the three. The characters are generally speaking from an in-between position, one that is not possible to define, which is, however, made possible mainly by their fictional experience of diaspora. Robyn Warhol-Down referring specifically to *Jasmine* argues that “Mukherjee’s novel reminds us that there are many more ways than one to occupy a postcolonial subject position” (14). If you relate Warhol-Down’s statement to all diasporic women in both *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*, it is possible to say that Mukherjee shows that there are many more ways for the characters to be gendered subjects in the diaspora spaces that they occupy.

If global feminism based on a homogenizing category of woman is not suitable for these characters because it is necessary to acknowledge the differences among women, what

would then be an appropriate framework from which to understand women such as Tara, Padma and Jasmine? Besides the relational feminism proposed by Shohat, Friedman in *Mappings* also offers a different approach to contemporary literary feminist criticism. Such feminism would go beyond discourses which emphasize only the differences between men and women as well as the differences between genders. In such a feminist approach, contemporary theories on identity and subjectivity formation processes are used as useful tools. Identity is not seen as pure or authentic, but rather as a heterogeneous mixture produced by cultural grafting often as a consequence of geographical migration. Such grafting results in hybridity, which “often takes the form of painful splitting, divided loyalties, or disorienting displacements [and] leads to or manifests as a regenerative growth and creativity” (*Mappings* 24). Thus, the cultural grafting generated by the women characters’ diasporic experience allows them to question gender relations that are not suitable for their lives anymore.

Guedes argues that hybridism is a very important theme in Bharati Mukherjee’s writing. She claims that in her fiction, the writer represents and writes about what Mukherjee herself calls the hybridization of new America. This process exposes how the new immigrants deal with the social and cultural conflicts generated by their diasporic experience, and how such conflicts affect their identities. The hybridization of the new America is, however, not only about immigrants’ transformations, but also about the transformations suffered by those who stay put (Brah 181). As the Brazilian critic explains:

Mukherjee is a writer who faces the issue of nostalgia for one’s native country and culture in the transformed, globalized world squarely, exploring relentlessly the contradictions in her own native culture and presenting a dramatically revised vision of India, America, the world and the new immigrants. (277)

In *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* it is indeed possible to find diasporic characters that go through social and cultural conflicts maintaining a critical view of both Indian and American culture. Regarding Tara, Padma and Jasmine, it may also be argued that these women characters are cultural hybrids that do not simply assimilate their host land cultures, but rather remain caught in an in-between position, moving constantly between allegiance to their home country and occasional identifications with the host country while maintaining a critical outlook in relation to both.

Hybridity is a term commonly used and debated in postcolonial theory. As Ashcroft et. al. explain, the term was used initially in horticulture to refer to the process in which the cross-breeding of two species forms a third hybrid one. In postcolonialism, however, the hybrid does not designate a new species but rather new transcultural forms that were made possible by the cultural contact propitiated by colonization. The term hybridity is commonly associated to the work of Bhabha, “whose analysis of colonizer/colonized relations stresses their interdependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivities” (Ashcroft et. al. 118). In claiming that cultures are hybrids and products of historical change, Bhabha criticizes hegemonic narratives of nation which are based on the notion of a hierarchical purity of cultures. On the other hand, he celebrates the power of marginal migrant subjects to disrupt such narratives of nations. He argues that colonial, postcolonial, migrants and minorities are “wandering peoples who will not be contained within the Heim of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation” (*The Location of Culture* 164). The counter-narratives produced by these wandering peoples are empowering tools which help them subvert the essentialist cultural identities of so-called homogeneous nations. Although it seems dangerous to propose that all marginal migrant subjects are capable of disruption and subversion, the diasporic women characters in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* do enact some form of transgression as a consequence of their cultural grafting.

Other critics in postcolonial studies, such as Boehmer, Loomba and Shohat also discuss hybridity and its outcome as a consequence of diaspora. Boehmer argues, for instance, that the situation of migrant and/or diasporic writers is nowadays being regarded as “representative, if not iconic, of postcolonial writing in general” (215). Similarly, Loomba states that “the experience of migration or of exile has become, in the Western academy, emblematic of the fissured identities and hybridities generated by colonial dislocations” (180). Generally speaking then, hybrids are formed as a consequence of colonial dislocation, such as in the diasporic movements discussed here. There are, however, enormous differences between diasporic experiences. Along the same lines, Shohat calls attention to the danger of using the catch-all term hybridity and ignoring “the diverse modalities of hybridity, for example, forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political cooptation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence” (“Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial’” 110). Loomba’s and Shohat’s claims are particularly suitable to the analysis of Mukherjee’s women characters, since their experiences of diaspora, although similar in some points, generate different reactions and alterations in their gender relations.

Friedman claims that hybridity is indeed a contested term as it is, at times, described in negative terms, but rather than endorsing an uncritical and laudatory use of the concepts, most theorists on hybridity are interested in charting the effects of such intercultural exchange. Among the different perspectives on hybridity identified by Friedman, it is relevant to single out the notion of cultural mixing as an intermingling of differences in which “the differences that make up the new hybrid remain in play, retaining some of their original character although altered in the weaving” (*Mappings* 84). This form of cultural mixing described by the critic is very similar to those identified in Mukherjee’s women characters. Tara, Padma and Jasmine do not completely reject the gender roles and relations they learned in India nor do they simply assimilate the ones they experience in the United States. They somehow adjust

and alter perspectives of both the United States and India so that they can fit their new necessities and experiences.

Like Bhabha, Friedman further analyzes the politics of hybridity stating that this cultural grafting may be seen as a way of displacing the binaries upon which the authority of so-called homogeneous nations rests (*Mappings* 89):

The hybrid exceeds borders of the normative and expected, thus calling into question the inevitability of the status quo, the power relations of the social order. Within this framework, hybridity represents a liberatory, anti-authoritarian force for good, opening doors of possibility instead of regulating and confining. (*Mappings* 90-1)

Even with all those possible positive outcomes of hybridity, Friedman takes care to remind the reader that hybridity is not free from pain, dislocation, suffering or oppression (*Mappings* 90).

The portrayal of the diasporic women characters in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* seems to be in line with the definition of hybrids that Friedman establishes above. Tara, Jasmine and Padma are judged by family members and society because they move away from tradition. They feel lost and guilty, but even though they experience physical and psychological suffering, they somehow create something positive out of it. Although the women characters can only subvert traditional presentations of gender roles within a limited set of possibilities, they do so in a way that confers them some freedom and agency. No matter what the affiliations they consciously or unconsciously adopt in relation to feminist notions are, it is mostly their diasporic experience and their consequent in-betweenness that allow them to subvert gender relations that limit their life choices.

CHAPTER 2

“A village girl, going alone to America, without job, husband or papers?”: Gender, Class, Caste, Education and Social conditions in Diasporic Experiences

The women characters Tara, Padma and Jasmine all experience some form of subversion in gender relations mostly as a consequence of their diasporic experience. Although every character destabilizes gender relations as they move to the USA (if such relations are compared to the characters' learning of gender roles in their home country), they do not do so in the same way. Tara and Padma share their condition as diasporic women raised in the same family and subject to the same values, however, there are also several differences between them. Class, caste and social conditions are factors that mark both their lives in their home country and their experience of migration. The feminist ideas or the more liberating environment to which the women characters are exposed in the USA are not the only factors that explain their subversion of gender relations. Class, caste, education and social conditions are also determinant issues in their process of destabilizing traditional gender roles and relations.

In this chapter, I examine Tara's, Padma's and Jasmine's characterization in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* paying special attention to the factors that mark their process of identity construction. I compare and contrast their subjectivities in terms of gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, color, sexuality and education, and analyze which of these constituents of identity (Friedman, *Mappings* 34) are the most significant in their subversion of gender relations. Initially, I discuss the importance of the recognition of difference and the markers of identity adopting concepts from postcolonial studies, diaspora studies and feminist literary criticism. Then, I give a general overview of the three women characters in light of these theoretical discussions and, subsequently, I examine each one of the characters in more detail. I describe the way gender relations generally function in India, based on the way they

are portrayed in the narratives, and I examine how Tara, Padma and Jasmine learn to play gender roles in that society. Moreover, I investigate how their gender, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and education place them in privileged and unprivileged positions in India and in the United States. Later, I expose and respond to the criticism of Mukherjee's writing, especially of *Jasmine*. Finally, I discuss the issue of agency and relate the characters' subversion of gender relations to the markers of their identity in drawing a conclusion to the chapter.

2.1. Diasporic Experiences

As discussed in the previous chapter, it is inappropriate to think about "woman" as if it were a monolithic category. As the contemporary discussions on identity and subjectivity have shown, there are many aspects and perspectives through which an individual, man or woman, can be viewed. Thus, if it is risky to homogenize the experiences of different women around the world, it is also inappropriate to think about postcolonial subjects, who are increasingly being described as those who experience cultural expatriation (Boehmer 226) and diaspora (Brah 16), as if they formed a homogeneous group. Loomba, Boehmer and Brah have all written about the importance of acknowledging the differences among individuals and groups that move across borders.

Loomba, for instance, stresses the fact that it is not adequate to make generalizations in terms of postcolonial subjects:

many writings on postcolonialism emphasise concepts like "hybridity" and fragmentation and diversity, and yet they routinely claim to be describing "the postcolonial condition", or "the postcolonial subject" or "the postcolonial woman". At best, such terms are no more than a helpful shorthand, because they do not allow for differences between distinct kinds of colonial situations,

or the workings of class, gender, location, race, caste or ideology among people whose lives have been restructured by colonial rule. (15)

The notion of a so-called “postcolonial woman,” for instance, ought to be used carefully since it is important to avoid essentialism and to account for the differences among the realities of women generalized under such classification. Loomba also explains that although there is the tendency to describe the experience of exile “in universalised terms” (180), critics in postcolonial studies should be aware of the dangers of doing so. Even though subjects in a postcolonial context may share some characteristics, such as going through a diasporic experience, they have to be regarded in light of the differences that mark each one of them, that is, differences of class, gender, race, caste and ideology and location.

Brah, in her discussion of global feminism, explains that the global economic system in which we live nowadays is responsible for many inequalities that operate both within and between nations. In such a system:

our precise position depends on a multiplicity of factors such as gender, class, colour, ethnicity, caste, whether we practice a dominant or subordinate sexuality, and whether we live in a rich, industrially advanced society or a poor country of the Third World. (84)

The position mentioned by the critic is related to the concept of identity, which for her is neither fixed nor singular, but rather a “constant changing relational multiplicity” (123). As identity changes and has to be perceived through multiple positions, it depends substantially on gender, color, sexuality, ethnicity, and on how a person is inserted into the current global economic system.

Discussing the situation of postcolonial women in general from the 1970s on, Boehmer argues that native or subaltern women were doubly or triply marginalized not only as a consequence of their gender, but also because of “race, social class, and, in some cases, religion, caste, sexuality and regional status” (216). Like Loomba, Boehmer highlights the

importance of black and ex-colonized women writers and activists, including Brah, who have also called attention to the diversity of women's experience:

Social determinants of class, race, national affiliation, religion, and ethnicity, they pointed out, necessarily cut across and made more problematic a politics of identity based solely on gender. And their writing, they argued, demanded a different complexity of response than did the writing of Western women or once-colonized men. (218)

The focus of postcolonial writers and critics' on the multiplicity of women's experience, according to Boehmer, was crucial to help dismantle Western (and usually white) feminist generalizing assumptions that gender was the only cause of women's marginalization.

Bearing in mind Loomba's, Brah's and Boehmer's warnings against generalizations in mind, it is necessary to examine the experiences of postcolonial individuals through a relational perspective paying attention to the differences and similarities among them (Friedman, *Mappings* 22). As Brah discusses, diasporic experiences have to be examined through varied points of view, since "[t]he question is not simply about *who travels* but *when, how, and under what circumstances?* What socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these journeys?" (182). In this passage, Brah is not only referring to the conditions in which those postcolonial individuals leave their home country, but also to those in which they settle and are inserted into the country to which they migrate (182).

It is exactly in light of the discussions and questionings proposed by the critics above that the women characters in Mukherjee's novels *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* are analyzed in this chapter. Although Tara, Padma and Jasmine are all Indian women who share the experience of leaving India to relocate in the United States, there are also significant differences among them. Their fictional diasporic experience is marked by questions of gender, class, caste, education, and social conditions in general, and such factors also play a part in their destabilization of gender relations once they settle in the USA.

2.2. Similarities and Differences among the Women Characters

Keeping in mind the factors pointed out by Brah, Boehmer and Loomba that are relevant to understand the subjectivities of postcolonial women, I now conduct a general analysis of the three women characters I deal with in my work³. The critics above mention mainly social class, gender, national origin, location, race (color), caste, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion as axes through which subjectivities can be analyzed (*Mappings* 22). As I discuss throughout this chapter, some of these constituents of identity are more relevant to my analysis of the characters than others.

If one considers the similarities among the women characters, it is possible to say that they share some of the factors mentioned above, for example, gender, national origin, race, ethnicity (including religion) and sexuality. Tara, Padma and Jasmine are all women who were born in India from Indian parents and have the same religion – Hinduism - and the same gender and sexual orientation, that is, they are all heterosexual women. Except for ethnicity, the factors mentioned above are not problematic in their characterization while they live in India. Ethnicity, however, is a complicating factor once the women characters migrate to the USA (which brings about the issue of location) as, once there, they are seen as possessing a different cultural background in relation to the so-called natives of that country.

Ethnicity is an important issue for individuals living away from home, as is discussed in *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*. In the book's introduction, Ty argues that in the United States, racial politics tend to emphasize the binaries between black and white people while leaving people of other ethnicities, such as Native Americans, Middle Easterners, Asians and Mexicans, out of generalizations of race (5). The critic argues that such politics of ignoring people who do not fit into the generalizing white and black

³ Once more, I choose not to talk about Parvati since the constituents of her identity of class, caste, education, national origin and so on are the same as her sisters'. Furthermore, and as mentioned before, Parvati is not diasporic nor does she present great destabilizations of gender relations.

categories cause them to be invisible in a very negative sense, since it renders them “inconsequential in governmental policies and public discourse” (6).

Their invisibility is paradoxical as they cannot help being noticed because of what Ty refers to as birthmarks or visible hieroglyphs. Alluding to literary works by so-called ethnic writers, she explains that:

There are visible hieroglyphs imprinted on our eyes, our black hair, our noses, our faces, and our bodies, the resonance of another tongue, the haunting taste of another culture, as well as the perception real or imagined of being from another place. As Asian Americans and Asian Canadians, these hieroglyphs, along with our yellow and brown color, mark us indelibly as other, as Oriental, as exotic, subservient, mysterious, deviant, or threatening. (3-4)

These people, then, become visible since their physical characteristics, accents and cultural practices define them in the eyes of Caucasians as “the other.” Some of these physical and cultural traits can be modified and masked, as she argues:

Some of these bodily attributes, such as our hair colour, the crease of our eyelids, the shape of our noses can be changed, just as certain habits, such as acknowledging an elder person in the room by a small bow, showing courtesy to others at the dinner table by not taking the biggest piece of meat on the plate, and so on, can be unlearned. (4)

Even though physical modifications and cultural disruptions can take place, such changes do not guarantee that immigrant and diasporic people will actually belong to their host land.

Thus, although characters such as Jasmine and Tara can wear jeans and T-shirts instead of saris and refuse to play traditional gender roles typical in Indian societies, such transformations do not necessarily provide them with a sense of complete belonging to their new homes. Although they at times think that they belong to America, as I discuss in chapter 3, there are still physical traits that place them as Asian and consequently as “the other.”

Furthermore, being a foreign woman in a country which is not free from xenophobia and from patriarchal practices can place them in an even more complicated position.

Besides ethnicity, other constituents of identity, such as caste and class, which are related to their social conditions, may be complicating factors both in their diasporic experience and in their consequent destabilization of gender relations. In fact, Tara and Padma, as sisters who were brought up together, do not diverge in terms of caste and class. Both women characters are in a better position as they belong to the highest Hindu caste – Brahmin - and consequently belong to a privileged social class in India. Once they migrate to the USA they still benefit from the fact that they belong to such caste and class. Jasmine, on the other hand, is very different from the sisters in this sense. Named Jyoti at first, Jasmine is a low caste girl who lives, when the novel opens, in a rural village called Hasnapur. Her living conditions in India are characterized by poverty, famine and lack of education. Such unfavorable conditions, I argue in detail later, are responsible for the type of transgression of gender relations she enacts in the USA.

Analyzing the women characters' subjectivities through a relational or even situational perspective (Friedman, *Mappings* 23), I argue that it is first of all their condition as women that is determinant in their learning of gender roles in India and their subsequent subversion of traditional gender relations in the USA. The transformation in their subjectivities happens because they are all women and learned about performing that gender within a particular society, that is, within an Indian, Hindu, high/low caste, wealthy/poor, heterosexual environment. Having internalized gender roles and relations from a specific perspective in India, the women characters, in spite of their difference in terms of class and caste, are confronted with gender roles and relations that are put into practice through a different perspective in the United States. Although they share a similar configuration of subjectivity in relation to specific constituents of identity, each woman character needs to be analyzed

separately and in more detail so that their individual processes of transgressing traditional roles can be understood.

2.2.1. Tara: “the legacy of the last generation of Calcutta high society”

As mentioned in chapter 1, the protagonist and first person narrator of *Desirable Daughters*, Tara, is a thirty-six-year-old Indian born woman, who migrates to the United States after getting married to an Indian man, “Bishwapriya Chatterjee, a first son from an outstanding family” (24). Being born in India, where caste and class are very important markers of identity, Tara is aware that her identity is predetermined. While in the USA, however, she feels freer to make herself over. She has the opportunity to reinvent herself in spite of the social configuration of India that compels her to present a well-established and delineated sense of self. She describes her perception of her Indian “dusty identity” as:

fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist’s glass case, confidently labeled by father’s religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), subcaste (Kulin), mother-tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta), formative region of ancestral origin (Mishtigunj, East Bengal), education (postgraduate and professional), and social attitudes (conservative). (82)

Tara knows that in India her religion, caste, subcaste, mother-tongue, place of birth, ancestral origin, education and social attitudes are the elements that define her identity in that society. Comparing her life to that of her American friends, Tara ironically concludes that her friends should be thankful for their identity crisis: “When everyone knows your business and every name declares your identity, where no landscapes fails to contain a plethora of human figures, even a damaged consciousness, even loneliness, become privileged commodities” (35). She implies, therefore, that in India her identity is so well-defined that she is not even allowed to have such feelings.

The protagonist also knows that her American friends have wrong impressions about India in general and mainly about the city where she was born:

My American friends in California say *God, Tara, Calcutta!* as though to suggest I have returned to earth after a journey to one of the outer planets. It's one of the cities in the world with negative cachet, a city to escape, one of those hellholes made famous by Mother Teresa and mindless comparisons in the American press: Dirtier than Calcutta. Crueler than Calcutta. Poorer than Calcutta. I grew up in a city that never pitied itself. (22)

Blinded by the stereotypes of poverty and misery commonly associated with India and the city of Calcutta, her friends are unable to understand that Tara comes from a privileged social class. As she explains: "They have no idea of the wealth I came from – they hear only 'Calcutta' and immediately feel sorry for me – and the money I now control" (28). Contrary to stereotypical views of India, Tara was raised in an elitist Indian milieu and still benefits from her privileges in the United State as she married a successful businessman.

Although the protagonist seems mostly to profit from being a Brahmin from Calcutta, her privileged background is not as positive as one might imagine. As mentioned before, her position in India and the fact that she is a woman do not seem to favor her in some aspects of her life. It is mostly because of her cultural indoctrination of gender roles and relations within that particular Indian society that she has to struggle to construct a new identity in a new geographical location. Once she migrates to the USA, Tara gradually notices that the traditional conceptions of gender roles and relations for Indian women from her class and caste, as she presents them in the novel, need to be reassessed and also challenged in face of her new necessities.

At the end of the novel, Tara's mother tells her that she and her sisters have proved that "a daughter is as good as a son" (309). Such a statement implies that, even if Tara, Parvati and Padma show that they are good daughters, it is culturally assumed that giving

birth to daughters is not such a blessing as it is giving birth to sons. It also implies that, in spite of their condition as women, they all somehow managed to succeed in life. Another example of the unprivileged status of women in India is the protagonist's comments on the way Bengali mothers traditionally treat their sons. As mentioned in the first chapter, when Tara feels like slapping Rabi, she controls herself and thinks that this is the kind of attitude performed by the American parents she sees in supermarkets and parking lots. Her reaction instead is to tell herself that Indian mothers do not do that mainly because they "don't have violent feelings except against [themselves] and never against [their] sons" (42). In her narrative, she shows, then, that playing the role of the ideal Bengali woman, in spite of the class privileges she has, is not so advantageous. In fact, through her comments, it is possible to say that she is rather critical of those traditional customs.

Tara's access to education in India also points to her apparent privileged life in her home country. The protagonist was educated in a prestigious Catholic school in Calcutta, Loreto House. The convent school, she explains, was the most appropriate one for girls of her class, since "convent education guaranteed poise, English proficiency, high-level contacts, French language skills, and confident survival in whatever future the gods or the Communists might dole out" (30). Acquiring knowledge in itself, however, was not traditionally the ultimate ending of such education. Convent education for Indian girls actually "meant that until [they] reached the age of marital consent, [they] would be certified (of course) as virgins, but also as never having occupied unchaperoned confined space of any kind with a boy or [their] own age who was not a close relative" (29). Education for girls of Tara and her sisters' class had the objective of preparing and guaranteeing their successful insertion into the marriage market.

Likewise, very often higher education was a means of creating valuable brides rather than providing women with knowledge or a profession. Tara tells the reader, for example, that she went to university and held academic degrees. She explains that, at nineteen, she was:

“holder of a B.A. Honours and M.A. First Class from University of Calcutta, committed to gathering more honors and scholarships and to take up the graduate school offers that had already come from Paris, London, and New York” (24). Her plans are interrupted, however, because it was at this time that her father informed her that he had found a suitable Indian boy for her to marry. Even if Tara got scholarships to graduate schools as she mentions, it does not mean that her education was aimed at preparing her to enter the job market much less to become a financially independent woman. Even Parvati, her most conservative sister, asks herself about the purpose of their education:

Where does our kind convent-school education get us? I’m not putting down Loreto House and Loreto College or Mount Holyoke, but I didn’t learn any skill that I can now put to use to earn money. Please don’t think that I’m criticizing Daddy’s ideas of education for us. He didn’t expect us to work, let alone to have to work for money. Only middle-class women went to coeducational classrooms and studied useful things like law or medicine or engineering. (110)

Once more, from Parvati’s account, it is possible to see that formal education for subjects of their gender and class was a means of preparing brides for the marriage market. Tara and her sisters were never supposed to put into practice the knowledge they acquired in the schools they studied at because they knew that, once they got married, it would be their husband’s duty to provide for them.

School education, however, is not the only way through which girls learn how traditional Indian societies work in terms of gender relations and roles. It is through Indian myths and history that Tara also learns about models of women’s behavior she is supposed to emulate. The novel *Desirable Daughters* begins with the protagonist telling the story of Tara Lata - the Tree Bride - a mythic figure in Indian history that became a symbol of women’s virtue and nationalism. Tara’s interest in the Tree Bride story is relevant to the novel’s major

narrative as Miller explains, because it points to “the impact of history, community and religion upon a woman’s identity” (65). The critic’s argument is indeed valid since throughout history, mainly during colonialism, the female figure was often used as a symbol. Loomba explains that in colonialism, such figures were used for different purposes: women were often associated with the conquered land, for example, to represent the new continents that were available for discovery and conquest, and also as a symbol of the promise and the fear of the colonial territory (151). In colonial, anti-colonial and postcolonial national fantasies, Loomba argues, women are often connected to the land and the nation:

across the colonial spectrum, the nation-state or its guiding principles are often imagined as a woman. The figures of Britannia and Mother India, for example, have been continually circulated as symbols of different versions of national temper. Such figures can be imagined as abstractions, allegories, goddesses or real-life women . . . Resistance itself is feminized . . . (215)

The female figure, then, was used for different purposes. Anti-colonial or nationalist movements, for instance, have used the notion of the Nation-as-mother. That mother nation would symbolically give birth to its sons, that is, to the lineage of members of that nation (Loomba 216).

Tara Lata’s role in history would be representative of the strong women who contributed to India’s resistance against British colonialism. She may not only be a nationalistic symbol, but also a model for other Indian women. The story that is passed on is that Tara Lata of Mishtigunj almost became a widow on the day of her wedding since her husband-to-be died from a snake bite. So that she does not have to live as a widow and to become a burden to the community, her father marries her to a tree. As a consequence, the Tree Bride lives in retreat in the forest and only leaves her home once during her lifetime. According to historical accounts, she is forced to leave her father’s house by colonial police as a punishment for her support of India’s freedom fighters (21). Although the diasporic Tara

feels a connection with her namesake, she feels she is less important than and different from the Tree Bride. As I discuss in chapter 3, unlike Tara Lata who practically never leaves her house, Tara moves away from India both physically and psychologically. Therefore, the protagonist refuses a connection with the mythological Lata as a symbol of nationalist pride or traditional Indian womanhood.

School education, myths, history and family are all means which help Tara and also the other women characters in the novel to learn to be women. Although it is not easy for her to disregard the way she is taught to be a traditional Indian daughter, sister and wife, after her migration, she is indeed able to question and transgress some of these teachings. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the protagonist's main transgressions are related to her marriage and to her role as wife.

Tara grows up in India knowing that she and her sisters are being prepared to get married. Her narrative shows that her whole education and upbringing were aimed at preparing her for matrimony. The arranged marriage is a common practice in her caste and class and she knows from her sister Parvati's example that the same is probably going to happen to her. When she is nineteen years old, her father announces that he has found her a husband and shows her his picture (24). The partners' compatibility is determined by their common class, caste, language and values. Bish Chatterjee, the chosen boy, seems to be selected by her father also because of his promising success in financial terms. Tara's narrative shows that she is not completely unhappy with this idea of marriage, as she states:

For ten years I kept the graduation photo of Bishwapriya Chatterjee, my husband – Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur – on our nightstand. Last icon before falling asleep, first worship image of the morning. The countries, the apartments, the houses all changed, but the portrait remained. He had that eagerness, and a confident smile that promised substantial earnings. It lured my father into marriage negotiations, and it earned my not unenthusiastic

acceptance of him as husband. A very predictable, very successful marriage negotiation. (7)

Tara's acceptance of Bish as her husband turned unenthusiastic after living as his wife in the USA. As mentioned before, his idea of love does not seem to match his wife's expectations and eventually she asks for a divorce. Divorce for Bish was unthinkable because for him things were very simple: "You married, you had a son, you provided for the family, and if you provided very well, everyone was happy" (273). His wife, however, wants more than love as duty and to be provided for. Even though Bish is a generous man and an excellent provider, the kind of love he offers Tara is not enough anymore.

As I discuss in chapter 1, the protagonist's diasporic experience in the USA and her exposition to a culture which is different from India's helps trigger her decision to break the rules. Tara destabilizes gender roles and relations in a variety of ways, but these transgressions are mainly related to her marriage. Although getting divorced is the solution she finds to her dissatisfaction with playing the role of the traditional Indian wife to Bish, such an attitude is not exempt from suffering and conflict. Tara suffers from the consequences of her divorce in different aspects of her life and realizes that it is not easy to let go of the markings of her overdetermined Indian upbringing and identity.

First of all, she feels guilty over her transgressive attitudes and their consequences. She thinks she has failed Bish as well as her son. She believes that things would have been much easier if she could have been the traditional wife and mother that everybody in her family and social milieu expected her to be. As the protagonist knows that being a divorced woman represents a major disruption of tradition and a shameful situation, she tries to hide the news of her divorce from most people, including her parents. Even in the United States, she faces prejudice because she is a divorced woman. As she explains, Indian men often see her as a sexual object. Tara knows that she is sexually desired because these men seem to believe that "[t]he divorced Indian lady combines every fantasy about the liberated, wicked

Western woman with the safety net of basic submissive familiarity” (197). Finally, she also feels bad because her sisters judge her and accuse her of being too Americanized.

As if to compensate for her difficult situation, the divorced Tara can at least benefit from a comfortable financial situation in the USA. While married, she had “a car and an unlimited credit line on all [her] charge cards” (217), thus, for her “money is not longer the point, if it ever was” (24). After the divorce, Bish continues to be generous and protective (28) and agrees to give her the house, Rabi’s trust fund and some support (217). Because of her ex-husband’s financial help, Tara does not have to work; therefore, she does volunteer work in a pre-school near her house.

Her lack of occupation is also a reason for being judged by her family members. Her sister Parvati accuses her of having too “much time on [her] hands for narcissistic projects” (104), and Padma, in spite of her own transgressions, tells her that Tara should be “very thankful to Daddy or to [her] ex-husband that [she has] never had to worry where [her] next meal was coming from or how to keep a roof over [her] head or clothes on [her] back” (145). Thus, in the eyes of her sisters, having plenty of money is not such an advantage because, according to them, Tara’s financial situation makes her spoiled and narcissistic.

Gender, class, caste, education, ethnicity and sexuality, therefore, are all constituents of Tara’s identity that make her both privileged and unprivileged. These markers acquire different meanings as they are combined with each other and as she moves from one location to the other. In India, the protagonist occupies a privileged position in terms of class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality and education. She was raised in a Bengali Brahmin family, benefitting from the high social status and financial comfort their caste offers her. Sexual orientation is not even an issue for her, since heterosexuality is considered to be the norm for Indian women of her caste. When it comes to gender, Tara’s position is not as clear cut. On the one hand, as a woman, she does not have to work and provide for herself because her father is supposed to take care of her. On the other, being a woman in a patriarchal society implies basically being

prepared to live a life for the benefit of male figures. As a consequence, Tara does not have the freedom to make her own life decisions or to even choose her own husband.

In the United States, the constituents of her identity are further complicated. Once more, her sexuality is not an important issue, since, as in India, heterosexuality is considered to be the norm in American society. She is also in an advantageous position in terms of class and caste since she is still able to maintain the respect of her elite upbringing. Her education is also a benefit for her. As she studied in British schools, she has mastery of the English language and thus is able to verbally communicate easily in America. Gender and ethnicity, however, do not exactly favor Tara's situation there. Even though she lives legally in the USA, her ethnicity marks her as a foreigner, that is, as part of a visible minority (Ty 15), and as such, she is not exempt from prejudice and discrimination. Even though she believes at times that she is at home in San Francisco since she is seen "as ethnically ambiguous" (26) and somehow invisible (84), as I discuss in chapter 3, it is not so easy for her to belong in the United States. Finally, her gender once more has different implications. On the one hand, she continues to be provided for by her ex-husband because of his belief in a patriarchal value that a woman ought to be protected and taken care of. The protagonist, then, still financially benefits from being a woman in America. On the other hand, her gender also places her in an unprivileged position if one considers that she is an ethnic woman living in a foreign patriarchal society which does not exactly welcome its immigrants.

2.2.2. Padma: "the last flowering of Calcutta's golden past"

The forty-two-year-old Padma is Tara's eldest sister and one of the most important characters in *Desirable Daughters*. As mentioned previously, the mystery Tara tries to solve throughout the whole narrative revolves around her. Like her sisters, Padma was born in India and shares with them gender, caste, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and education.

Moreover, she is also a diasporic subject as she moves to Switzerland, England and finally settles in the USA. As a result of her traditional upbringing in India, Padma's identity also seems to be overdetermined. As Tara states, her sister seems to possess "a firm identity resisting all change" (205), but as Padma's own attitudes in the USA show, she also destabilizes the gender roles with which she was indoctrinated in India.

As explained before, the reader has access to Padma's story mostly through Tara's narration. Since most of the information we have about her comes from an indirect source, some facts about Padma's story cannot be confirmed in the novel, either by Tara or by Padma herself. From the information we have from the protagonist, it is possible to say that Padma was raised in the same environment as her youngest sister. She was born into a privileged elite family from Calcutta, a "blessed, elite minority" (30). She was a Hindu Bengali Brahmin, and although there are no references to her going to college, she is described as having the same convent school education as her sisters. Being a Bhattacharjee, as the sisters were, meant "to share a tradition of leadership, of sensitivity, of achievement, refinement and beauty that was the envy of the world" (23). Although that was "the last generation of Calcutta high society" (23), they benefited from having a high social status in India.

Not all status and class comfort, however, seem to be positive for Padma. Like her younger sisters, she was raised and educated in order to get married and become a traditional Brahmin wife. The Indian tradition of her class and caste demands that the first born daughter should be the first one to get married, so there was a lot of pressure and expectation. Having the eldest daughter get married first was so important to her family that it was quite a problem when Parvati expresses the desire to get married before her:

So many eyes were watching, so many precautions were taken, and so much of value was at stake – the marriageability of Motilal Bhattacharjee's oldest daughter, which, unless properly managed, controlled the prospects of his

second and third daughters as well – that any violation of the codes, any breath of scandal, was unthinkable. (33)

The sisters' lives were controlled in many ways. As Tara states, there was no adolescence in the sense that girls were never allowed to date or to rebel against their parents. The sisters' father did not allow them to go out on the street and “[their] car was equipped with window shades. [They] had a driver, and the driver had a guard” (31). The girls lived in a bubble where everyone who entered and left it was monitored. Although the protagonist says there was nothing to rebel against in Calcutta (29), so much protection and repression were difficult for her eldest sister to bear. From Tara's narrative, it is possible to see that Padma was (or supposedly was) quite transgressive in terms of gender roles even in India.

First of all, although the sisters' family is said to live in a bubble, it does not mean that they were completely exempt from receiving Western influences. In fact, their cultural life was very much influenced by American customs. The sisters' father, for instance, was an admirer of Hollywood movies. As Tara explains, for her father “Hollywood values were Bhattacharjee family values, as opposed to the standards of Europe and, especially, those of Bombay” (118). Her father liked the glamour presented by actors such as Cary Grant, Gregory Peck and Grace Kelly, and considered those movies safe for the girls to watch, that is, they matched the values and taste of this particular social class. Bollywood, however, is the opposite of that conservative glamour, since, as the protagonist observes, plenty of its stars are involved in sexual scandals and criminal activities and the movies' plots are repetitive and implausible (119). Padma is an enthusiast of American culture, especially music; but contrary to her father, she is also quite interested in Indian cinema. As Tara informs the reader:

[Padma] was born in 1958, and by the time I came along, she already knew the American songs beamed across the subcontinent from Radio Ceylon. When I was six, she was reading the movie magazines and knew the juicy scandals. (30)

Her enthusiasm for cinema is so great that she reveals she wants to pursue a career in dancing or acting. As her desire to follow an artistic career increases, she eventually receives an offer to make her dream come true.

She tells Tara that in the 1970s, the Indian Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray, perhaps the most well known Indian filmmaker in the Western World, was looking for a new girl to star one of his movies:

What actress was fresh and unknown, sixteen or younger, capable of speaking the East Bengal dialect and behaving like a village Brahmin girl, but then turn around and star in a cluster of contemporary, middle class, business-oriented Calcutta films? Who was beautiful enough, English-speaking enough, Bengali enough, Brahmin enough, worldly enough and sophisticated enough, and still unknown? (186)

Padma would be the answer for all these questions and, although her story seems to be an exaggeration, she claims that the filmmaker indeed sent her father a letter asking if she was available for a movie role (188). The girls' father, however, turned the proposal down, because although he was fond of the cinema and appreciated American movies, their "family 'Westernization' was superficial, confined to convent school, Metro cinema and movie magazines, and overlaid a profound and orthodox Hinduism" (186). Thus, although Padma wants to and seems to be the right girl for the movie, since her age, language, class, caste, appearance, education and ethnicity make her perfect for the role, her father does not allow her to be a film actress mainly because she is a woman. The eldest daughter of Bhattacharjee family was overprotected and their "father would never have permitted any form of exhibitionism" (30) that could cause any damage to the girls' reputation. Padma is not happy with his decision and still remembers that event. When Tara visits her in New York, she feels that her sisters is still hurt and blames her "Daddy for ruining her life" (191).

Padma, then, as an Indian girl belonging to a traditional Bengali elite, is repressed in her life choices in the name of her family's reputation. She is obliged to sacrifice her dream of becoming an actress and to keep playing the role of the traditional obedient daughter. Consequently, it can be said that all the constituents of identity that seem to place her in a privileged position such as class, caste and education do not guarantee the freedom of choice that she wants. Because of her gender, that is, because she is a woman who has to play certain gender roles within that class, she is unable to make her own life decisions. It is possible to say that such repression is responsible for her resolution to leave India and settle elsewhere. Still a teenager, Padma goes to Switzerland to finish her studies and then lives for some time in London. Finally she moves to New York and decides to live there permanently.

Reading *Desirable Daughters*, the reader never gets to know the real reasons for Padma's going to Switzerland. Tara remembers that when her eldest sister was 16 years old, her parents sent her to a "finishing school" (67). Padma, however, did not seem happy with this decision: "Didi had acted resentful. She had refused to pack a bag for the trip, and Mummy, red-eyed from crying behind closed doors, had had to decide what saris Didi should take abroad with her" (67). Parvati also has memories of the time when her sister went to Switzerland. She tells Tara that she remembers a conversation between her father, mother and eldest sister about the pros and cons about marrying an unsuitable boy (105). She remembers her mother telling Padma:

if you want to marry this man, you better know what you are getting into, because you just don't marry a boy, you marry his family, his religion, his biases, his politics, and if all those things are totally different from yours as they are bound to be, then you can prepare yourself for a lifetime of being lonely. (106)

Such memories are all linked to the main mystery of the story, that is, whether she had a relationship and a baby with Ronald Dey. While the younger sisters suspect that the story is true, Padma never admits it. When Tara confronts her, she says:

You know me, I was a terrible flirt, but so were you, and so was Parvati, that's what we were trained for. He was Christian, so how serious could it get? If you remember me smiling at him or laughing at his jokes, it's just the thing we girls did whenever we had an audience. What I remember is waiting for a sign from above, or from some boy, or from Daddy that my life could start. I waited six years, dressing up every night, smiling, laughing, collecting gold and saris and thinking I was getting old and no one would marry me. Even Poppy was getting offers! I started begging Daddy to find someone because I was already sixteen and I hated school and the nuns and I knew I wasn't cut out to be the wife of some bigshot businessman, and Daddy kept saying no, no, I had to finish school, and no boy was good enough for me. (130-1)

Even though Padma does not admit it, there are other events in the story which make the reader believe that she actually had a relationship with Ronald Dey. The novel, however, does not present a solution to the mystery. If it is true, as discussed before, her pregnancy and abandonment of his child would mean a serious transgression in gender roles and relations for her culture's standards.

The novel gives the reader no certainty about her pregnancy and its aftermath; however, through Tara's narrative it is possible to identify other forms of transgression of gender roles performed by Padma. Her destabilization of gender relations are all related to geographical spaces outside home, as I discuss in chapter 3. It is not possible to discuss her life in Switzerland or England in detail because the novel does not present much information about that. It is possible, however, to look at her life in New York, since it is described in more detail and does contain examples of her subversive behavior.

In New York, Padma moves away from India and from some Indian traditions related to her class, but paradoxically has “become more Indian than when she left Calcutta” (98). Padma’s situation is complex, as discussed in chapter 3, because at the same time that she changes her life and enacts minor disruptions, she also makes sure she is keeping traditional Indian customs. Living in New York and geographically far away from her family, she seems to have more liberty to choose the traditions she wants to maintain along with the ones she needs to discard in terms of the presentation of the gender roles of daughter, sister, wife and mother, as I point out in chapter 1.

Padma’s adherence to and rejection of gender roles is further complicated by the interplay of the constituents of her identity. Like Tara, gender, class, caste, education, ethnicity and sexuality are all constituents of her identity that change according to her geographical location and places her in both advantageous and disadvantageous positions. In India Padma belongs to a privileged class and, caste and she receives the same formal education as her youngest sister. Her family has a good financial situation, is widely respected in the community and is part of the high Calcuttan society. As a woman, however, she does not have such a comfortable position because she has to live within the boundaries of what is prescribed for her gender in that society. She is repressed and cannot simply date anyone she wants to nor can she choose her own career. In the United States, she is privileged by her English-speaking education. Although she is an immigrant in the United States, she chooses to live surrounded by Indians, so she feels protected and is able to keep the respect and recognition of her home country’s class and caste. Like Tara, sexuality does not seem to be an issue to Padma in India or the USA, since, like her sisters, she is heterosexual.

2.2.3. Jasmine: “the last to be born to that kind of submission, that expectation of ignorance”

The protagonist and first person narrator of *Jasmine* is a twenty-four year old woman who was born Jyoti in the village of Hasnapur in India. Not only does she share with the sisters Padma and Tara from *Desirable Daughters* their condition as Indian women, but also the same religious background and sexual orientation. Jasmine, however, differs from the sisters in terms of class, caste and education.

Jasmine was born in the small village of Hasnapur, “Jullundhar District, Punjab, India”(39), eight years after the partition riots (44). As narrator of her own story she explains that the village is very poor and there is no water and electricity available for most families who live there. The rural community is described by her as “India’s near-middle age” (106), and as a place which does not even receive the influence of British culture. Without electricity, water and health facilities, her family leads a hard life.

Jasmine’s family, however, is not originally from Hasnapur and their lives had not always been that difficult. They actually lived for centuries in a city called Lahore before the protagonist was born. There, they did not live in huts: “In Lahore my parents had lived in a big stucco house with porticoes and gardens. They had owned farmlands, shops” (41). The family, however, lost everything they had because of the partition riots when the country was separated from Pakistan in the 70s. Jasmine tells the reader that “Muslims sacked [their] house. Neighbors’ servants tugged off earrings and bangles, defiled grottoes, sabered [her] grandfather’s horse” (41). The chaos and destruction caused by the partition riots, then, force her family to move to a poorer place.

The configuration of Jasmine’s family also makes their situation even more difficult. The protagonist has several brothers and sisters; she is actually “the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children” (39). The size of her family, however, is not said to be the greatest

cause of their difficult life. It is actually the number of daughters which makes them so poor.

Jasmine explains such situation in the passage below:

In a makeshift birthing hut in Hasnapur, Jullundhar District, Punjab, India, I was born the year the harvest was so good that even my father, the reluctant tiller of thirty acres, had grain to hoard for drought. If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as lucky, a child with a special destiny to fulfill. But daughters were curses. A daughter had to be married off before she could enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generations. Gods with infinitive memories visited girl children on women who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations. (39)

This quote shows the predicaments of gender in an Indian society which places women in a rather disadvantageous position. Since it is impossible for the protagonist's father to pay for the dowry of five daughters in order to get them all married, her birth is considered a misfortune. They are already poor and another baby girl makes their situation even worse.

Being a daughter and, consequently considered a curse, teaches Jasmine how women are treated in her village and in her class. The protagonist's sisters tell her, for instance that when her midwife carries her out of the birthing hut, she has "a ruby-red choker of bruise around [her] throat and sapphire fingerprints on [her] collarbone" (40). The bruise indicates that Jasmine's mother tries to kill her baby thinking about the hard life she will probably have as a girl without a dowry. The daughter understands that well and does not judge her mother for the incident. She shows she comprehends her mother's decision by saying: "She wanted to spare me the pain of a dowryless bride. My mother wanted a happy life for me" (40). Jasmine grows up, then, knowing that being a woman relegates her to the margins of that society.

As the protagonist grows older, she keeps witnessing situations which show her how unprivileged a woman of her village and class may be. Although all women are supposed and

expected to get married, matrimony does not seem to render their lives much better. As finding a husband is a must for Indian girls, there is great concern about getting Jasmine married. When she is seven years old, and astrologer foretells her future, mentioning her widowhood and exile. As the protagonist answers him back and calls him crazy, the astrologer hits her in the head. Then, she falls and she gets a bruise on her forehead. As Jasmine reunites with her sisters, they worry about Jasmine's star-shaped wound: 'Now your face is scarred for life! How will the family ever find you a husband?' (5). Her sisters worry because they know that the lack of a dowry and of physical beauty can indeed ruin a girl's prospects in the marriage market and, therefore, condemn such a poor girl to a life of servitude. Even though Jasmine's sisters are worried about marriage, their own experiences with jealous drunken men show the protagonist that getting married is actually not the best thing that can happen to a woman. Eventually, she is luckier than her sisters and marries a considerate man. As most Indian marriages from Hasnapur are not portrayed in a positive way in the novel, Jasmine and Prakash's happy relationship seems to be an exception to the rule.

As discussed in the first chapter, widowhood is also presented to Jasmine as one of the worst situations for a woman in the society she lives in. She learns about the life options for widows, as she witnesses the widowhood of her friend Vimla as well as her mother's. Vimla, widow at twenty-two, "doused herself with kerosene and flung herself on a stove" (15). Jasmine's mother, not succeeding in throwing herself on her husband's pyre, "shaved her hair with a razor, wrapped her body in a coarse cloth, and set all day in a corner" (61). The protagonist herself, eventually, also goes through widowhood, as Prakash is murdered. She describes how she is treated as a widow by saying: "Mataji and I were alone in the widow's dark hut, little better than Mazbis and Untouchables" (96). Because it is believed that widows bring by bad luck, the protagonist and her mother live isolated among other widows and Jasmine "felt dead in their company" (97). Subject to oppression and destitution, Jasmine decides to act and travels to the United States.

School education is not widely available for girls such as Jasmine in Hasnapur. Going to school is not a priority for her parents. It is only after some arguments in the family that her mother agrees to let her study for six years, that is, “three years longer than [her] sisters” (45). Education could even be considered a disadvantage for girls who were destined for marriage. A cousin of Jasmine’s father says, for instance, that big-city men prefer village girls because they are “brought up to be caring and have no minds of [their] own” (46). Village girls are compared to cattle “whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go” (46). Since having an educated daughter is not a priority for the protagonist’s family, her teacher has to convince her father that it is important to let her go to secondary school. Masterji has to make clear that the modern ladies who study are not “shackling themselves to wifhood and maternity first chance” (50). With the argument that an educated daughter will still be more suitable for marriage and maternity, Jasmine’s father allows her to continue studying.

Even though it is not easy for Jasmine to have a formal education, with Masterji’s instructions she shows she is quite an intelligent girl. The protagonist says that, at seven, she is “a reader, a counter, a picture drawer to whom Masterji, the oldest and sourest teacher in [their] school (B.A. Patiala, failed), lent his own books” (40). She seems to learn languages easily, knowing Punjabi and Urdu, and she is also “the first likely female candidate for English instruction [her teacher had] ever had” (40). Learning English becomes a main concern to Jasmine. She frequently borrows books in English in order to learn the language. Reading British literature is not an easy task, though. As she says: “I remember *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*, both of which I was forced to abandon because they were too difficult” (41). Masterji’s classes are the only formal instruction in English that the protagonist has. When her father dies, she tries to keep on improving her English by “listening to the All-India Radio English-language newscast . . . and borrowing Vimla’s father’s copy of *The Hindu*” (64). In order to practice writing, Jasmine copies words several times from old newspapers. After getting married to Prakash, she also tries to keep in touch

with the language by reading the manuals of the electronic devices that her husband tries to fix (89). Knowing English to Jasmine is more than simply wanting to learn a language, for her it is “to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world” (68).

Jasmine does not lead a comfortable life in India because she is a woman and because of her class, caste and education. Likewise, in the United States, her situation initially does not improve much. After her husband’s death, the protagonist moves to America to live as an illegal immigrant. About her bold attempt, Jasmine admits: “A village girl, going alone to America, without job, husband, or papers? I must be mad!” (97). Jasmine’s decision is indeed a risky one, and she suffers the consequences of entering the country through illegal and dangerous means.

The novel’s protagonist catches a plane from an airline company that “do[es] not appear in any directory” (106) and whose attendants have no manners and serve no food or beverages. In order to finally get to Florida, she has to travel for days on a shrimper boat. Once Jasmine and the other illegal immigrants get to Florida, the boat’s captain, Half-Face rapes her in a motel room. She is not only vulnerable because she is a woman but also because of her ethnicity. As an Indian illegal immigrant, she is unprotected and becomes an easy target for physical and psychological violence. Even with all this suffering, as I discuss in chapter 1, Jasmine is still brave enough to react and kill the man who rapes her.

Jasmine’s ethnicity, lack of money and illegal status added to the fact that she is a woman place her in a quite unprivileged position in American soil. She is the typical illegal immigrant who is constantly hiding and trying to avoid being deported. As discussed in detail in the third chapter, she spends some time with Prakash’s friends in an Indian ghetto in Flushing and while there she has to once again submit herself to the limiting role of the widow. As Jasmine wants to do more with her life than live in a ghetto, she sets herself free in the United States. She gets the typical immigrant jobs, such as baby-sitter, until she settles with Bud in the city of Baden in Iowa. Most of the negative experiences that she goes through

are consequences of her disadvantageous situation in the USA. She is a foreign face, an illegal immigrant, a poor dark girl who barely speaks English in an alien country. She possesses the birthmarks of ethnicity that render her as “the other,” and as part of the visible minorities that Ty discusses.

If the protagonist suffers from her unprivileged status both in her home-country and in the USA, her diasporic experience still turns into something positive for her. Both in India and abroad, her low class and caste, poor education and gender provide her with a variety of negative experiences. In the USA, however, she has the chance to destabilize the gender roles and relations with which she was indoctrinated throughout her whole life in India and fight victimization. The main transformations that Jasmine undergoes are all related, as pointed out in the first chapter, to her subversions of traditional gender roles and relations.

As a widow, the protagonist is transgressive for not following the examples of widows such as her friend Vimla and her mother. Jasmine does not throw herself on her husband’s pyre, neither does she live in retreat from society. She escapes the traditional role of widow as it is practiced in Hasnapur and in other parts of India in order to have a freer life in the United States. Moreover, she does not play the role of the traditional wife and mother from Hasnapur. Jasmine never gets married again, although she has relationships with other men in the USA. Having boyfriends or lovers is not something accepted in her culture, but in the diasporic space she currently lives in, she falls in love with Taylor and even gets pregnant by Bud. As mentioned in the first chapter, although Bud proposes to her, the protagonist never says yes and actually leaves him to reunite with Taylor and his adopted daughter. By marrying Bud, Jasmine has the chance to build a family and to gain acceptance in the American society, but she chooses not to do so. Furthermore, she transgresses her role as a sister and daughter for she never maintains a connection with her old home, and never mentions whether she keeps in touch with her family in India. In sum, in the USA Jasmine is not the woman she is supposed

to be according to the traditional gender roles she learns in India. There she is able to transgress gender roles, since she leaves Bud in spite of being pregnant by him.

2.2.3.1. Criticism of *Jasmine*

The portrayal of Jasmine as a female character whose destitute condition is a consequence of her class, caste and education in India has been widely criticized. As Warhol-Down states: “Among feminist and postcolonialist readers, practically everybody hates *Jasmine*” (1). Although the story received plenty of positive reviews at the time it was published and is often found in reading lists of literature courses in universities all around, critics such as Aneja, Ray and Carter-Sanborn are harshly critical of Mukherjee’s novel.

In her article, Aneja argues that in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee portrays a stereotyped Third World woman who goes through a process of re-colonization in the first world (74). The critic explains that the way Jasmine is portrayed reveals “a farcical image of oppressed Indian womanhood - an image which might have a special appeal for western liberal feminism, which looks for exactly such token images of oppressed sisters in need of rescue” (76). Mukherjee is, therefore, accused of having written the novel aiming at a specific audience that would consist of Western readers who would sympathize with the situation of the oppressed Jyoti and who would eventually feel relieved at the freedom she achieves in the liberating USA (77).

Aneja describes Mukherjee as a so-called authentic third world voice, that is, someone able to translate the third world material about indigenous women into a discourse available to Western readers (72). The writer is accused of taking advantage of her position of third world intellectual in order to allow:

the narrator to construct a caricature of oppressed Indian womanhood, and use this caricature as the starting point of a series of changes which involve a

"betterment," an entry into a more complex and sophisticated world; [the author] neglects to take into account the complexity and specificity of the situation of third world women. (79)

Jasmine's relocation in the United States, as a result, would provide her with the means to improve her life, emphasizing the superiority of Western culture over backward Indian culture. Aneja understands that Mukherjee portrays Jasmine's diasporic experience in quite positive terms. That's why she names her essay "*Jasmine, The Sweet Scent of Exile.*" As she puts it:

The bitter smell of exile – of coming to terms with the loss of previous ways of knowing the world, quickly transforms itself into the sweet scent of a newly defined reality that yields its soft contours to the individual who has the will to sculpt an ever widening future out of past experiences. At the end of the novel, Jyoti, having traversed the landscapes of her various transformations, becomes the truly American and extremely selective adventurer, and steps on the road of the American Dream of a narrowly defined happiness. (73)

Contrary to traditional descriptions of exile, Aneja understands Jasmine's experience as a process exempt from suffering which results in the betterment of the character's life.

Furthermore, Aneja claims that it is true that "Jasmine's subjectivity, as she moves westwards, is always defined through her relationships with male figures who will either love her too much or too little" (77). The critic understands Jasmine as a female figure who is generally dominated and redefined by masculine figures.

Ray, along the same lines as Aneja, criticizes the way Mukherjee portrays her novel's protagonist. She accuses the writer of offering the reader a version of India which reinforces the stereotyped view of the East that the West normally has:

a regressive world stricken by poverty, communal violence, and oppressive social practices; a world where dead dogs float in water that people usually use

for the household chores, where women are ritually beaten by their husbands for expressing their opinion, and where young widows pour kerosene over their bodies and set fire to themselves. (91)

Ray even admits that she is not saying that such a backward picture of India described in *Jasmine* is completely inexistent in reality, but she claims that the author is reinforcing the binaries concerning the East and West. The critic uses Bhabha's ideas to argue that Mukherjee fails to use a narrative of hybridism to question and disrupt the master's national narrative.

Jasmine's diasporic experience is also described by Ray as "celebrations of the condition of migrancy as a proviso for the boundless possibilities of assimilation" (189). The protagonist is, therefore, described as a character that does not question or think critically of her experience in the United States, who simply assimilates the country's cultural traits. The critic refers to the protagonist's trajectory in America as a rather positive one, saying that Jasmine "fails to transform and question the myth of the American metropolis as a place of tremendous possibilities" (192). Actually, her attitudes prove that the novel "celebrates the pluralist ideal of America where the immigrant can attain health, wealth, and happiness" (193). In sum, the characterization of the novel's protagonist, according to Ray, shows that a diasporic experience of an Indian woman in the USA is one of assimilation in which the stereotyped gendered victim is given a better life.

Carter-Sanborn also criticizes Mukherjee's writings and questions the academic popularity of the novel. She believes that *Jasmine* was well received by book reviewers and has been increasingly taught in Western academic literature courses because of the "complicated investment in the racial and cultural otherness of the narrator (and of course, her author)" (575). Once more, the critic accuses the author of portraying the novel's protagonist as exoticized and backward. For her, *Jasmine* presents "the Other" in such stereotypical ways that it pleases an audience that believes in its cultural superiority.

In short, the criticism on Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is well defined and summarized by Warhol-Down:

Jasmine, written by an upper-middle-class immigrant to the United States from India via Canada, got a reputation as a novel that Orientalizes and stereotypes the experience of rural India women, solidifying Western prejudices and glorifying the position of women in North America by contrast. (1)

In her essay, the critic retracts her own criticism as summarized above. She says that by reading the novel again she comes to the conclusion that the idea of "betterment" explored in Aneja's essay is a term that *Jasmine* never uses in her narrative. Warhol-Down argues that the critics' interpretation of *Jasmine* actually reveals "the critics' own ironic readings of the novel's trajectory" (2).

I agree with Warhol-Down's statements and believe that those limiting and restricting readings of *Jasmine* are products of the critic's need to find in the books they analyze their own theoretical agendas. First of all, *Jasmine*'s story is never described by her narrator or author as being written as representative of all Indian women. *Jasmine* contains a first-person narrator who describes her individual story and comes from a very specific place – Hasnapur. The specificity of *Jasmine*'s location and personal history, however, does not isolate her from the rest of the world. The character's journey can be seen as an example, among plenty of others, of the migrations that are part of the transnational flow of peoples which is a characteristic of the new diaspora.

It is not possible to say that Mukherjee generalizes the experience of Indian women and, thus, does not take into account the complexity and specificity of the situation of third world women. In *Jasmine*, the author describes the story of a low-class, rural girl living in Hasnapur, that is, she depicts the living conditions of several Indian women. It does not mean, however, that all women in India live in such an unprivileged condition or that it is the only experience of women characters that she is able to portray. On the contrary, Mukherjee has

proved that she is able to tell the stories of Indian women from a variety of backgrounds. The greatest example of the author's awareness of such differences among women is her characterization of the sisters in *Desirable Daughters*. Unlike Jasmine, the sisters are not victims of their own class and caste. The writer, then, shows through her novels that she is able to account for the existence of different realities for Indian women and characters. Furthermore, it is not because she has written about a fictional rural experience like Jasmine's, or one from the elite like the sisters', that she is stating that these are the only realities that exist in India. Finally, it is important to bear in mind that the author is writing fiction and as a consequence does not necessarily have to be concerned with mimetically representing reality in her writings. One ought not to forget that in both *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee portrays fictionalized experiences of women.

Aneja's claim that Jasmine's subjectivity is dominated by male figures is also problematic. It is indeed true that the protagonist is named by most men she encounters in the novel, but it does not mean that men are the ones responsible for helping her shape her subjectivity. It is not possible to disregard the importance of many female figures in Jasmine's trajectory. Lillian Gordon, for instance, helps her in her first days in the USA and also gives her a name: Jazzy. Moreover, Lillian is not the only female figure that the protagonist looks up to in the novel. Characters such as Mother Ripplemeyer and Jasmine's own mother are also strong female figures that play a relevant part in her story. Finally and most importantly, she cannot be said to be such a passive character that she needs men to actually shape her identity. The protagonist is the one who is mostly responsible for her own transformations. She moves to the USA in spite of all the risks, murders Hal-Face, decides not to commit *sati*, leaves Flushing, gets her own jobs, flees to Iowa, leaves Bud and then chooses to reunite with Taylor. Even though she does not perform all these actions without other people's help, she is the one who makes her life decisions.

Finally, it seems to me that some critics in postcolonial and feminist literary criticism often come with an agenda when they analyze a literary work. I believe there is nothing wrong in putting theoretical frameworks into test in novels, poems and short stories. It is not the author's role, however, to express the exact concepts and hypotheses presented in literary critical theories. Furthermore, if a literary work is interpreted through a particular perspective with a particular purpose, such interpretation may not necessarily be the author's responsibility. Thus, if a group of Western readers reads *Jasmine* as the story of a rural Indian woman who is saved by the West thanks to its liberating social system, it does not automatically mean that the author is complicit with such interpretation. Mukherjee then does not exactly need to present in her novels the ideas of postcolonial or feminist literary critics, whatever their importance or respectability.

2.3. Questions of Agency and Identity

In *Mappings*, Friedman argues that thinking geopolitically about identity involves routes and routing, that is, movement and settling. She explains that "routes imply travel, physical and psychical displacements in space, which in turn incorporates the crossings of borders and contact with difference" (151). Those displacements, then, do not only make the subjects aware of their identity formation, but they may also result in some form of change and maybe in some form of action.

The three women characters in Mukherjee's novels are rooted in their native countries and possess apparently well-defined gendered identities based on issues of class, caste, religion, sexuality and education. When they migrate, they experience physical and psychological displacement from their homeland, they come in contact with difference and, then, cross the borders and disrupt the definitions of gender roles and relations and the belief in supposedly stable identities. These disruptions and border crossings in identity can be

related to the concept of agency, that, as Hall argues, “remains at the heart of discussions of subjectivity today” (124).

If agency is the ability to act or perform an action, as defined by Ashcroft (Ashcroft et al. 8), the critic asks whether “individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed” (8). Hall also warns about such a question, saying that:

we must still complicate any designation of possible agency with an awareness of greatly varied material resources and education levels, degrees of gender and racial privilege, comfort levels with technology, and even mental health and all of the myriad of other factors that can even affect one’s ability to choose carefully, take risks bravely, and accept failure or criticism without paralysis or other self-destructive response. (126)

Putting agency into practice, then, depends on a variety of factors, such as the ones mentioned by the critic, but it is indeed possible. One of the means through which one can achieve agency is related exactly to the physical and psychological displacements mentioned by Friedman. Such displacements may open space for change and disruption. Agency is not always easily available for all individuals since their advantageous or disadvantageous situation may directly influence their ability to act. Unprivileged individuals, however, those who are oppressed because of their gender, class, caste, sexuality and access to education, cannot be deterministically said to be unable to perform action. As Bhabha claims, “it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking” (172). It is always dangerous to make generalizations, but it is true that sometimes those who are the most oppressed are the ones who are capable of enacting the biggest transformations. In my analysis of the novels’ characters, Jasmine stands out as an example of Bhabha’s statement.

In Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and *Desirable* Daughters, the physical and psychological displacement generated by the characters' diasporic experience enables disruption and change. Once Tara, Padma and Jasmine are confronted with difference in the United States, they are given the chance to transgress the traditional presentation of gender roles and relations that they were taught to adhere to in their homelands. The characters, however, are not transgressive in the same way. Such difference is related to the different constituents of the characters' identity that place them both in privileged and unprivileged situations in different locations. On the one hand, their identity markers of sexuality and religion do not seem to play a great part in their destabilizations and transgressions. On the other, gender, class, caste, ethnicity and education for Tara, Padma and Jasmine are shown to be directly related to the extent of transgression each one of them is able to enact in the United States.

All of the characters are, in India, oppressed in a way when it comes to gender. Tara, Padma and Jasmine all internalize, generally speaking, notions of gender roles which include a blind belief in women's submission, obedience, lack of freedom of choice and even inferiority. Such a patriarchal situation in India causes them to be quite unprivileged as women, and their relocation to the United States offers them a space to experiment with some kind of disruption. I am not saying, however, that the American culture is superior to Indian culture or that in the USA they do not suffer from gender oppression. The characters' destabilization of gender roles, then, is much more related to the space in which agency occurs because of the diasporic displacement, than to the hypothetical superiority of one culture over another. For example, as I discuss in the first chapter, the so-called feminist attitudes that Tara encounters in America do not seem to be the most appropriate ones for her situation. In sum, what matters is that in a different geographical space, the women characters seem to be given the chance to somehow experiment the forms of gender relations that are more suitable for them.

Freedom of choice is quite a relevant issue for the women characters' transgression of gender relations, but do they really have the chance to choose whatever roles and relations that they want? The roles of mother, daughter, wife and sister seem to be the same everywhere; the expectations, functions and responsibilities associated to them, however, may vary from culture to culture. As Hall claims, although we have the belief that we can create and recreate ourselves the way we want, there is actually a narrow set of possibilities that will allow us to fit "comfortably into society and our particular gendered, regional, ethnic, sexual subset of it" (1). There are not as many options as one would like, and even if one is able to transgress traditional presentations of gender roles, one may not always be able to escape the unprivileged configurations of gender relations of a different culture.

It is true that, as Miller argues, mobility allows women characters to move beyond the traditional boundaries of women's identity (64). But in analyzing *Desirable Daughters*, the critic concludes that in Tara's case:

By separating herself from her family and community, Tara challenges some of the social and ideological markers that determine her identity; however, as Mukherjee demonstrates in this novel, identity determinants cannot be shed as easily as a snake's skin. (64)

Miller has a point when she argues that Tara cannot escape some constituents of identity, even if she is away from India. When she looks for the detective's help in order to try to solve the mystery around Chris Dey, Jack Singh Sidhu informs her that in the eyes of Indians, she will also be linked to her ex-husband. Thus, although Tara is a divorced woman, as the ex-wife of a wealthy member of the Indian community, she is "a target for the Indian underworld" (69). It is not easy for the protagonist then, although she transgresses gender relations, to let go of what has for so long defined her, especially in the eyes of others.

Compared to Tara and Padma, Jasmine is the most transgressive women character. She is able to move the farthest from traditional boundaries of women's identity. Unlike the sisters, Jasmine is not privileged by any axis of identity of class, caste or education. Her situation in India as a poor, uneducated widow is so oppressive that her embracing of the USA as a country of possibility should not surprise the reader. She performs major transgressions because in America, even with all her suffering, she sees a possibility of having freedom of choice. She is not a desirable daughter. On the contrary, she learns from birth that, as the fifth daughter, she is the curse which is going to make her family even poorer. Furthermore, although Jasmine does not negate her Indian background and does not completely forget her life in Hasnapur, as mentioned before, she chooses not to keep in touch with her family in India and not to become too attached to memories of her home country either. That is why Jasmine is so much more transgressive than the desirable daughters. It does not mean, however, that her process of transgressing gender roles and relations is an easy one. In the USA, Jasmine does not escape gender oppression. She suffers physical and psychological violence as she is raped and cannot help being regarded as an exotic sexual figure by men such as Bud and Darrel, her farmer neighbor in Baden.

In sum, as the examination of each character above shows, some of their constituents of identity both render them privileged and unprivileged in different locations. The characters' identity markers of sexuality and religion do not seem to play a relevant role in their destabilization of traditional gender relations. Gender, class, caste, ethnicity and education for Tara, Padma and Jasmine, however, are directly related to the extent of the transgression each one of them is able to enact in the United States.

CHAPTER 3

“I felt suspended between worlds”: Home and Transgression

The diasporic women characters in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* present different relations with different geographical spaces that can be called home. Even though Tara, Padma and Jasmine were all born in the same homeland, their diasporic experience complicates their perceptions of home. India is, then, not necessarily the immediate association that they make to the notion of home. Their diasporic experience also generates some form of attachment to the land they currently live in, that is, the United States. On one hand, there is India, the location not only where they were born in and lived their childhood and adolescence but also where they learned the gender roles and relations that they will eventually question. On the other hand, there is the United States, the foreign land to which they moved and where they have the opportunity to develop other gender relations that are different from the ones they learned in their home country. Marked by the experiences and memories of these two spaces, the analysis of the women characters' affiliation to India and to the USA shows that feeling at home and declaring a place as home is not such an easy task.

In this chapter, I discuss the characters' different understandings of home. Since it is a significant notion in postcolonial, feminist and diaspora studies, I first revise the literature on home and associate the critics' discussions to the portrayal of Mukherjee's women characters. I examine in detail how Tara, Padma and Jasmine relate to each geographical place they inhabit. In my detailed analysis I describe the characters process of making themselves at home, their rejections and their acceptance of the places they live throughout the novels. Finally, I discuss how displacing oneself from home, even if one is already displaced in one's home, is linked to the opportunity of questioning and subverting gender roles defined in one's homeland and culture.

3.1. Criticism on Home

Several critics in postcolonialism, feminist literary criticism and diaspora studies have discussed and highlighted the relevance of the notion of home in the examination of literary works. Martin, Mohanty, Kaplan, Anzaldúa, hooks, Davies, George, Brah and Friedman are some of the critics who discuss the significance of home in literature and in the identity formation processes. Home and identity are further complicated when the subjects leave home, that is, when they experience some physical and psychological displacement from home.

George, for instance, argues that home can be considered to be a constituent of identity:

Home is a way of establishing difference. Homes and home-countries are exclusive. Home, I will argue, along with gender, sexuality, race, and class, acts as an ideological determinant of the subject. The term “home-country” in itself expresses a complex yoking of ideological apparatuses considered necessary for the existence of subjects: the notion of belonging, of having a home, and a place of one’s own. (2)

The subject’s status, she states, may be sustained by the experience of the place one knows as home or even by the resistance to places that are considered not to be home. The self and the home are both ruled by the location by which they are defined.

Martin and Mohanty also assume that identity is shaped by the individual’s experience of home. Analyzing Minnie Bruce Pratt’s autobiographical narrative “Identity: Skin Blood Heart,” the critics discuss how ambivalent a notion of home associated with safety, security and individualism may be. The critics state that the experience of identity present in Pratt’s story is:

a complicated working out of the relationship between home, identity, and community that calls into question the notion of a coherent, historically

continuous, stable identity and works to expose the political stakes concealed in such equations. (296)

Thus, an identity marked by the experience of home which seems to work within familiar, safe and protected boundaries may actually be based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance (297).

As Davies argues, although home is “often situated as the site of calm, security and comfort” (65), more problematic constructions of home call into question the notion of stable, continuous identities. George also states that the word home “immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered, self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection” (1). Homes, however, may have more connotations than those mentioned, as the critic mentions:

Homes are manifest on geographical, psychological and material levels. They are places that are recognized as such by those within and those without. They are places of violence and nurturing. A place that is flexible, that manifests itself in various forms and yet whose every reinvention seems to follow the basic pattern of inclusions/exclusions. Home is a place to escape to and a place to escape from. Its importance lies in the fact that it is not equally available to all. Home is the desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few. It is not a neutral place. (George 9)

Homes and the identities rooted in them, although often represented as fixed, rooted and stable, move along several axes and may have multiple and ambivalent significations. Home can imply security and comfort and/or repression and violence; thus, it is indeed not neutral.

Home and identity are further complicated when the subject moves across geographical spaces, as mentioned briefly in chapter 2. Friedman discusses identity and travel referring to the opposing dimensions of the concepts of routes and roots:

Traveling is a concept that depends upon the notion of stasis to be comprehensible. Routes are pathways between here and there, two points of rootedness. Identity often requires some form of displacement – literal or figurative – to come to consciousness. Leaving home brings into being the idea of “home,” the perception of its identity as distinct from elsewhere. (*Mappings* 151)

The implication of such displacement, either physical or psychic is the crossing of borders and contact with difference. Roots, then, imply an identity based on stable cores, whereas routes produce an identity based on travel, change and disruption (*Mappings* 153). According to Friedman, identities developed through routes involve “an experience of leaving roots, of moving beyond the boundaries of ‘home’ (however that is defined or problematized)” (*Mappings* 154) and may also result in the subject’s hybridity, as I discuss in chapter 1.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that home for diasporic and migrant subjects may have distinct meanings and be associated to different geographical locations. Identity based on routes may imply different modalities of hybridism, as pointed out previously, and the hybrid’s different relationships to homes and home-countries. While Davies states that home in diaspora can be seen as multiple locations (49), George argues that “[h]ome-country and home resonate differently from different locations for different subjects and often even for the same subject at different locations” (17).

Migrations and diaspora may generate in the subject, as Davies points out, “the desire for home” (113). Homesickness or the longing for home, however, may not exactly refer to one’s home country. One’s homeland at times may actually be a place to escape from and there may not be, then, nostalgia for home. Sometimes, then, it may be nowhere. As Friedman states:

The magical phrase – there’s no place like home – is also doubly cryptic.

“There’s no place like home” means home is the best, the ideal, everything that

elsewhere is not. Places elsewhere can never bring the same happiness as home. Alternatively inflected, the phrase turns into its opposite. “There’s no place like home” also means that no place, anywhere, is like home. Nowhere is there a place like home. Home is never never land of dreams and desire. Home is utopia – a no place, a nowhere, an imaginary space longer for, always already lost in the very formation of the idea of home. (“Bodies on the Move” 192)

The realization that home is nowhere to be found can be associated to its idealization as a place of protection and comfort. For some, the place where someone was born and raised is not a place of safety and nurture. On the contrary, such places are the antithesis of the idealization of home. Davies argues, for instance, that in Black women’s writing, home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement (21). As she states:

The family is sometimes situated as a site of oppression for women. The mystified notions of home and family are removed from their romantic, idealized moorings, to speak of pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in complex ways. (21)

Such negative connotation of home may indeed be found in Black women’s writing; however, it can also be found in other forms of writing.

There is a variety of women’s writings in which the authors portray women characters’ experience of oppression inside the home. Anzaldúa, for instance, discusses the idealized image of home, arguing that it is not necessarily a comfortable or safe place: “Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as a prey” (20). To exemplify Anzaldúa argument, Davies examines stories such as that portrayed in Ama Ata Aidoo’s play *Anowa* in which the women characters’ inhabitation of home is marked by gender oppression and female subordination (61). Friedman also refers to texts of women writers such as Jamila Hashimi, Shauna Singh

Baldwin, Buchi Emecheta, Edwidge Dandicat and Leila Abouela in which the women characters' turbulent migrations revolve around violence against the female body and spirit initially in their home country and afterwards in their host land. To Friedman, these texts:

suggest that the displacement of diaspora begins before the journey from home to elsewhere, begins indeed within the home and homeland and travels with the women as they face the difficulties of negotiating between new ways and old ways of living. ("The 'New Migration'" 23)

The narratives by women writers mentioned above present home for the women characters as a place where safety and comfort are almost completely absent. In several women writers' narratives, then, home is not always the idealization of safety and protection.

Like Davies, George and Friedman, Brah points out the different connotations of home as it can "simultaneously be a place of safety and terror" (207). The critic also makes a distinction between a homing desire and a desire for a homeland (180), as mentioned in the introduction, by arguing that not all diasporas nurture the desire of return, and that feeling at home is also different from declaring a place as home. According to her, feeling at home depends on different aspects, and that "[i]t is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhabit public proclamations of the place as home" (193).

Although home is often described as a place of alienation and even violence for women, and moving away from it is also a reason for suffering and dislocation. It is also because of migration and diaspora that there is often the possibility of change. It may also be because of one's distancing from home that the belief in so-called stable and fixed identities is allowed to change. As Friedman explains:

Travel, migration, exile – these are the itineraries of being as becoming, identity forming in the movements through space, identity in motion.

Fragments of each place remain as locations to which memories are attached,

out of which identities are formed. In each, the body as marked and read is catalyst for reflection. (“Bodies on the Move” 206)

The movement of travel, migration and exile makes possible the formation of less stable identities and such subjectivities may result in reflection, questioning and subversion.

The potential for change that moving away from home offers, especially in migration and diaspora, is discussed by several critics. hooks, for instance, in “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” states that oppositional political struggle can be put into practice once one moves out of one’s place and that “that movement requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex and class domination” (153). Like hooks, Kaplan defends a type of the feminist criticism which exhorts women to move. As she states:

We must leave home as it were, since our homes are often sites of racism, sexism, and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new. (195)

Leaving home and relocating in another place, then, may offer the woman subject the possibility of reconciliation with the past and the opportunity to make a fresh start. Davies also claims that in Black women writing there is often the possibility of agency as a consequence of movement. As the critic states, “As ‘elsewhere denotes movement,’ Black female subjectivity asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it re-asserts” (37). As I noted in chapter 2, it is possible to conclude that movement, then, may result in agency.

As individuals move across borders because of migration and diaspora, home becomes a more complex notion. hooks, for instance, defines homes as locations:

Indeed the very meaning of “home” changes with experience of decolonization, radicalization. At times home is nowhere. At times one knows

only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. (155)

Thus, as the critics above mention, the displacement from home and the experience in different locations can indeed turn into something positive for the subject. Leaving home through exile, diasporic or migratory movements open space for transformation in identities and subjectivities. Such transformations can lead, for instance, to women questioning gender roles and relations that they learned while at home in their home-countries.

It is always important to bear in mind, however, as I discuss in chapter 2, that such geographical and psychological displacements are not exempt from pain and suffering. Relocating to another space may not necessarily imply an easy process of belonging to the new home. The subject's new home may not be as open to accommodate the new inhabitants. George reminds us, for instance, that homes are built on selective inclusions:

The inclusions are grounded in a learned (or taught) sense of a kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender, or religion. Membership is maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control. (9)

Homes are then based on inclusions as their inhabitants need to share some characteristics, and they are also based on exclusions, since home is not open to those who do not share blood, race, ethnicity, class, gender and religion, for instance. George points to the pattern of exclusion as the most significant characteristic of the configuration of homes. She admits that "Homes are not about inclusions and wide open arms as much as they are about places carved out of closed doors, closed borders and screening apparatuses" (18).

Friedman also writes extensively about the advantages and disadvantages of searching for new homes. She states, for instance, that leaving home involves interaction with others

and such interactions foster the formation of hybrids. Hybridity is, however, according to her “often the product of unequal power relations, forced assimilation, and cultural erasure of differences imposed by a stronger power” (*Mappings* 156). That is why Friedman states that it is important to “avoid the all-too-easy idealization of hybridity as utopian panacea for the brutalities that difference can sometimes exhibit” (*Mappings* 156).

Belonging to a new geographical place, or to a new home, is not such an easy task. Besides having to deal with the balancing of inclusion and exclusion that homes offer, the subject also needs to know how to deal with the memories of the old home. As George states: “Belonging in any one place requires a judicious balancing of remembering and forgetting” (197). The homelessness felt by diasporic subjects and immigrants in literature, George argues, is “compensated for by an excessive use of the metaphor of luggage, both spiritual and material” (171). The subjects, then, when arriving at a new location, may travel light or arrive with heavy luggage. They may choose to forget and leave behind most of the memories and objects of their homeland or maintain them in their new location in order to cope with the feeling of homelessness. For some, actually, choosing one over the other is not such an easy task, one which often causes a feeling of in-betweenness. The difficult relationship that immigrants have with their cultural baggage is explained by George:

Immigrants have to come to terms with the spiritual, material and even linguistic luggage they carry or inherit. Do such belongings impede or facilitate belonging? Over and over again, in the literature of immigration and exile, there are scenes that (either lovingly, as a matter of fact or in despair) catalogue the varied luggage that the immigrant carry over. (173)

Luggage in the spiritual and material levels further complicates the subject’s position in his or her new locations. The balancing between remembering and forgetting may be crucial to explain how the diasporic subjects are willing to be transformed or resist transformation.

Given the attention that the several critics mentioned above give to the notion of home, it is possible to say that home is a rather significant concept as it is intrinsically connected to diasporic experiences. As Brah argues, “The problematic of ‘home’ and belonging may be integral to the diasporic condition, but how, when, and in what form questions surface, or how they are addressed, is specific to the history of a particular diaspora” (193). One of the ways through which it is possible to attain a greater understanding of the relationship between home and diaspora is through written works. Diana Brydon, for instance, points to the importance of texts in this process by stating that:

texts, both academic and fictional, employ aesthetic devices to engage these changing dimensions of how home means and the cultural work that it does.

Attention to the uses of home and the range of claims that are made in its name can help us to understand what is at stake in current rearrangements of the relations among citizenship, state and territory. Through their generic choices and creation of affective responses, all kinds of texts may also intervene to imagine new ways of being at home, to reinforce the demopolitical, or to stage their conflicts in ways that may enable more productive dialogue. (5)

Texts, therefore, literary or academic, facilitate the comprehension of home as it is disrupted by the processes of globalization. It is through written texts that home “becomes a more expansive notion than that imagined within terms set by the patriarchal household . . . or the nation-state” (4). Brydon points to the role of “women, indigenous people and immigrants” (3) in questioning such conventional values attached to home claiming that such principles are currently being contested within feminist, gay and lesbian critiques. Additionally, the “understandings of home are being revisited in light of new ways of living associated with increased labor mobility and migration” (5). In this sense, the examinations of the women characters Tara, Padma and Jasmine also offer an additional gendered perspective of home and diaspora as it is portrayed in Mukherjee’s novels.

In sum, as the critics mentioned broadly discuss, home is a very significant term in the examinations of literary works in postcolonial and diasporic times. Home is not a neutral place as it has a different significance for different subjects and also depends on location. The displacement from home can become a quite desirable movement as it can open space for transformation. It is once more important to keep in mind, however, that such displacements are not free from pain and feelings of exclusion and homelessness. Having to deal with the old home as well as with the new one is not always an easy task. Diasporic subjects often need to balance between maintaining and letting go in terms of their spiritual and material luggage from an old home. Moving away from home and settling in a different location, however, may actually bring some form of transformation in identity and indeed imply agency. Using the discussions provided by the critics that I discuss in this section, I now proceed to an examination of the women characters in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*. Jasmine's, Tara's and Padma's movements away from home and their settling in the United States along with their balancing of remembering and forgetting are all linked to their transgression of gender roles and relation in the novels.

3.2. Home for Jasmine

As argued in chapter 2, some critical works on Mukherjee's *Jasmine* assume that Jasmine's process of identity transformation is due only to the presence of male figures in her story (Aneja 77). I disagree with such a statement and believe that Jasmine's identity changes not because of the male characters she has relationships with, but as a consequence of her movement across different homes. Jasmine's experience of home ranges from her living in rural and urban areas in her home country to dwelling in the USA, in Florida, Flushing, New York, and Baden. Each location Jasmine inhabits is responsible for shaping her identity, but it is only in the United States that she is able to enact her greatest changes and transgressions.

Jasmine's first experience of home is with her family in Hasnapur. The description of the village, as seen in chapter 2, does not seem to conform to the idealization of home as a place of safety, comfort, protection and nurturing. Whereas Vimla's home is "a two-story brick house with real windows" (15), Jasmine's is made of mud. Hasnapur, as described by Jasmine, is "a village of flaky mud huts" (41) where comfort is scarcely available for its inhabitants. Poverty is widespread in the village. As Jasmine explains, there is no access to sanitation or electricity. Jasmine and her family members have to use bushes as toilets and finish all their domestic chores before it gets dark. The population does not have access to doctors or dentists either, as the protagonist states: "We had no dentist in Hasnapur. For a long time we had no doctor either, except for Vaccinations-sahib, who rode in and out of the village in a WHO jeep. My teeth look as though they've been through slugfests" (19). Moreover, the village is also chastised by the water famines in which at "the dried-out well docile women [turn] savage for the last muddy bucketful" (16). Jasmine's home in Hasnapur, then, is not a place of comfort because of its miserable configuration.

Jasmine's home in the village is not a secure or protected location for her either because she is a woman. She has to get together with other women in the village for latrine hour, for instance, because if she goes alone, she can run the risk of being raped by the men of her own village (55). Furthermore and most importantly the cultural configuration of her home traditions show that being a woman is not a blessing. As discussed in chapter 2, so that the protagonist can get married, her family has to pay her dowry. Because Jasmine was born a girl and is the fifth daughter, she is considered to be a curse given that she will contribute to the impoverishment of her family even more.

Throughout her life in Hasnapur, Jasmine witnesses the several forms that the oppression of women takes on. As she states, she sees: "All over [the] district, bad luck dogged dowryless wives, rebellious wives, barren wives. They fell into wells, they got run over by trains, they turned to death heating milk on kerosene stoves" (41). The protagonist's

prospects of marriage are not that positive since her grandmother arranges to marry her to a “widower with three children [who] needed a wife to look after them” (48). Even though Jasmine demonstrates she is a good student and learns languages easily, she knows there is not much hope for her in terms of education. As her mother concludes, God is cruel “to waste brains on a girl” (40). The protagonist then does not have reasons to feel secure or protected in her home since it is actually a site of oppression and constriction for her.

She escapes from her first home in Hasnapur when her father dies and she marries Prakash, a twenty-four-year-old Indian student for whom she actually cares. Although her wedding is “a no-dowry, no-guest Registry Office wedding in a town a 250-rupee taxi ride south of Hasnapur” (75), it takes Jasmine to a different form of home. Instead of living in a mud hut, Jasmine now lives in “two-room [rented] apartment in a three-story building across the street from technical college” (76). The protagonist, then, leaves the village to live in a city in the district of Jullundhar. In this apartment, she feels more secure than when she lived in Hasnapur. Although these are unhappy times for the city, since the extremist group Khalsa Lions terrorizes the population with bombings, they are happy times for Jasmine and Prakash (89). Although the city is not safe due to the attacks, she feels safe in her apartment. Even though her husband worries about keeping a VCR in the apartment and running the risk of attracting the attention of burglars, Jasmine states that “There were no secrets in our building. People kept their windows open and their televisions and stereos blaring” (88). Her new home seems then to be much more comfortable and secure compared to the one she comes from in Hasnapur.

Material comfort is not the only apparent improvement in her life as she moves to a new home. Living with a husband, whom she defines as a modern man (76), as a woman Jasmine is allowed more freedom and thus changes gender relations in a way that she did not know she could. It is precisely Prakash that chooses his wife’s new first name – Jasmine – as it “is customary in some orthodox Hindu communities” (George 147). He believes that

Hasnapur is feudal (77) and he claims that he opposes feudal practices in his relationship with his wife. He does not want Jasmine to call him by pronouns, as custom demands, nor does he want her to get pregnant right after the marriage, as traditional wives often do. Jasmine is not completely open to these transgressions and actually accepts them because Prakash asks her to do so. Discussing his attitudes, Parekh argues that he is the one who begins the process of retraining his wife by redefining gender roles within marriage. Although such destabilizations of gender roles are initiated by the husband, the critic argues that:

Jasmine's preconditioned voice is trained by Prakash to argue and fight if she does not agree with him – to *want* for herself, a lesson that Jasmine learns as she later empowers her voice with speech. Within the parameters of socially accepted gender roles and their defiance by her husband, she moves from the position of being told to that of telling. (111)

Parekh has a point in stressing that Jasmine learns to be more assertive because of her relationship with Prakash and it is actually at this point that the protagonist starts to experience some kind of change in her subjectivity. Thinking about her old and new selves, that is, the Jyoti she was in Hasnapur and the Jasmine she is at that moment, the protagonist states that she “shuttled between identities” (77). Even though Jasmine's transformations are not at first the result of her own choices, she feels happy in her home with her husband and it seems that there is no turning back. She mentions, for instance, that Prakash works six days a week for many hours and, as a consequence, he is often absent from home. She says “[she] missed him, but [she] didn't feel abandoned” (79). Living in her new home with her husband, Jasmine experiences some freedom and is even able slowly to be more assertive, being transgressive on her own. The protagonist takes part in the Ladies' Group raffle in her building and also makes some of her own money by accompanying her neighbor in “her door-to-door detergent selling routes” (79).

Jasmine is indeed much happier in her new home and in her husband's company. As she states, "My life before Prakash, the girl I had been, the village, were like a dream from another life" (91). She describes the couple enjoying their free-time in scooter rides and picnics (80). He tells her that he wants to 'be able to make [her] genuinely happy' (80), to start up a business with her and encourages Jasmine to continue studying English. Prakash is also responsible for presenting her with the possibility of moving again, now to the United States.

Although living in her new home with her husband provides the protagonist with a sense of comfort, security and love, Jasmine's happiness is interrupted as Prakash is murdered by Sukhwinder, one of the extremist Khalsa Lions. Because of his death, Jasmine has to return to her old home but in a much worse situation, for now she is a widow and has had the taste of her potential for growth with Prakash. As Jasmine explains her situation:

My sisters all were living in cities, with jealous drunken men who wouldn't part with a few rupees of bus or train fare. They were gone from my life.

Except for the visits of my brothers on the weekends, Mataji and I were alone in the widow's dark hut, little better than Mazbis and Untouchables. My young friends, like Vimla, never visited. Inexplicable, seemingly undeserved misfortune is contagious. (96)

The protagonist returns to her old home in which widows have to face very constricted life options. They could either commit sati or live in retreat, as Jasmine does by her mother's side. Having such a limited life and feeling dead among other widows (97), she claims she wants to commit *sati* in the USA – the place Prakash dreamed of starting a new life with her.

Leaving India to go to the United States is the greatest physical dislocation that Jasmine undergoes. It is also there that she experiences the most radical transformations in her identity and performs the most significant transgressions in gender relations. The protagonist, however, needs to change little by little as she has to negotiate between forgetting and

remembering. In order to move on, she needs to cope with the material and psychological luggage, mentioned by George, that she brings with her to the United States.

The moments which precede her rape by Half-Face are crucial to the story's turning point. Jasmine needs to make a decision about the luggage she is carrying. As Half-Face states, the protagonist comes with "such a heavy bag" (111). As he opens the suitcase:

He hefted the bag onto the bed and unsnapped the catches. Out came my sandalwood Ganpati. He propped it up against a picture on the dresser. He noticed my photo album and picked it up. Pictures of Prakash and of Pitaji, wrapped in an old sari. He flipped through them all, raising an eyebrow at pictures of me in a sari, leaning on the old Bajaj. Some clothes. At the bottom, the blue suit, unworn, still folded with its BABUR ALI/MASTER TAYLOR/JULLUNDHAR on the sleeve. He got a kick out of this, slipping on the jacket, only to find that he couldn't button it or move his arms. (114)

Jasmine brings with her not only objects, but memories of her home country, of her mother and of Prakash. She also brings the symbol for her mission, that is, her husband's suit that she is going to burn while committing *sati*: "I had planned it all so perfectly. To lay out the suit, to fill it with twigs and papers. To light it, then to lie upon it in the white cotton sari I had brought from home" (118). The protagonist's heavy luggage, however, somehow brings her trouble, since it helps her become a prey for Half-Face:

You made me carry this shit up here? You carried all this shit halfway around the world? You crazy or what? Travel light, sweetheart, always travel light. If you hadn't been carrying this bag, you wouldn't be in the deep shit now, you know that? Ever think of that? 'Course, I'm not objecting. (114)

Jasmine at that moment is not traveling light. She brings with her all the memories of home and tries to focus on her mission. After the rape, she considers suicide, but she concludes that she cannot let her personal dishonor disrupt her mission since "[t]here would be plenty of

time to die; [she] had not yet burned [her] husband's suit" (118). Afterwards, as she murders Half-Face, she changes her mind and burns her suitcase with all the objects and memories inside in an area outside the motel. At that moment, Jasmine abandons her mission of committing *sati* and realizes that her body is merely a shell "soon to be discarded" (121). As the protagonist sits by the fire, she reflects: "I buttoned up the jacket and sat by the fire. With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, traveling light" (121). As she decides to travel light both materially and metaphysically, she decides to let go of her mission and the old self she brought with her from India. She is, then, open to try other different identities and to live a new life in the United States.

Jasmine's first home there is a temporary one. She is rescued by Lillian Gordon, "a kind Quaker lady" (127) who takes her home. As Jasmine explains "[home] was a "wooden house on stilts on blackish swampy ground" (130). In this new home, the protagonist lives in the company of other three immigrant women from Guatemala. Gordon takes care of her in many different ways, by bringing a doctor to take care of her injuries, by providing her with clothes, and mainly by helping her assimilate into American culture, so that she can stand on her feet. The Quaker lady is concerned with making Jasmine look like somebody who fits her environment because, as an illegal immigrant, she cannot be caught by the immigration police. Once more, in this new home away from home, the protagonist feels some comfort, although temporary, and goes through yet another process of identity transformation. She is named Jazzy by Gordon. Jazzy is Jasmine's first attempt to assimilate and belong in the location she now inhabits: the United States.

Jasmine leaves Lillian Gordon's home in order to meet Prakash's mentor in New York. In the Vadheras' home in Flushing, the protagonist experiences a life much too similar to the one she had in Hasnapur. She describes Flushing as a ghetto of Indians, a safe place and "a cocoon to hatch out of" (142). They have everything they need near their apartment

because “[t]hey had Indian-food stores in the block, Punjabi newspapers and Hindi film magazines at the corner newsstand, and a movie every night without having to dress up for it” (146). Not only the Vadheras, but also other Indian families living in Flushing try to emulate their old homes in India in their new location. Jasmine describes the way the family spends time on Sundays:

We squeezed onto the sofa in the living room and watched videos of Sanjeev Kumar movies or of Amitabh. Or we went to visit with other Punjabi families in sparsely furnished, crowded apartments in the same building and watched their videos. Sundays were our days to eat too much and give in to nostalgia, to take the carom board out of the coat closet, to sit cross-legged on dhurries and matchmake marriages for adolescent cousins or younger siblings. (146-7)

The Indian families of Flushing seem to live in eternal nostalgia, that is, in constant homesickness for India. They try to preserve Indian living and traditions at home so much that Jasmine has the impression that “Flushing was a neighborhood in Jullundhar” (148).

The Vadheras also try to maintain old home’s traditional gender roles. So-called Professor Devinder Vadhera is married to a nineteen-year-old Indian girl called Nirmala. He works for many hours every day and, in a supposed display of liberalism, allows his wife to have a job. Nirmala works outside the home at a sari store in the neighborhood. They also have his parents living with them and they take Jasmine in and call her a cousin-sister (144). The protagonist describes Nirmala and Devinder’s marriage by saying that “[h]e was following an ancient prescription for marital accord: silence, order, authority. So was she: submission, beauty, innocence” (151). In the United States, therefore, traditional gender relations common in India are reproduced in the private sphere of home.

Living in Flushing makes Jasmine enact the role of widow much the way she did in Hasnapur. Because of her widowhood, her life options are very limited. As she explains: “Nirmala was nineteen: According to my forged passport, I was nineteen too, but I was a

widow. She was in the game, I was permanently on the sidelines” (143). As discussed in the first chapter, Jasmine is not allowed to remarry nor to have children. Her only option is to look after an older widower with children (147). She cannot even keep her widow status a private matter since she has to wear saris in patterns that were “for much older women, widows” (145).

The constricted life Jasmine has in Flushing does not make her happy. She does not want to go back to the home and the identity she experienced in Hasnapur. As she states:

I could not admit that I had accustomed myself to American clothes. American clothes disguised my widowhood. In a T-shirt and cords, I was taken for a student. In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like. To them, I was a widow who should show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude. If not, it appeared I was competing with Nirmala. (145)

Playing the role of the Indian widow, enacting the identity of the old home Jyoti leads Jasmine to depression:

I was spiraling into depression behind the fortress of Punjabiness. Some afternoons when Professorji was out working, and Nirmala was in her shop, and the old Vadheras were snoring through their siestas, I would find myself in the bathroom with the light off, head down on the cold, cracked rim of the sink, sobbing from unnamed, unfulfilled wants. In Flushing I felt immured. And imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future. I was a prisoner doing unreal time. (148)

She is then stuck in her old way of life, playing the limiting role of the Hindu widow and that makes her very unhappy because now she yearns for different experiences. The Vedheras' home, although described as safe and comfortable, does not provide Jasmine with the freedom she needs. The protection offered by that home actually turns out to be a prison for Jasmine.

The artificial safety of that home is actually responsible for her confinement and unhappiness. Her confinement, however, is also a consequence of the impossibility of leaving the ghetto since she is an illegal immigrant. At the same time the safety of Flushing is suffocating, she needs its protection because of her illegal status in the USA. As Jasmine states: “I didn’t feel safe going outdoors. If I had a green card, a job, a goal, *happiness* would appear out of the blue” (149).

When the protagonist finally gets her green card, she is ready to leave for her next home. With the help of Kate Gordon, Jasmine finds a job as a caregiver in New York. Leaving the Vadheras home, she chooses something else instead of security: “I had just escaped the tidiness, the neatness of my benefactors in Flushing. I’d just abandoned whatever chance at security I had in the world” (161). In fact, Jasmine abandons security but becomes more genuinely at home, in a world that is more comfortable for her.

It is in the apartment of the Hayeses on Claremont Avenue in New York that the protagonist claims she becomes an American (165). Working for Taylor and Wylie Hayes, Jasmine becomes the caregiver of Duff, their adopted girl, and feels quite at home. She describes her new home as not tidy or neat:

The apartment was stocked like a museum. Wylie and Taylor weren’t simple acquirers. Unlike the Vadheras, they bought useless things, silly things, ugly things – wooden ducks, two wooden Indians, a wood cutout of Carmen Miranda – and arranged them in clusters. (174)

The untidiness of the Hayeses’ apartment does not bother Jasmine. She is amazed at how people such as their employers and Kate Gordon can live in such messy homes. Actually Jasmine is indeed thrilled by this idea and states that “it spoke to [her] of possibility, that one could live like this and not be struck down” (160). The lack of organization in those people’s apartments is quite appealing to her and contrasts to “the order of Professorji’s apartment”

(160). Her rejection of tidiness and interest in disorderly homes may precisely reflect her state of mind and her choice of change and disruption over conformism and regularity.

When Jasmine moves in with the Hayeses, she expresses the willingness to let go of her past. Even though she is living just one hour from Flushing, she does not even give the Vadhervas the Hayeses telephone number. In her new home, the protagonist actually wants to be another person:

I wanted to become the person [the Hayeses] thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful. In Flushing, I had lived defensively in the midst of documented rectitude. I did not want to live legally if it also meant living like a refugee. (171)

Jasmine then wants to let go of her spiritual luggage and old self which defined her as a widow, an illegal immigrant, a rape victim and so on. Although she is named Jase by Taylor, she claims she is the one who wants to change. She believes that she needs to change because “[to] bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward” (186). The protagonist is willing to once and for all let go of her old self: “Jyoti was now a sati-goddess; she had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a boarded-up motel in Florida. Jasmine lived for the future, for Vijn & Wife. Jase went to movies and lived for today” (176). Thus, she seems to be ready to assume a new identity: “On Claremont Avenue, in the Hayeses’ big, clean, brightly lit apartment, I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase” (186).

Although Jasmine is willing to take in everything new (174) and is excited about that, it takes some time to get used to the differences in culture and gender relations. At first, she cannot understand for instance, how the girls who lived across the street at the dorms could walk around naked in their apartments and thought that “there was no concept of shame in [American] society” (171). Moreover, as mentioned in chapter 1, she is not quite comfortable

with the idea that the family's daughter is an adopted child. As time goes by, however, Jasmine feels more and more at home in the family, and states: "Duff was my child; Taylor and Wylie were my parents, my teachers, my family" (165).

Jasmine's protagonist actually falls in love with Taylor the moment she meets him, but while he is married to Wylie she never expresses her love for him. As Wylie falls out of love with her husband, and he falls in love with his child's caregiver, Jasmine finally has the chance to express her feelings for him. Therefore, she transgresses the gender roles she learns at home for she allows herself to have a love relationship even though she is not supposed to because of Indian customs related to widowhood.

Even though Jasmine's family is not the same way it was when Wylie was there, she actually feels happy with the family she has with Duff and Taylor:

Though Taylor's grin had stiffened into a pained and patient smile, he didn't seem bitter about the reduced size of the family. The truth is, we were happy, happier than when Wylie'd been around filling up the apartment with her restlessness and unspoken guilt. Now the rooms seemed warmed by a mute intimacy. My life had a new fullness and chargedness to it. (184)

From Jasmine's narrative it is possible to affirm that her life in the apartment on Claremont Avenue is much better than her life in most of the other locations that she has inhabited so far. As she confesses: "On Claremont Avenue I came closest to the headiness, dizziness, porousness of my days with Prakash" (211). Her happiness, however, is over when she believes that she is being followed by the murderer of her husband. The protagonist, then, in order to protect Taylor and Duff from her violent past, flees to Iowa in search of another home.

In Baden, Iowa, Jasmine continues her process of destabilization of gender roles and identity transformation. She is now Jane, the unofficial wife of a fifty-year-old wheel-chaired banker named Bud and the mother of her adopted Vietnamese son, Du. In Baden, she has a

fixed place to live and to call her own: “The Ripplemeyer land: Bud’s and mine and Du’s” (7), that is, she has the material means to be rooted. Although she states that she sometimes thinks that all of the Ripplemeyers, “even the new ones, belong” (13) she actually seems to be somehow out of place in that location.

She describes the low and squat house she lives in with Bud and Du as “an ugly, comfortable house” (223). Although she seems to be comfortable living there, she actually feels lonely and not safe. At first, when Jasmine starts her relationship with Bud, her new home seems to be full of prospects. As he is shot and, as a consequence, confined to a wheelchair, Jasmine does not feel the same excitement about home anymore. She wonders what would have happened if Bud did not get shot:

Had things worked out differently – no Harlan Kroener, no droughts – Du would have had the father of any boy’s dream, a funny, generous, impulsive father, and American father from the heartland like the American lover I had for only a year. I would have had a husband, a place to call home. (224)

Even though she knows that Bud is a good man and, as Du says “[h]e gives [them] a good home” (209), the protagonist is not satisfied with the life she has there. After the shooting, she compares her life in Baden’s home, her current lack of security, with the way she used to feel in New York: “I used to feel so secure, being alone in the farm with Bud, in the winter; now I feel deserted, except for Du, who rarely talks. New York wasn’t like this. Even with the men in stores and on the streets, I felt safe and never alone” (207). Later on, as her adopted son is leaving Baden, Jasmine admits that not even Bud’s company could make her feel not alone. She believes she will always feel she is by herself there. As she says: “I will be lonely here, with Bud or without him” (223).

Her unhappiness may be associated with the awareness of her feelings for Bud, as pointed out in chapter 1. She never uses the word love to describe what she feels for him. Instead, she says: “Duty and prudence count. Bud has kept me out of trouble. I don’t want

trouble” (211). Even though he may indeed keep her away from trouble and she thinks she should not dare to want more than that, Jasmine is unhappy and dissatisfied. Furthermore, the protagonist also feels guilty about the event that confined Bud to his wheel-chair. She believes that she could have somehow prevented Bud from being shot. Du and Bud’s ex-wife Karen, she says, would have known what to do. Instead, she thinks she has actually “delivered him to his crippler” (192). Even though Jasmine does not abandon Bud after the incident and continues to take care of him, she is bothered by his condition. Even though “[i]t’s Bud who tries to make [her] happy now,” she does not feel good and actually misses being with Taylor.

If Jasmine’s feelings for Bud are related to affection, Bud’s feelings for her do not seem to be genuinely related to love, as I mention briefly in chapter 1. The protagonist’s foreignness is at the same time a repelling and attractive factor for him. On the one hand, Bud does not feel comfortable about Jasmine’s past. As she explains, “Bud’s not like Taylor – he’s never asked me about India; it scares him” (12). According to Jasmine, he is indeed unlike Taylor, since, “Taylor didn’t want to change me. He didn’t want to sanitize the foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate didn’t scare him” (185). The typical American name he gives her, Jane, and his Tarzan inspired joke “Me Bud, you Jane” seem to show both his inevitable recognition of Jasmine as “the other” and an attempt to make her foreignness easier to deal with. He admits that when his mother called him asking him to find a job for an Indian woman she met, he: “pictured a stick-legged, potbellied, veiled dark woman like the ones he’s seen fleeing wars, floods and famines on television” (199). Instead of the stereotype he had imagined, Bud sees a pretty and exotic young woman to whom he is immediately attracted:

I saw you walk in and I felt my life was just opening to me. Like a door had just been opened. There you were in my bank, and I couldn’t believe it. It felt as if I was a child again, back in the Saturday-afternoon movies. You were glamour, something unattainable. And you were standing there with my mother. (199)

His interest in Jasmine seems to be based on his idealization of her so-called exotic Eastern beauty. Jasmine is aware of the nature of his feelings for her. As she states: “Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am” (200). It is her foreignness that attracts Bud to her and her relationship with him makes her aware that she does not really belong in Baden.

Jasmine does not experience a sense of belonging in Baden. Even though it is in that place she has the freedom to transgress gender roles as a widow, wife and mother, her shifting identity does not guarantee that she will belong to that place. As she states: “In Baden, I am Jane. Almost” (26). Although people try to digest Jasmine’s foreignness, they have trouble doing so:

In Baden, the farmers are afraid to suggest I’m different. They’ve seen the aerograms I receive, the strangest lettering I can decipher. To them, alien knowledge means intelligence. They want to make me familiar. In a pinch, they’ll admit that I might look a little different, that I’m a “dark-haired girl” in a naturally blond country. I have a “darkish complexion” (in India, I’m “wheatish”), as though I might be Greek from one grandparent. I’m from a generic place, “over there,” which might be Ireland, France, or Italy. (33)

Even though they try to treat her as if she belonged there, their preoccupation implies an artificial way of dealing with cultural difference. Jasmine is not naturally accepted, she is “the other”, part of the visible minority that Ty defines, and it takes people some effort to comprehend her difference. When Jasmine visits a fund raiser fair she observes that all the dolls to be sold have yellow hair. The image of the toys makes her declare: “I felt too exotic, too alien” (202).

The way Jasmine is treated in the USA, the way people cannot help seeing her as “the other” triggers again her critical view of America. She is disgusted, for instance, by how

people on television shows blame immigrants for their financial misfortunes (27). Jasmine is also shocked when Du's teacher, Mr. Skola, tries to use Vietnamese to communicate with him. The teacher shows complete lack of respect for the boy since he ignores the fact that his attitude of speaking in Vietnamese might bring back undesirable memories for Du. The protagonist then expresses her anger: "This country has so many ways of humiliating, of disappointing" (29). She sees, as pointed out by George (18), that turning America into one's home is complicated, since that home is not always open to newcomers.

As Jasmine realizes she is not happy living at home with Bud and that she actually misses Taylor and Duff, she decides to leave Baden behind and move with them to California. Jasmine acts in a way that reminds the reader of how she behaved when she left the motel in Florida and the Vadheras' home in Flushing. She once again is willing to abandon the identity she has built for herself in that place and which was linked to that home and her feelings toward it. She does not want to pack or to take that luggage with her. Jasmine says she already stops thinking of herself as Jane the moment she accepts leaving with Taylor and Duff (240). The protagonist, once more, heads for a new home and a new identity, traveling light. The reader, however, does not know what will become of her or how many more subjectivities she may create since the novel has an open ending.

3.3. Home for Tara

Like Jasmine, Tara experiences a distinct sense of home in different locations. As a consequence of her relocation, her identity is transformed through the displacement from various homes. Tara's first home is located in India and it is a place where she learns the gender roles she is supposed to play in life. Tara's departure from India places her at another home, the gated community of Atherton, California, marked by the reproduction of gender relations learned in her home-country. The protagonist, then, rebels, and settles in her Upper Haight house in California believing that she has finally found the place where she belongs.

There, she is confronted with a family scandal, a hidden history which she has no knowledge of because she has always believed that her Indian home was transparent and unequivocal. Her life is once more turned upside down and she eventually decides to search for her roots, returning to India and to her parents. Her departure from home in Calcutta is crucial for her transgressive attitudes in relation to the gender roles she learns about in India. The rootless Tara undergoes transformations in her subjectivity as she moves to different homes.

Tara's first home can be said to be, as George defines it, "a private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered, self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection" (1). As discussed in chapter 2, she is born into a Bengali Brahmin family in the city of Calcutta, and benefits from the financial comfort and the social status associated with her caste and class. The protagonist describes her family house in Calcutta as:

Our nineteenth-century Raj-style fortress of a home on Ballygunge Park Road was set behind a wall topped with glass shards, and the long yard with its landscaped garden was the scene of fabulous parties during the winter "social season." (34)

Living in a luxurious house which looks like a fortress, Tara's sense of self is overdetermined by her gender, class, caste, religion and education. She is also overprotected because of the form of gender roles she is supposed to play in that society. As a girl, she spends her life being prepared to leave her father's home in order to enter her husband's. Her preparation includes a prestigious education, the development of social skills and strategic and careful display of her beauty and poise. Tara is one of the desirable daughters of Motilal Bhattacharjee, a girl to be wooed by the most successful men, to be coveted in the marriage market. Her home, then, provides her with security and comfort, at the same time that it serves as a place of the enforcement of the gender roles valued in her culture and social class.

Unaware of the interplay of inclusions and exclusions, as pointed out by George (8), involved in the very constitution of her home, Tara seems to live in a bubble. She states, for

instance, that: “The narrow world of the house city felt as secure to me as it must have to Tara Lata in Mishtigunj” (24). She does not question the education she received, both familial and formal, and actually expresses willingness to play the roles she is supposed to. She enjoys going to convent schools and is able to get all the diplomas and certificates that would certify her as a bride-to-be full of prospects. She also accepts the marriage her father arranges for her. As Tara’s father finds her a groom who possesses “a confident smile that promised substantial earnings” (7), she does not oppose. His smile actually earns her “not unenthusiastic acceptance of him as husband” (7). At this point, Tara seems to conform to the gender roles and relations she learns in her home-country and in the private sphere of her family home.

The comfort and security that this home provides her also makes her unaware of the familial conflicts involving her eldest sister. Comparing the way American family dynamics usually work in the USA to the way her family operates in India, Tara states:

In India, we didn’t have outside influences like the media, or lax schooling, or cars and dating and drugs. We didn’t know family breakdown. Our families existed inside an impenetrable bubble. Anyone entering or exiting was carefully monitored. (45)

As Tara believes in the existence of such stability inside the family throughout most of her life, she is shocked by the revelations about her sister. If the story about Chris Dey, as I explain in chapter 1, is true, the protagonist now understands that the maintenance of her family status within that home was based on the exclusions of her sister’s aspirations and life choices. As discussed previously, Tara’s suspicions are never confirmed by her sister, but the so-called family scandal helps her question even more the values learned in her old home.

The protagonist gets married, leaves India and moves to the United States to accompany her husband. She lives now in Atherton, a gated community where the security and comfort existent in her old home in India are to be reproduced. She explains that the families in Atherton “worked their way to the big houses behind iron gates and posted

guards” (83) in order to protect themselves from the marginality rooted in the area and to isolate themselves from American influences. As a good provider, by living in a secure community like Atherton, Bish believes he can guarantee comfort and security to his family.

In Atherton, however, not only is the comfort and security of Tara’s life in India emulated, but also the gender relations practiced in her old home are reproduced. She states that her husband wants her to “look like a princess and live like a queen” (78). At first, she admits that her life in Atherton is all she has dreamed of. Accompanying Bish to social gatherings at students’ pubs and surrounded by brilliant academicians, Tara believes she is living “the liberating promise of marriage and travel and the wider world” (85). Tara describes herself at that time as “a teenager trained to be adoring, sitting in a California bar with the most brilliant boys in the world, listening to ideas that would shape the twenty-first century” (85). As time goes by, however, she feels that this form of life is not fulfilling for her.

Having a husband like Bish, a successful businessman and excellent provider, Tara is not allowed to work or to engage in any type of activity that might imply the inability of her husband to provide for his family (85). Although he allows his wife to commit small transgressions in gender roles, such as allowing her to call him by his first name and to work at the library of the university where he studies, she feels that this is not enough for her. At the same time, according to her, Bish gradually becomes more of a traditional Indian husband and father, as I point out in chapter 1. She states that the promise of life as an American wife is not being fulfilled (85) and that she wants something more from her life. As a result, the protagonist decides to leave the gated community. As she tells her friends: “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 Atherton” (28).

Tara leaves her father’s home in Calcutta simply to inhabit her husband’s home in Atherton. Once more, her choices in life are restricted because of the patriarchal gender

relations she is forced to accept in both India and the USA. After crossing the dark waters to California, playing those roles do not provide her with happiness and that is why she breaks away from the home she has with Bish and acts out her greatest subversion: she asks for a divorce.

After that, Tara leaves Atherton to live in a place where she seems to be more at home. She lives now in a part of San Francisco called Upper Haight with her son Rabi and her Hungarian lover Andy. As if to compensate for the loss of security provided by the gated community, Tara's own place is a retrofitted house. She mentions that when the renovations are ready: "I felt for the first time in my life totally at home, unwilling to leave" (26). The protagonist explains her feeling of belonging by mentioning the community she lives in: "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 dogs, strolling with boyfriends, none of us with apparent sources of income" (26). In a neighborhood where so many people are ethnically ambiguous like her, Tara finally feels comfortably invisible:

The rhetoric of modern San Francisco makes me invisible. I am not "Asian," which is reserved for what outdated textbooks used to be called "Oriental." I am all things. When the little kids climb on my lap to be read to, or just listened to, I don't think they see me as anything different from their parents, the school nurse, or their teachers. . . I thrive on this invisibility. It frees me to make myself over, by the hour. (81)

Here, the invisibility that she feels and celebrates in Upper Haight is understood as the opposite of Ty's invisibility of the Asian minorities, as I discuss in chapter 2. For Tara, to be invisible is something positive and it contrasts exactly with the overdetermined sense of self associated with India that she mentions in other passages in the novel. Dwelling in this new home, the protagonist has the chance to believe she can transform her identity into something

different from what she is trained to be. This alteration enables her to destabilize the gender relations that are not suitable for her anymore.

But is Tara actually able to benefit from her so-called invisibility? Moments after she leaves the school where she does voluntary work, she observes the chaos and misery of the street people in Haight Street, the “small army of America’s untouchables”(83) and declares: “I am not the only Indian in the block. All the same, I stand out, I’m convinced. I don’t belong here, despite my political leanings; worse, I don’t want to belong” (82). In another passage, Tara is asked to attempt communication with an Indian woman who might be going through domestic abuse. The protagonist is the one chosen to talk to the woman because people assume, based on their physical traits, that they speak the same dialect. As Tara confesses: “Nafisa’s mother and I don’t speak the same dialect. We don’t even speak the same language. I am tired of explaining India to Americans. I am sick of feeling an alien” (91). Furthermore, there is another passage in which she becomes aware of the impossibility of becoming invisible or making herself over. When Tara asks for the detective’s help in order to solve the mystery which revolves around Chris Dey, she realizes she is not really invisible. As she explains the situation and her divorce to him, he says:

Under California law five years is a long time, people move on with their lives. But in the eye of Indians you’ll always be linked. If Mrs. Bishwapriya Chatterjee comes to me with a problem, I have to ask myself, whose problem is it, really? (149)

Thus, Tara is forever linked, even if she is miles away from India and divorced for years, to her old home gender relations and to the figure of her ex-husband. Even though she faces difficulties in making herself over and becoming invisible, it is mainly on Haight Street that she feels most at home in the United States and where she disrupts most of the gender roles she is supposed to conform to.

After her diasporic experience, Tara seems to feel much more at home in the United States than in India. There is a place, however, where she seems not to feel at home. It is in her sister's house and social milieu. Padma's home in New York is dealt with later in this chapter; however, it is possible to say that the artificiality of the Indianness maintained in her eldest sister's home makes Tara feel a foreigner within her own culture. Even though this culture is a simulation of the one practiced in India.

At Padma's, Tara misses her own home in San Francisco. Her sister's cold and dark house makes the protagonist miss her own place. As she says, "Oh, how I missed my bed and all its pillows and comforter, my son, my funky house, the clutter of half-read books, the small bedside television, the open vista across the park to the lighted spires of USF" (192). It is not only the physical space of Padma's house that causes Tara to feel uncomfortable. Playing the role of the traditional Indian sister and displaying it at her sister's parties also makes the protagonist feel she does not belong there. At first, Padma's preoccupation with taking care of her sister's skin, hair, nails and style pleases Tara, as it triggers some of her childhood memories of her mother and sisters (195). She knows, however, that she is playing a role: "She was playing Didi, and I was playing chhoto bon, the youngest sister, bowing my head in submission" (194). At the same time that Tara enjoys playing this role in a way, she feels exhausted for having to move around New York in order to get her beauty treatment while listening to the gossip about people her sister knows in the city:

Wrapped in a sari for the first time in years, I was taking twice the number of steps and still falling behind my sister. I was jostled, I heard curses, and I felt hostile eyes assessing me. In a city of foreigners, I was feeling the most alien. A commute like this, twice a day, would press the life out of me. If nothing else came of this trip, at least I would know I belonged in California. (204)

Once more, Tara feels she does not belong. Wearing a sari seems to take her back to her old self, that elitist Calcutta girl whose main function was to socialize and display her beauty at

social gatherings. At this point, the protagonist tends to believe she belongs in California rather than in that old town pattern. She tries to conciliate her conflicting identities, saying: “I felt as though I were lost inside a Salman Rushdie novel, a once-firm identity smashed by hammer blows, melted down and reemerging as something wondrous, or grotesque” (205). Making a reference to Rushdie’s writings, Tara points out the writer’s playful style when it comes to identity. In the portrayal of his characters, the author usually stresses the existence of many selves within the self in order to supposedly shape a different sense of identity.

Tara, then, does not seem to belong to an Indian context anymore, as she feels more at home (although not completely comfortable) living in her own house in San Francisco. As she has her house destroyed in the bombing at the end of the novel, she goes back home to India. Still hurt and traumatized by the bombing which also causes Bish serious injuries, it is in her sister’s and parent’s company that she looks for protection, comfort and healing. While in India, the rootless Tara decides to engage in an activity that she defines as the “*most American of impulses, or compulsions, a ‘roots search’*” (17).

Tara’s root search is related to her interest in finding out more about the historical figure of Tara Lata Gangooly since she is named after her and feels a profound connection to her. Tara Lata is the youngest daughter of Jai Krishna Gangooly, a middle-class Hindu doctor whose ninth wife is somehow connected to Tara’s mother. As explained in chapter 2, the legendary female figure is married to a tree in the jungle and is taken back home by her father. This home that, even after so many years, is described by people of Mishtigunj as a palace-house (234), is a place in which The Tree Bride lives but never leaves. Tara Lata is then as rooted as the tree she marries and her attitudes in that home are seen as a symbol of Indian nationalism. During the struggle for the India’s independence, Tara Lata opens her house to accommodate the injured freedom fighters as well as injured civilians. She keeps records of the atrocities committed against the population and pays special attention to the women who were beaten and raped by British soldiers (326). The only time she leaves her home in

Mishtigunj is when she is forced by colonial authorities. As she is in their power, she never comes back and is declared dead in the 1940s. The history of Tara Lata is seen by people as an example, the history of a saint. She is considered to be a symbol of Indian nationalism, a figure that contributed to India's independence. Her figure is a source of admiration and reflection for the modern Tara.

Although these two Indian women share a name, there are enormous differences between them. On the one hand, Tara Lata, rooted as a tree, even though she is enclosed in the private sphere of her home, manages to have an active voice in the public life of her country and fights against the British imperialistic oppression. On the other hand, the rootless Tara is a diasporic woman whose small conquests are confined solely to the private sphere. The Tree Bride's home is very well defined and she is faithful to it throughout her life. She also never disappoints her father and plays the gender roles she is supposed to even though she is only symbolically married to a tree. She lives according to tradition and the gender roles prescribed for her, never disappointing her family. The modern Tara, however, leaves her home and transgresses the gender roles as she learned them in her class and caste. In this sense, she is not faithful to the symbolic notion of home. On the contrary, she suffers a displacement from home and chooses not to follow some of the roles that this social space expects from her. Even before knowing the Tree Bride's ending, Tara expresses deep admiration for her story:

After the night of her marriage, Tara Lata returned to Mishtigunj and, at least by legend, never left her father's house. Unburdened by a time-consuming, emotion-draining marriage and children, never having to please a soul, she grew up and grew old in a single house in an impoverished village in the poorest place on earth, and in that house, the world came to her. She lived there seventy years and gradually changed the world. (17)

The protagonist knows how different she is from her namesake, and she supposes she will probably “grow old, but [she] know[s] [she] will never change the world” (18).

At the same time that the rootless Tara leaves home, she is never sure which place she should call home. Although the protagonist’s mother defines home as “where you belong” (314), such definition of home does not match Tara’s experience. She does not know exactly where she belongs and feels she is always in-between. She has transgressed too much to simply go back to India and she is too critical to simply assimilate into American culture. Tara tries to balance between her homes trying to acquire some sense of belonging but to no avail.

3.4. Home for Padma

Padma has inhabited the same places as her youngest sister. In spite of her short stay in Switzerland and London and the lack of information about her life in these locations, Padma has made her home in the same geographical places as Tara. Both were born in India and raised in Calcutta, and after their diasporic experience, they settle in the United States. Although there are similarities between the locations the sisters inhabited, the way Padma seems to deal with and define home is quite different from her sister’s.

In India, Padma has the same home as her sisters. She also lives in the fortress-like house of Calcutta and enjoys the privileges of being part of the elite of Bengali Brahmins. She learns in that home that she is the eldest desirable daughter of Motilal Bhattacharjee and that she is supposed to play the gender roles prescribed for her family’s caste, class and religion. In the same way as Tara, and as discussed in chapter 2, she receives a formal education in convent schools so that she can be seen as an educated bride-to-be in the marriage market. In sum, Padma inhabits a patriarchal household in which she should conform to the traditional gender roles of her culture. She is raised and protected in her father’s home so that she can properly enter her husband’s.

In spite of the comfort and security that the home in Calcutta guarantees Padma, she does not seem to be completely happy about it. As discussed in the previous chapter, young Padma wanted to pursue an acting career, but was prohibited by her father because he worried about her reputation and feared that her marriage prospects could be ruined because of the exposition she would suffer. The so-called security and comfort of the home her father provides Padma turns into a prison for her. Her life choices are restricted by the norms of that patriarchal household and her answer to that is rebellion.

From Tara's narrative, it is possible to see that Padma expresses the will to commit some transgressions in terms of gender roles while she was living at home with her family. Based on her sister's memories, one of Padma's disruptions was expressed in her interest in marrying a boy whose religion and origin do not match her family's. As a means of moving Padma away from that danger, her parents send her to a finishing school in Switzerland. From there, she moves to London and then to New York and never really returns to India. The so-called comfort and security of Padma's private sphere, home and home-country do not guarantee her the freedom of choice she wants for her life and that is why she moves away from it.

Padma, however, seems to distance herself from home in a peculiar way. At the same time she physically and psychologically displaces herself from home, she tries to reproduce home in the location she currently inhabits. It is in the passage that Tara describes her visit to her sister in New York and the way she lives there that the reader finds out that Padma is stuck to a version of India she builds for Americans to consume.

Her house in New York is not described as comfortable or cozy. On the contrary, in the eyes of Tara, Padma's house is cold and does not seem to be truly inhabited. As the novel's protagonist describes it:

There was no evidence that anyone actually used the living room; no television, no books, no papers or magazines strewn on the tables. The house

was kept cold and dark, uncluttered as a crypt, with halls sealed off and the curtains drawn. Nothing out of place, but nothing to get misplaced either. I could not imagine their home ever having been used for parties or dinners.

(182)

Her sister's house then does not seem to be a home. It does not seem to be inhabited, as Tara explains, and its tidiness, unlike the Hayeses, points to some form of artificiality of that home.

The appearance of Padma's house seems to match the relationship she has with her husband. When Tara arrives at their house to visit her sister, Mehta does not care about entertaining Tara while she waits for her sister's arrival. Instead, he only reappears the moment his wife arrives and pays her compliments, which sound insincere in Tara's view (183). In other passages of the novel, Padma's sisters wonder why she, a girl who seemed to be so passionate towards life, could have married an unenthusiastic man such as Harish. Their relationship, as observed by Tara during her stay, does not seem to be based on love and companionship. Both husband and wife seem to be rather independent from each other.

Artificiality is a key word to describe Padma's home, marriage and also her overall attitudes in the novel. Tara has trouble understanding how her sister is able to isolate herself from American influences and to keep such a traditional and artificial presentation of Indianness in spite of her displacement from her homeland. At the same time, she sees the contradictions in her sister's personality. As she observes: "In public, she was calm and gracious, her voice and manner soothing and engaged. In private, nothing outside her immediate interest penetrated, and she seethed with bitterness" (213). It is mainly in the way Padma deals with her ethnicity away from home, however, that most intrigues Tara.

In her harsh criticism of *Jasmine*, Ray claims that the novel's protagonist is portrayed as an Indian woman who exoticizes herself so that she can function effectively within the dominating nationalist ideology of her host country. She states: "Jasmine acquires agency by participating in the objectification of the 'other' that is the hallmark of the epistemology of

individualism” (194). The protagonist is responsible for othering herself as an Indian woman in such a way that she is “offered to the American palate as a desirable exotic product for consumption” (194). Although I disagree with Ray’s criticism of *Jasmine*, as I argue in the previous chapters, I believe that her analysis of one of Mukherjee’s women characters can actually be applied to Padma’s portrayal. In *Desirable Daughters*, however, Padma’s depiction seems to be a criticism of that type of exoticism that Ray talks about.

Although Padma lives away from India for several years, she somehow manages to reproduce the stereotypical exoticism of her ethnicity in New York. Tara, on the other hand, feels she is quite different from her sister:

For some reason, perhaps the six years’ difference in our ages and the invisible fault line that ran between us, I loved my family and culture but had walked away from the struggle to preserve them. In San Francisco, I barely knew any Indians. But Didi, whose every utterance was couched in hatred for those times and for the family and for the city, was trying to lead a traditional Bengali life in New Jersey. (189)

Tara observes an apparent contradiction in her sister’s attitude. As her father does not allow his eldest daughter to have a career, Padma seems to be quite bitter about that fact and still cannot forgive her parents. At the same time that she affirms that she is upset about the confinement and restriction involved in her old home life, she tries to reproduce in New York the very life that she often criticizes. While Tara has no interest in preserving the culture and family life she once experienced in India because she is aware of the displacements she suffers in that home, Padma apparently does the opposite. The youngest sister breaks away from the gated community and does not try to live only among Indians. The eldest, on the other, “socialize[s] almost exclusively with Indians” (98).

Not only do her attitudes but also her physical appearance point to her preoccupation in emulating India in the United States. Padma does not wear Western clothes. She preserves

the tradition of women of her class in having the preoccupation of taking proper care of her beauty as well as always wearing a sari and jewelry. Padma apparently reproduces the gender and ethnic roles she learned in India.

Padma's occupation also points to her willingness to present oneself as the exotic other to Americans. She plays the role of the traditional Bengali woman by performing that role on television shows, at local schools, on community shows, at parties and political events. Although her activities are never well defined, as discussed in chapter 2, she can be said to be a multicultural performance artist (99). When Tara visits her in New York, the novel's protagonist remembers: "When I was nine, [Padma] confided a career ambition to be, somehow, a performer, to act or to dance. She was beautiful enough, and perhaps even talented enough" (30). Padma's precise career as a performer reminds the reader of the notion of performance or performativity as discussed in feminist and postcolonial studies.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler refers to the notion of performativity to explain the construction of gender. She claims that gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (44). Such notion is, therefore, a performative process that results in the subject displaying the effect of a specific gender, that is, presenting the physical and cultural characteristic of male/female, masculine/feminine or gay/straight and so on (Salih 45). Sara Salih further explains this notion by saying that "gender is not something one *is*, it is something one *does*, and act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'", that is, a performance (69). Although the performative connotation of gender, as argued by Butler, applies to all the women characters in both *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* as all of them present cultural and physical characteristics that grant them the appearance and role of women, in order to explain Padma's performance of ethnicity, another theoretical conceptualization is necessary.

The character's representation of an exaggerated Indianness in the United States may be seen not only as a performance of gender, but actually as one of ethnicity. In this sense, the discussions on performativity provided by Bhabha are helpful as to explain Padma's attitudes. The critic refers to contemporary times explaining that "We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (1). The historical moment he describes is marked by in-between spaces that make room for elaborating strategies of selfhood that "initiate new signs of identity" (1). In this context, it is necessary "to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (1). It is precisely in the articulation of cultural difference, mostly related to the production of hybridity, that Bhabha refers to the role of performativity. As he claims, "Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively" (2). The critic's emphasis on the performative aspect of the articulation of cultural difference dismantles the idea of any originary identity or that there are pre-given ethnic or cultural traits since it reveals these terms' constructed quality.

Padma's effort to embody the traditional Brahmin woman living in the USA is, thus, not the result of pre-given ethnic traits. She actually does something to create an effect of pure ethnicity, which is nothing more than make believe. That is why Tara claims that her sister gives the impression that she possesses "a firm identity resisting all change, at least from a distance, on a brief inspection" but that actually, under scrutiny, her identity is "fractured, like cracks under old glaze" (205). As she says:

Up close, I didn't recognize her. I didn't know who she was. I was following the cracks, fascinated by their complexity, not the simple, shining face.

"Puffles and Piffles," Andy once called them, but I never thought that previously unidentified fault lines could refer to my sister, or to me. (205)

The contradictions in Padma's attitudes as well as her evasive answers to Tara's questions make Tara quite upset and critical about her sister. As Tara rehearses the confrontation with her sister by asking questions about Chris Dey, she plans to tell Padma about the significance for them of that old home:

that world is gone, we're here, we have to stop pretending, we have to stop living in a place that's changed on us while we've been away. I don't want to be a perfectly preserved bug in amber, Didi. I can't deal with modern India, it's changed too much and too fast, and I don't want to live in a half-India kept on life-support. You think I'm ridiculous, or somehow a disgrace to Indian womankind, a divorcée walking around in my American clothes? It's okay for the Indy Vermas and the girls who were born here and don't know any better, but not for us, the last flowering of Calcutta's golden past? Give me a break!

(193)

Tara wants to make her sister accept that the old home way of life is gone and now that they are away from home, they should stop being exaggeratedly attached to the past. That conversation, however, never takes place and although Tara actually inquires about Chris Dey, Padma never admits to having an affair or a baby with Ronald Dey. Furthermore, Padma seems to stick to her alienating choices in life, her never-ending performance and her firm belief in a supposedly stable Indian identity.

Padma's attitude of reproducing Indian ethnicity and traditional gender roles is indeed just a performance or pretence. As discussed in chapter 1, like her sister and Jasmine, she also enacts several disruptions in gender relations. She subverts the gender roles she claims to be protecting in many different ways. She is not the traditional wife, sister, daughter and perhaps mother as defined by her culture. Padma uses her displacement from home as a means of rebelling against the confining and restrictive configurations of home and of acquiring the freedom of choice and the career opportunities that she longs for. Her attachment to an

artificial and exotic version of India away from home, on the other hand, is actually a means of providing her with both the respect of her family and social milieu and financial advantage. It is Padma and not Jasmine, as Ray claims, that indeed offers herself as an exotic product for consumption. The novel's narrator, however, does not endorse such exoticizing attitude and examines Padma's behavior with rather critical and inquisitive eyes.

In sum, Padma needs at the same time to move away from and to preserve home. The apparent construction of home in terms of safety and comfort actually turns into confinement and limitation to her. Home then is a place to escape from and she moves to the United States. In contrast, Padma sees advantages in keeping in New York an exaggerated attachment to her old home values. Exoticizing herself by performing the Indian ethnicity benefits her in two ways. On the one hand, she keeps the respect of people who share her culture, including her parents and sisters, while she is able to make the life choices that go against that very cultural configuration. On the other, she is able to earn her living out of her performance, selling an exoticized image of the Hindu woman in the USA and financially profiting from it.

3.5. Home for Parvati

Although I have already argued that the portrayal of Parvati is not the main interest of this research since she is not a diasporic character nor does she usually present transgressive attitudes, the configurations of her home in India offers a significant contrast to Jasmine's, Padma's and Tara's homes in the United States. In the same way as her sisters, Parvati was raised in the luxurious and comfortable fortress-like home in Calcutta. Unlike Padma and Tara, however, as she gets married, she abandons her father's home in order to dwell in a place where she continues faithful to tradition.

In India, Parvati lives with her husband Auro and their teenage sons Bhupesh and Dinesh. Living on "the fifteenth floor of a spectacular high-rise that from the back three

bedrooms over-looks the Arabian sea” (52), she inhabits the conservative and comfortable household she is supposed to according to her caste and class. As her younger sister explains:

In her Bombay flat each object has its rightful place. She doesn't waste time hunting in closets and drawers, as I seem to have to do, for basics such as needle and thread, spot remover, matches, scratch pads and postage stamps. No piled-up dirty dishes in her kitchen sink, even though she doesn't own a dishwasher, not wet towels on her bathroom floors, no beds left unmade, though she has three to four nuclear family members as houseguests almost every day of the year. (55-6)

The orderly characterization of Parvati's home contrasts precisely with the lack of organization of Tara's home in San Francisco and Padma's in New York. Moreover, the methodical way that she takes care of her house alludes to the tidiness of the Vadheras' home where Jasmine lives temporarily. If Dave and Nirmala's home stands for the struggle to emulate Indianness in the United States, Parvati's home in India can be said to be representative of a so-called authentic Indian household.

It is not only because her house is tidy and clean that Parvati's home is traditional. In her house, she also plays the traditional gender roles of daughter, wife, mother and relative that she is supposed to according to her culture. As Tara describes, her sister is constantly receiving and accommodating guests in her house, as custom demands. Although taking care of so many in-laws may at times be exhausting for her, she does not complain about it: 'We have this great place that Auro's company pays for, so why not share with my in-laws?' (56). In this sense, her home is distinct from her older sister's house in New York. Whereas Parvati's house is always filled with guests and relatives, Padma's looks like nobody inhabits it.

It is in this home that she plays the role of the traditional Indian wife and mother. As mentioned in the introduction, the only transgression she is able to perform is her attitude of

choosing her own husband when she was studying in America. Except from this disruptive behavior, that curiously takes place when she is away from home, Parvati conforms to the gender roles she is taught to play. As a mother, she manages to raise and educate her “good Bengali boys, good Bombay boys, good students at elite English-language schools” (69). Playing the role of wife, Tara observes that her sister’s “marriage had proved to be more solid, her lifestyle more conspicuously luxurious than Didi’s and mine” (57). When the protagonist flees to India when her house in San Francisco is bombed, she describes Parvati’s routine as one limited to waiting for her husband’s “nightly return, his bathing rituals and change from business suit to kurta and pajama” (299). Auro’s wife lives mostly for her husband, sons, parents and relatives. As Tara claims, her life is one “that preserves most of the old ways as sanity permits” (299). In sum, unlike her sisters and Jasmine, Parvati is not diasporic and chooses to dwell in a home that can be described, as George defines it, as a private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy (1).

3.6. Displacement from Home and Transgression

In the introduction to *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Brah presents the concepts she deals with in the book and points to the relationship between home and diaspora. As she claims:

I suggest that the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins while taking account of a homing desire, as distinct from a desire from a ‘homeland’. This distinction is important, not least because not all diasporas sustain an ideology of ‘return.’ (16)

According to Brah, the new diaspora does not necessarily imply one’s necessity to go back to her homeland or home-country. Instead, the subject may present a homing desire, that is, the desire to transform particular locations into home.

As the critic argues, diasporas involve at the same time one's displacement from home and one's settling down, that is, putting roots elsewhere (182). Displacements, however, may occur even at home, that is, before leaving home. As Friedman claims, mainly referring to the content of narratives written by women writers:

the displacement of diaspora begins before the journey from home to elsewhere, begins indeed within the home and homeland and travels with the women as they face the difficulties of negotiating between new ways and old ways of living. (23)

Thus, even before leaving home the subject may go through oppressing and even violent experiences inside such space. The memories of the displacements suffered at home may accompany the subject to his or her new location and be determinant in their life at the new home.

In sum, and as discussed by the critics mentioned in this chapter, home may have different significations to different subjects at different locations and at different times. The movement involved in diaspora requires the displacement from home, but such displacement may be triggered or stimulated because of the very displacement of the subject at home. Home is, then, not a neutral place and the very displacement from home may be a source of suffering and of feelings of alienation. But even though one's diasporic experience may be problematic, not all diasporas foster the desire for return. In spite of the suffering, moving away from home may offer possibilities of agency. The theoretical discussions on home I present in this chapter are indeed helpful in my analysis of *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*.

Jasmine experiences displacement within her very home. In Hasnapur she suffers with the local configurations of gender relations which oppress her and turn her into an obedient and submissive woman. Even though she is offered the opportunity to build a better home with Prakash, her sudden widowhood takes her back to the old and oppressive home. That is why she escapes and moves to the United States. Even though her first impulse is still to play

the widow role she learns about in India, the possibilities that living in that new location offers make Jasmine long to make herself at home there. But the protagonist does not immediately belong to that place and still looks for one in which she does not feel an alien. She has a homing desire, but never a desire to return to her homeland. In spite of all suffering that she goes through in her new home, she has the opportunity to go beyond the role of an Indian widow she is destined to fulfill and acts differently from the way she is taught to be and behave. Jasmine is able to shape her subjectivity and to make the life choices that will offer her a sense of possibility. Agency for her is the ability to choose. Moving away from home gives her the possibility of subverting the gender relations that limited her life back home.

Tara also experiences displacement within home but does not even realize it. Blinded by the privileges offered her by her family's class and caste, she is unable to see through the patriarchal configuration of her family home. Her displacement from home is not really a choice. Moving to the United States is part of the wife role she plays after marriage. It is there, however, that she becomes dissatisfied with the confinement and limitation of her life outside home which reproduces the gender relations of her old home. In that new location, Tara has the opportunity to act and transgress those very gender roles. As she gets the divorce, she feels freer and believes that in that space, she can let go of her overdetermined sense of self and benefit from her so-called invisibility. Things, however, are more complicated for her as she still feels a profound connection to her old home at the same time that she is unable to let go of her newly acquired subjectivity and to simply return to home. Tara seems to look for a sense of belonging, but, like Jasmine, her desire is much more a homing desire than a desire for her homeland.

Like Jasmine, Padma also goes through some form of displacement within home. The main difference between them, however, is that Padma benefits from the privileges her class and caste offer her. Although her home in India offers her comfort and security, the

patriarchal configuration of her home actually renders her life constricted and limited. As she is prevented from making her own life choices within that location, she relocates away from home. Settling in the United States, Padma shows a very peculiar way of dealing with the location she dwells in. At the same time that she refuses the gender roles and familial life that she once experienced in India, her life in the United States is based on the performance of the exotic ethnicity of her homeland. Her performance, however, is strategic. While she presents on the surface, the gender roles and way of life of her old home, she avoids trouble. She is able to keep the respect of people from her ethnicity and profit from her performer's career. Somehow Padma creates her particular sense of belonging away from home, but like the other two characters does not express the desire of returning to her homeland.

Although the diasporic women characters in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* present different relationships to home, they also have things in common. Jasmine, Tara and Padma somehow are displaced within home as the gender roles and relations practiced in the public and private spheres of her homes in India oppress them and restrict their life options. In spite of the suffering and feelings of alienation associated with leaving home and placing oneself in a foreign land, the outcomes of such experience still seem to be positive ones. Moving away from home and putting down roots elsewhere provide them with the opportunity to transform their once believed stable identities and as a consequence open space for new subjectivities and for agency.

CONCLUSION

In Mukherjee's *Jasmine and Desirable Daughters*, the women characters Jasmine, Tara and Padma are displaced from India and put down roots in the United States. My point, which I have demonstrated, is that, as a consequence of their diasporic movement, the women characters question the gender roles that they were taught to play in their homeland and suffer transformations in their subjectivities. Even though contemporary times are changing, and liberal ideas have been influencing the way women are treated and given opportunities in societies that are still patriarchal, it is mainly because of their displacement from home that Jasmine, Tara and Padma are given the chance to modify their gender relations so as to adapt to their new realities in the United States.

Because of the diasporic movement that they undergo, the women characters come in contact with different cultures. Not only do they have to deal with their position as subjects in-between languages and spaces, but they also have to cope with different configurations of gender relations that they experience in India and in the United States. As I demonstrated, Jasmine, Tara and Padma are not interested in simply replacing the way gender roles are played in their home country with the way they are played in America. They do not simply assimilate the liberal behavior and feminist ideas that they encounter there. Instead, they question both social constructions of gender relations and look for alternatives that apply to their realities. In this sense, the novel *Desirable Daughters*, more specifically, seems to present a criticism of feminist notions that are said to be based on interests of a monolithic group described as "woman." As I discussed in chapter 1, such a critical view of a universal feminism has been vehemently questioned by several critics in postcolonial and feminist literary criticism.

Although it can be said that all women characters are exposed to liberal and feminist attitudes in the United States, I show that it is not appropriate to say that they react to that cultural influence in the same way. Padma mostly rejects and criticizes the American way of

life, while Tara feels she is more in-between, and Jasmine seems to be more open to adapt to American culture. All the three women characters, however, present disruptive behaviors as they play the roles of sister, daughter, mother, wife, lover and widow in their new homes, which are quite different from the way they were taught to conduct themselves in India. As I argue, the characters are in-between cultures, that is, they are cultural hybrids, and do not simply assimilate their host land culture. Instead, they keep a critical view of both the United States and India. Hybridity is a powerful concept, an in-between position that implies an act of challenging and questioning the status quo and the power relations of the social order. As I show, the concept of hybridity describes well the condition of the women characters in the novels I examine. It does not only explain their cultural grafting and in-between position, but also elucidates their subversive and challenging attitudes in terms of gender relations.

Even though I claim that all women characters are diasporic women who destabilize gender relations, I conclude that their experiences of migration are diverse and that they are not transgressive in the same way. Based on postcolonial, diaspora and feminist literary studies, I argue that gender, class, caste, education and social conditions in general are factors that differentiate each character's diasporic movement and influence their disruptive attitudes. While class, caste, education and social conditions place the women characters in privileged and unprivileged positions both in India and in the United States, gender, combined with those other factors, seems mostly to render them inferior, constricted and submissive. It is mainly the indoctrination of the characters to their gender roles in a patriarchal society, within their specific class and caste, that triggers their impetus to subvert such roles and modify their subjectivities. Such disruptive attitudes can be referred to as the characters' assertion of agency, that is, the ability to act or perform action, which is made possible precisely by their physical and psychological displacements from home. Not surprisingly, the woman character who is capable of enacting the most radical destabilizations of gender relations, is Jasmine,

the one who suffers the most from gender oppression and the unprivileged configuration of her caste, class and social conditions.

As a part of their diasporic experience, the women characters leave their homeland and settle in different geographical spaces. As I demonstrate, the notion of home is a relevant topic in the examination of literary works, especially for those who deal with migration and diaspora. Each place that Jasmine, Tara and Padma inhabit plays a part in the formation of their subjectivity as they either enforce gender relations or offer the possibility of subversion. Home for the characters can represent safety and comfort in the same way that it can imply confinement and limitation. As the women characters undergo displacement from India, all of them express a homing desire, that is, the desire to make America their home, as opposed to the desire to simply return to their homeland. Actually, their displacement from home begins before they leave India to settle in the USA, as there are negative aspects of their gendered perception of home that stimulate their homing desire. Moving away from home, choosing to carry or leave behind memories from home, therefore, does not only cause Tara, Padma and Jasmine feelings of alienation, but mostly provide them with possibilities of change and disruption. As I demonstrate, for the women characters in *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* movement suggests agency, that is, it opens space for them to question the gender roles and relations with which they were indoctrinated while in their home countries.

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, gender has been indeed quite a relevant topic in diaspora studies, especially in relation to literary works that portray this phenomenon. The importance of women writers in exposing hidden aspects of what Friedman calls the new migration is relevant, as the author explains below:

What gets lost or muted, what is omitted, and what assumptions lie hidden within many formulations of the “new migration” are what interests me. It is here that women’s diasporic writing can illuminate what has often been suppressed in the discussions of the “new migration.” (“The ‘New Migration’” 8)

I believe that my analysis of Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* is relevant if one takes into account that she was one of the first women writers to portray the nuances of diaspora experience for women in her fictional works. Despite her importance in postcolonial literature and diasporic narratives, there are not many studies on the writer's work examining the relation between diaspora and gender relations, nor are there substantial critical materials on *Desirable Daughters*. Thus, a work focused on Mukherjee's most recent works informed by a theoretical framework based on postcolonial, diaspora and feminist literary criticism may be an enriching contribution to the studies of contemporary diaspora and the works by this diasporic Indian writer.

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