**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE ALAGOAS**

**FACULDADE DE LETRAS**

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**Cultural Identities of Diaspora: Myth and Empowerment in *Desirable Daughters* and**

***The Tree Bride*, by Bharati Mukherjee**

Maceió

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Ph.D. degree from the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras e Linguística, Faculdade de Letras, Universidade Federal de Alagoas.

Thesis Supervisor, Ildney de Fátima Souza Cavalcanti, Ph. D.

Maceió

2011

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## TERMO DE APROVAÇÃO

### CLEUSA SALVINA RAMOS MAURÍCIO BARBOSA

Título do trabalho: "CULTURAL IDENTITIES OF DIASPORA: MYTH AND EMPOWERMENT IN *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS* AND *THE TREE BRIDE,* BY Bharati Mukherjee."

Tese aprovada como requisito para obtenção do grau de DOUTOR em ESTUDOS LITERÁRIOS, pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras e Linguística da Universidade Federal de Alagoas, pela seguinte banca examinadora:

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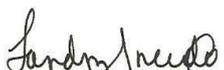
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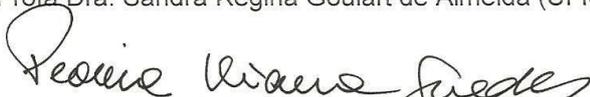
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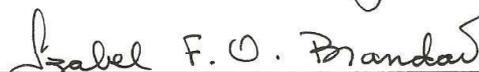
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Maceió, 30 de setembro de 2011.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# ABSTRACT

By examining the constitution of identity/ies related to women's diaspora in contemporary times, the present thesis focuses on its representation in two novels written by the Indian born U.S. writer, Bharati Mukherjee – *Desirable Daughters* (2002), and *The Tree Bride* (2004). I argue that these two novels offer excellent cultural manifestations for the examination of the representation of the identitary process resulting from transnational displacements. Centred on the field of Cultural Studies, the first part of this study presents readings of the women protagonists´ identitary quest portrayed in the novels informed by the major concepts of diasporic identities, hybrid identities and transnationalisms, as they have been theorized by Stuart Hall, Inderpal Grewal, and Homi K. Bhabha.  The analyses contained in the second and the third parts of this thesis draw from studies in the area of Gender Studies, and present reflections on the main characters´ trajectories which are illuminated by the central notions of agency, performativity, and empowerment, theorized by Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray. Studies on mythology – both from non-feminist and feminist perspectives – also provide a backdrop for the readings proposed. The thesis is structured in three chapters: the first one discusses the constitution of diasporic identities, particularly the main character's; the second chapter concentrates on the gender-marked appropriation of mythical discourse by the author in the composition of her narratives by means of the literary strategy of feminist revisionist mythmaking, as pointed out by Alicia Ostriker; and the third section analyzes the protagonist's actions, viewing her process of empowerment as a transformative strategy in terms of subjective development which is strongly marked by gender issues. The main results of the analysis carried out is the perception that, by combining the shaping of diasporic identities, the rewriting of myth, and the deployment of empowerment strategies in the composition of the main characters in her novels, Bharati Mukherjee problematizes the diasporic woman subject's identity formation in relation to the India/U.S. movement, revisiting and reweaving Indian traditions from multifaceted and gender-marked perspectives. This, in turn, may act in terms of raising readers´ understanding and critical awareness of the women subjects´ diasporic process in the contemporary world.


Keywords: Cultural Identities; Diaspora; Bharati Mukherjee.

# RESUMO

Ao examinar a constituição das identidades relacionada à diáspora feminina na contemporaneidade, a presente tese enfoca sua representação em dois romances escritos pela estadunidense de origem indiana, Bharati Mukherjee – *Desirable Daughters* (2002), e *The Tree Bride* (2004). Argumento que esses dois romances oferecem excelentes manifestações culturais para o exame da representação do processo identitário resultante de deslocamentos transnacionais. Centrada no campo dos Estudos Culturais, a primeira parte deste estudo apresenta leituras da busca identitária das protagonistas femininas retratadas nos romances informadas pelos conceitos principais das identidades diaspóricas, identidades híbridas e transnacionalismos, como tem sido teorizados por Stuart Hall, Inderpal Grewal, e Homi Bhabha. As análises contidas na segunda e terceira partes desta tese derivam da área dos Estudos de Gênero, e apresentam reflexões sobre as trajetórias das personagens principais as quais são iluminadas pelas noções centrais de agenciamento, performatividade, e empoderamento, teorizadas por Judith Butler e Luce Irigaray. Os estudos sobre mitologia – nas perspectivas feminista e não feminista – também oferecem um contexto para as leituras propostas. A tese está estruturada em três capítulos: o primeiro discute a constituição de identidades diaspóricas, particularmente a da personagem principal; o segundo capítulo concentra-se na apropriação gendrada do discurso mítico pela autora na composição de suas narrativas por meio da estratégia literária de escritura revisionista dos mitos num enfoque feminista, como apontado por Alicia Ostriker; e a terceira seção analisa as ações da protagonista, visualizando seu processo de empoderamento como uma estratégia transformativa em termos de desenvolvimento subjetivo o qual é fortemente marcado por questões de gênero. Os resultados principais da análise realizada é a percepção de que, ao combinar a formação de identidades diaspóricas, a reescrita do mito, e a utilização de estratégias de empoderamento na composição das personagens principais em seus romances, Bharati Mukherjee problematiza a formação da identidade feminina do sujeito diaspórico em relação ao movimento India/Estados Unidos, revisitando e retecendo tradições indianas de perspectivas multifacetadas e gendradas. Isto, por sua vez, pode agir no sentido de aguçar a percepção e a consciência crítica de leitoras e leitores em relação ao processo diaspórico dos sujeitos femininos no mundo contemporâneo.


Palavras-chave: Identidades Culturais; Diáspora; Bharati Mukherjee.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

No one behind, no one ahead.
The path the ancients cleared has closed.
And the other path, everyone's path,
Easy and wide, goes nowhere.
I am alone and find my way.

Sanskrit verse adapted by Octavio Paz and
translated by Eliot Weinberger

The poem excerpt quoted above is the epigraph to *Desirable Daughters* (2002), which, along with *The Tree Bride*[1] (2004), form the literary *corpus* analyzed in this thesis. Part of the poem "The Tradition" is compared with the narratives, and such an analysis is discussed and reexamined from cultural, mythical and gendered perspectives. From the idea in this quotation, we are led to the understanding that the hero/ine has to go on his/her own to seek his/her truth, as does the protagonist in the novels. Bharati Mukherjee begins *Desirable Daughters* by introducing the legend of Tara Lata, the protagonist's great-great-aunt, whose trajectory illuminates Tara Chatterjee's mission: an identitary quest.

By telling the mythic family story of Tara Lata Gangooly and her contemporary great-great-niece, Tara Chatterjee, Bharati Mukherjee provides a new perspective on the issue of tradition, which is represented by the protagonist's memories of India and her family's ancestral roots. Such a new perspective can be contrasted with the one presented in the author's previous novels, in which characters tend to be portrayed as immigrants or as outsiders, who have to deal with their tradition and their roots, in order to reinvent themselves again in a foreign country, often, in the United States – the place of reinvention.

Bharati Mukherjee's characters are eager travelers, who displace themselves throughout countries, continents, between the East and the West, the old and the new, the past and the future. For herself, she constructs the image of a North American writer, who decides

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[1] MUKHERJEE, Bharati. *Desirable Daughters*. New York: Hyperion, 2002. *The Tree Bride*. New York: Hyperion, 2004. These are the first editions of the novels, and in future references, the initials DD and TB are used, followed by page numbers.

to immigrate to the United States to escape imperialism in the U. K. and in Canada. Such a dream of freedom is portrayed in her work, and the United States is deployed as the land of opportunities for immigrants. In Bharati Mukerjee's novels, diasporic women subjects travel these paths towards freedom.

The writer has produced a considerable number of literary works, which consist of eight novels and two short story collections. There are also her memoir and non-fiction books. The first novels are *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), and *Wife* (1975). *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997), compose her first trilogy. The novels *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004) and *Miss New India* (2011), compose her second trilogy. The short story collections are *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). The latter was the winner of the National Book Critics Award. The memoir *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), was written in collaboration with Clark Blaise, her husband. Her three non-fiction books are *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of Air India Tragedy* (1987), also in co-authorship with Blaise, *Political Culture and Leadership in India* (1991), and *Regionalism in Indian Perspective* (1992).

Mukherjee's first novel offers "a portrait of a young woman painfully realizing that she is an expatriate who cannot go home again" (EDWARDS, 2009, p. xiii). It is considered to be autobiographical, although Mukherjee denies it. However, as argued by Edwards, it presents "the external similarities between protagonist Tara Banerjee Cartwright and Bharati Mukherjee Blaise showed that she based much of the book on her own experiences" (p. xiii). The second novel provides a counterpoint to the previous one. The protagonist, Dimple, is unable to "break away from the Bengali culture in which she feels trapped even as she moves to New York City". It contrasts with Tara Banerjee's "perspective realization that she cannot reenter her home culture" (2009, p. xiii). Therefore, such a character is relevant as central to "the first of Mukherjee's major works to explore what it means to become an [U.S.] American" (p. xiv).

Mukherjee says that the protagonist in *Jasmine* is a character that she "would have liked to have been" (p. xvi). On the one hand, the author and the character share some experiences, as they both have horoscopes that foretell "their exile and both bear scars in the middle of their foreheads where Hinduism places the mystic third eye". On the other hand, "Jasmine's circumstances are much more restricted than those of the author" (p. xvi). Jasmine's difficult beginning in the poor village of Hasnapur, without running water or

electricity, mark her 'odyssey' to the United States, which takes her to several places where Mukherjee had already lived, that is, New York, Iowa and California.

The second novel of the trilogy documents the endless possibilities of the digital age, bringing a complex plot which portrays "a precolonial setting where the wealth of India drew European immigrants and adventurers" (p. xvi). It establishes a vivid dialogue with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and with a Mughal miniature painting. The third novel depicts the legacy of the sixties – the adoptee Debby DiMartino renames herself as Devi Dee and searches for her birth parents. It is important to emphasize that this novel marks a trend in Bharati Mukherjee's fiction "for Devi Dee's quest personalizes the historical research of *Holder of the World* into American-style roots search that drives successors *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*" (p. xvii).

The protagonist of *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride,* Tara Chatterjee, undertakes a project – to return to her origins, in India, the place where she was raised, to look back on her family's past in order to come to terms with her own history and legacy. Tara collects information about her ancestor Tara Lata – the Tree Bride – , as an attempt to reconcile part of her Indian heritage and her present life as an assimilated[2] U.S. woman. The idea of quest may represent one of the "most American impulses" – "a root search" (DD, p. 17), according to Mukherjee´s narrative. It is important to notice that the author herself has gone through an assimilation process. In an interview given to Nicholas A. Basbanes, in 1997, she defines her status as a writer: "I have chosen and achieved the right to be an American, and the concept of 'America' is what fuels all of my writing."

The choice of the novels for this study has come from my interest in Mukherjee's work, in the early 2000s, with the reading of *Jasmine*, which provided the focus of my Master's thesis[3], a study on the representation of identitary phenomena based on Cultural Studies as its main theoretical framework, informed by issues related to myths and gender. With regard to *Jasmine*, the analysis focused on the protagonist's identitary quest, considering her displacements, feeling of alienation, conflicts related to  cultural tradition, and the resulting subjective identity process unfolding. This thesis proceeds with the exploration of such themes. In addition to the approach favored in that study, the present analysis

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[2] The definition of "assimilation" adopted in this study, as well as other key concepts in the area of Gender and the Cultural Studies, are given in the Glossary of Terms, at the end of the thesis. Cf. pp.128-130.
[3] My Master's thesis is entitled *O Caráter Utópico da Busca Identitária em Duas Autoras Contemporâneas: Lya Luft e Bharati Mukherjee* (2005) and provides a comparative study of two novels: *A Asa Esquerda do Anjo*, (1991) and *Jasmine* (1989).

incorporates discussions on transnational women diasporic identities; the revision of myths, under a comparative and gendered perception; and the concepts of power and empowerment and their gender implications in relation to the protagonist´s characterization. Thus, my attention now shifts to issues of cultural identity resulting from diasporic movements, which are experienced by Mukherjee's characters on the threshold of a new century, and especially represented by the protagonist of these two novels, Tara Chatterjee.

The protagonist of the novels, the youngest of three sisters, is raised in a Calcutta conservative prosperous family. After getting married to a brilliant engineering student, she moves to the United States. The urbane, modern Tara Chatterjee undertakes a journey to (re)connect herself to her ancestor, Tara Lata Gangooly, by trying to evoke a rural India in which daughters were given away in ancient rites of child marriage. The experience of contemporary Tara in the village of Mishtigunj, a place that seems to have been frozen in time, is juxtaposed with her U.S. cosmopolitan lifestyle. From Tara Chatterjee's contemporary experiences, she imagines her ancestor, the Tree Bride: "a Bengali girl's happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrow of history all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her" (DD, p. 4).

After the premature death of Tara Lata's husband, bitten by a snake, her father decides that she should marry a god who "come[s] down to earth as a tree to save her from a lifetime of disgrace and misery" (DD, p. 16). From this time on, Tara Lata begins a recluse living in the remote rural Mishtigunj, and becomes a local healer and a martyred freedom fighter. By considering this tale and comparing/contrasting it to the contemporary Tara's experience, I argue that Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist begins a process of self-evaluation, as well as a process of evaluating her sisters's life stories, having the heroic deeds of Tara Lata as a background to this movement. "Each generation of women in my family has discovered something in her. Even in far-flung California, the Tree Bride speaks again" (DD, p. 289). As Tara Chatterjee walks slowly with her son along the jungle pathway, following the same route taken by her ancestor before her, she has a vision that can be associated to a promising experience. This, in turn, may lead to the character's redemption and self-discovery/self-knowledge.

> The winter night of East Bengal falls quickly. The mosquitoes are fierce. Rabi and I walk along the paved road from the Tree Bride's house to the last of the permanent structures. The road gives way to crushed stone, rising above ponds on either side.

> This is called a shanko[4], I say, a word I have not used in my life and only now suddenly remember. Many words are flooding in and the trail ahead, as far as I can see, is lighted by kerosene and naphta lamps held by the children of fruit and vegetable vendors sitting on the carts. "Rabi!" I say. "Remember this. It's a miracle." (DD, p. 310)

As she walks the village streets again, Tara Chatterjee finds her ancestry in the subtle details that help reconstruct her memories of childhood. And, by having the company of her son, she sees with fresh look, concerning the perception of a foreigner's glance, that is, that of her U.S. son, at a familiar environment (to her). By doing so, Bharati Mukherjee's work provokes reflections upon the composition of cultural identities of diaspora, which is the central subject of this thesis.

In an attempt of thinking about the constitution of identity/ies in contemporary times in relation to female diasporic displacements, I propose a reading of the novels by observing two main theoretical frameworks, those of Cultural and Gender Studies, and by drawing from studies in the areas of mythology and of Utopian Studies as they provide ways to widen the scope of the reading approach I build. The possibility of an investigation related to the phenomenon of mass displacements is suggested by the immigration of individuals coming from the impoverished third world countries towards the 'prosperous'[5] first world – a recurring theme in Mukherjee's narratives. The women characters portrayed by Mukherjee are capable of living in a world in which the individual exists not as a unified One, but rather as many, surrounded by no borders and having the possibilities of constantly (re)configuring their identities. They displace themselves through transnational[6] movements in order to take advantage of the opportunities given by their favorable economical situation in a rich country – a modern/Westernized academic formation, the possibility of applying such expertise in order to make more money, for instance.

This study offers analysis of the protagonist's trajectory. The woman´s identitary quest evokes intersections with specific concepts which have been explored by thinkers and commentators in the area of Cultural Studies. The notion of "diasporic identity/ies", theorized by Stuart Hall (1990, 2003), is central to this study insofar as it is used to illuminate, analyze

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[4] "Shanko" is an Indian (Bengali) term used to express the narrow poles that divide the wet paddy fields. Cf. MANDAL, 2008.

[5] I use the inverted commas as a strategy of questioning the concept of prosperity as being a prerogative of rich countries, the so-called first-world countries, in face of the current economical panorama.

[6] The concept of "transnationalism" can be associated to the basic idea of border crossing and is discussed in chapter I.

and discuss the identitary constitution of Mukherjee's major character, as a U.S. female immigrant, from the higher Indian caste: that of Brahmin. Another relevant concept for my purpose is the one of "transnationalism", elaborated on by Inderpal Grewal (2005, 2006), as it makes it possible to characterize, thus enabling an understanding of, the protagonist's displacements throughout the narratives. Central for the reflection on the issue of amalgamated identities resulting from diaspora is the idea of "hybrid identity/ies", discussed by Homi Bhabha (2006). All these concepts illuminate the process/es that forge/s the diasporic identities of the main character in the novels and are discussed *vis-à-vis* the readings that compose the chapters that follow.

The field of Gender Studies also informs the present reading and adds a feminist perspective to the identity issues in focus. The notions of "agency", and "performativity", theorized by Judith Butler (1990, 2008), are important for looking at the protagonist's "capacity for individualized choice and action" (2008, p. 195), that is to say, at the decisions taken by Tara Chatterjee, which lead her to negotiate her presence/permanence in different cultural contexts. And, finally, the concept of "empowerment", theorized by Luce Irigaray (1985), who proposes a rethinking of the notion of power in "phallocratic cultures", contributes to the analysis of the main character's empowerment process perceptible as a main trait in the character´s development.

Studies on revisionist writing, myths and utopianism provide further theoretical frameworks for reading Mukherjee's fictions. In a text that has become a classic in feminist thought and criticism in the Anglophone context, Adrienne Rich (1973) proposes "writing as a revision", as the strategy of "entering an old text from a new critical direction" (p. 18). This is metaphorized in the fictions being studied by means of Mukherjee´s portrayal of Tara Chatterjee's fresh look on Tara Lata's story, as the former undertakes the rewriting of the tale. Revision is also at work in the novels in relation to myth. Hence, Alicia Ostriker's idea of "revisionist mythmaking" (1986), a feminist literary strategy, is also considered in the present reading as it suggests an   interpretative possibility to approach the story of the protagonist's ancestor. In Mukherjee´s fiction, the narrator revisits the myth of the Tree Bride in a revisionist perspective, by adding a renewed, gender-marked cultural experience to timeless myth.  Carolyne Larrington (1997), in her turn, offers some considerations on the mitigation of gender asymmetries through a reinterpretation of the roles played by women portrayed in a mythical (Hindu) perspective.

The categories of utopian and dystopian writing are also explored *vis-à-vis* Mukherjee's realistic writing. Ildney Cavalcanti's theory on feminist critical dystopias (1999) offers a useful and analytical resource to discuss the "patriarchal hells of oppression" which are presented in both novels by Mukherjee. And so does Vita Fortunati´s (2006) description of the characteristics of utopian writing, which is appropriated in the context of the readings of the fictions proposed here. Although Mukherjee´s fictions are more mimetic than most literary utopian writing forms, some tropes identified with this speculative genre can be observed in them, as will be become clear in the discussion below.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first one concentrates on the portrayal of identity construction process of South Asian[7] (Indian) and North American (U.S.) woman subjects in the late twentieth and the very beginning of the twenty-first centuries. My interest lies on the protagonist's identitary transformation, perceived in the articulation of history, culture, gender and displacements, which results in her citizenship construction as a transnational citizen due to the displacements undertaken among cities, countries and continents. In the second part, the study provides an overall view of Hindu myths, with special focus on gender-informed revisionism, and their representation in the novels analyzed here. A revisionist approach is favored in the examination of the novels, since the protagonist revisits a mythical narrative in order to rewrite it later. Finally, the third chapter analyzes the main character's actions and practices by focusing on the depiction of (em)power(ment) as a transformative strategy for resisting women's oppression.

Situated in the convergences of the fields of literary, cultural and gender studies, especially regarding the fictional representation of gender as a cultural category, I investigate the construction of the protagonist's identity in process, and also the phenomenon of cultural assimilation, due to the influences received from multicultural societies, in the novels studied. Bharati Mukherjee, whose formal education and academic background has a strong international (European and U.S.) component, has undergone transcontinental displacements herself, a movement which is thematized in her work. By offering such a perspective in her narratives, the author discusses the composite of cultural diasporic identities, which is central to this thesis.

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[7] The term "South Asian" refers to people with origins in India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, The Maldives or Bangladesh. As the author and the majority of the characters in the novels analyzed are of Indian origin, "South Asian" and "Indian" are used as synonyms in this thesis.

**CHAPTER I**

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*DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS* AND *THE TREE BRIDE:* A CONTEMPORARY
DIASPORIC PERSPECTIVE

> Passage, immediate passage! The blood burns in my veins!
> Away O soul! Hoist instantly the anchor!
> Cut the hawsers – haul out – shake out every sail!
> Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?
> Have we not grovel'd here long enough, eating and drinking like
> mere brutes?
> Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long enough?
> Sail forth – steer for the deep waters only,
> Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,
> For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
> And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.
> O my brave soul!
> O farther farther sail!
> O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all seas of God?
> O farther, farther, farther sail!
>
> (Walt Whitman, *Passage to India*)

## 1. Diasporic identities: in-between timelessness and history

This chapter focuses on the representation of the process of identity composition of Asian Indian and U.S. individuals in the late twentieth and the very beginning of the twenty-first centuries, by looking at Bharati Mukherjee's novels. It is perceived that the ever-changing processes which link history, culture, gender, and human displacements involve, as a result, the constitution of identity and citizenship. For the present study, the interconnections in such fields are observed, which provide the elements in the protagonist's identitary composite.

Considering that diaspora has been linked to a multiplicity of spatial and temporal references, and also that its meaning has been expanded more than it originally had, it is important to understand the connections and complexities of diasporic movements that result in diasporic identities. Now it is more than simply peoples' dispersion, it has assumed a political framework. And from this perception, a dialogical approach between historical processes and the constitution of identitary composites favored by diaspora is proposed. In Bharati Mukherjee's work, the characters go through diasporic processes. These, in turn, can

be observed by means of their displacements, which are generally transcontinental, going from India to the United States.

History usually appears in Mukherjee's narratives as a referential backdrop to the characters' trajectories. In a sense, Bharati Mukherjee draws upon many historical passages as a way of bringing her criticism on several Indian and North American political issues, such as interracial relationships, immigration and terrorism. In her non-fictional work entitled *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of Air Indian Tragedy* (1987), the author makes a critical examination of racism and horror, a reference made to the 1985 airline crash that killed hundreds of Canadians, most of whom were of Indian descent going from Toronto to Bombay. Mukherjee makes use of the real event in order to make a critical assessment of Indian politics and, at the same time, the author reveals the changing shape of the North American society.

The novels analyzed here are full of historical insertions as well, which proves to be a helpful source to understand the referential framework used by Mukherjee. Considering the sequence of events woven in the depiction of Tara Lata's lifetime, I propose the examination of two relevant historical passages which are brought into the narratives as a way of discussing the colonial period characterized by the British permanence in the Indian territory. The first reference is the well-known speech made by Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1833 entitled "Minute on Indian Education". Macaulay was a member of the Supreme Council of India who

> emphasized the importance of English literature as an instrument for disseminating the moral values of British culture to the Indian middle class, who were, at that time, subjected to the policies of the British East India Company. Furthermore, Macaulay argued that it was necessary to educate an elite class in Indian society who could act as interpreters between the English and the non-English speaking Indian population: 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in dialect'. (MORTON, 2007, p. 18)

Thomas Babington Macaulay supposedly proposed a 'Westernized' education to the higher caste Indians, Bengalis Brahmins since they "were naturally drawn to education" (TB, p. 44). Macaulay's purpose was "to turn natives into surrogate Englishmen, easily controlled, making the English language and Western values desirable to them" (TB, p. 46). And as a result of such an 'education', the narrator in *The Tree Bride* identifies this period as the beginning of her "hybrid family of orthodox Hindu, Bengali-speaking, cricket-loving, Shakespeare-acting, Gilbert and Sullivan-singing, adaptable-anywhere Brahmins" (TB, p. 45).

Partition is another historical reference alluded to by Mukherjee. By bringing this historical event into the narrative, the author highlights the conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims, which takes place when the British Raj ends, leaving Calcutta and the rest of the Indian territory.

> The entire structure of Hindu culture made intracaste competition impossible. No Brahmin would lift his hand in labor, nor permit himself to be caste-polluted in any way. He could not permit himself humiliation at the hand of a lower life form. Teamwork among Hindus entailed a fat Brahmin's sitting under a shade tree, directing the labor of sun-blackened coolies. It did not include diving after a ball or receiving it still slippery with sweat from a lower caste's brow. The confrontation between Hindu and Muslim was life and death. Not may the better man win, but may the better god, the higher order of existence, exterminate the other. Look at the bloody mess they've made of their so-called Partition. (TB, pp. 175-6)

In spite of being a Brahmin, the highest caste in divisional structure in India whose members include priests and scholars and whom are believed to have been born out of Brahma's head (KINSLEY, 1993, p. 153), Tara Chatterjee considers the caste system as a retrograde social structure, incompatible with her experience in the West, particularly, in the United States. Such criticism may be understood as a way of reflecting on the immigrant condition in North America. Pursuing acceptance and inclusion and fighting against the feeling of alienation are a recurrent outsider's attitudes, which can be observed in a number of Mukherjee's characters. However, in the novels analyzed here, the narrator does not need to undergo a hard process of acceptance, as she can be considered a successful example of assimilation.

Bearing in mind the historical trajectory of the immigration of groups of citizens originating from South Asian countries and moving to the United States, one notices that the flux of such groups has increased very much since the 19th century. My interest in the Asians, especially in the Indian nationals, in the United States, is justified by the fact that the protagonist of the novels examined here is an Indian born woman who moves to that country and, afterwards, starts to explore her historical background in order to understand her own trajectory and identity developed due to her displacements.

With regard to the narratives being studied, the beginning of the displacements experienced by the protagonist's family starts in the late 19th century, precisely in 1879, when the ancestor of the Bhattacharjee family moves from the town of Mishtigunj in East Bengal to a distant village located in the jungle's edge of that same region. Tara Lata Gangoopadhaya (Gangooly, as the English authorities call her), the bride-to-be, is married to a tree in order to avoid the curse of  widowhood, due to the premature death of her groom, who is bitten by a snake on their wedding day. From this first displacement, several others take place until the

the late twentieth century, the present time in the narrative. The protagonist's family comes from rural India to the capital – Calcutta; and, later in the story, Tara and her sisters move across continents.

Large movements by immigrant women of voluntary and forced displacements cause the spread of millions of women immigrants throughout the globe. Several reasons may be thought of regarding such a phenomenon, ranging from economic opportunity and ethnic violence to social and political persecution. As a matter of fact, there has been a consistent rise in border crossings since 1990, according to a report by the Intergovernmental Organization for migration – OM. In Tara Chatterjee's case, marriage leads her into a transcontinental displacement. She goes to the U.S. to accompany her future husband, who had been awarded a scholarship on engineering at Stanford at that time in the narrative. Yet, she could have gone to Paris, London or New York to continue her studies; for she had already graduated with honors from the University of Calcutta, and had received offers from those universities.

The largest mass migration of South Asians occurred in 1947, as the British decided to grant independence to the colonies in the Indian subcontinent, a fact which resulted from the high cost of maintaining colonial rule. Despite the provisional union of Indians from different religions to fight the British during the independence campaign, many Muslims suspected that the Hindu majority would have given them unfair treatment once independence had been achieved. This led to many violent conflicts and, as a result, British and Indian leaders decided that the only plausible solution was a partition that separated the continent into Hindu and Muslim states. In 1947, the Indian subcontinent became independent and two nations were founded: India and Pakistan.[8]

From August 1947 to May 1948, by unofficial counts[9] at least 18 million people – Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims – fled their homes and their birthplaces, becoming refugees. Many of the Partition refugees migrated to the West – particularly to the USA and the UK – in the following decades, the 50's and 60's. With regard to the particular case of the women migrants, the different experiences they underwent and the reception given to them resulted, in most cases, in vulnerability to hardship, discrimination and abuse.

> Unfortunately, the women of these diverse groups were among the greatest victims of religious and cultural persecution. Religious, ethnic, or political conflict between men on the subcontinent was often performed through acts of violence on the bodies of women. […] Historians have seen India's partition in the context of a horrific

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[8] Cf. DOWLING, Mike, 2010.

[9] The unofficial numbers were culled from the accounts by journalists and military officers who witnessed partition in 1947. Cf. FRENCH, Patrick, 1997.

political upheaval between the British Raj, the Congress, the All-India Muslim League. Unfortunately, the greatest victims of partition, women, have been left without a voice – largely ignored in the light of political events leading to partition.[10]

During the Partition process, the struggle and violence, sacrifice and loss are known by means of many reports that reach us, narrated in a myriad of individual and collective histories. The narratives have a common point: the greatest scale of violence was perpetrated on women. In many villages, "Hindus threw their young daughters into wells, dug trenches and buried them alive. Some were burnt to death, some were made to touch electric wires to prevent the Muslims from touching them" (MENON & BHASIN, 1998, p. 32). In the majority of the cases, women victims were very young. And the ones who left their families held the opinion that "it would have been better if they hadn't been born…" (p. 32). Acts of extreme violence are portrayed by Mukherjee in her depiction of the events in the Mishtigunj village as well. Even knowing of the forthcoming terror, the women from that place remain as an act of resistance.

Despite women's victimization, Tara Lata, the protagonist's ancestor, also known as the Tree Bride, represents the ultimate resistance to the British raj in the village in the jungle's edge mentioned above. She shelters and offers treatment to the ones considered to be outcasts and outlaws – the refugees from the British rule, the wounded, the poor, and the defenseless. She hopes to give voice to the speechless victims, especially to the women, by registering all the atrocities perpetrated on them in the Mishtigunj village. And, as a result, she is looked upon as a dangerous person by the authorities. Definitely, Tara Lata is not an ordinary woman. In the words of a magistrate, Tara Lata should be the one "behind this insurrection" (DD, p. 309).

> One holds one's fire when a woman is involved, of course, but this woman does not look like a woman and she certainly does not behave as a woman. […] There's something not quite on the up and up with that creature. It's said she's not ventured beyond the walls of her compound in over sixty years. Most extraordinary thing. (DD, p. 309)

The Partition contributed to the migration of millions. People tried to escape from violence and the miserable life conditions they faced, in the attempt to pursue the fulfillment of a dream. The narrative portrays migration trajectories, and one of them is Virgil Treadwell's, Victoria Treadwell-Khanna's grandfather, who is, in turn, the protagonist's

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[10] Cf. PENNEBAKER, Mattie Katherine, 2010.

doctor-friend – her 'ob-gyn'. Virgil Treadwell "was in the Indian Civil Service. […] He was a district commissioner in Bengal from 1930 up through Independence", who, after living and witnessing many conflicts, "left India in 1947 and never returned" (TB, p. 25). He "must have known the Tree Bride. All stories of Mishtigunj touch, eventually, on Tara Lata Gangooly" (TB, p. 27).

Bishwapriya Chatterjee, the protagonist's husband, exemplifies the professional person with expertise who migrates to English-speaking countries. He "became an electrical engineering student in India […] and received a scholarship to Stanford because that was the best place to go and everything Bish Chatterjee did was best" (DD, p. 44). Bish, as he is called by his U. S. friends, is

> a first son from an outstanding family. Father, on the Calcutta High Court and decidedly not a Bolshevik. Mother, descendent from Sir Biren Mukherjee. […] Bish kept the large house behind the gates in Atherton, in one of the first developments to grow up with Silicon Valley. He was, and probably still is, wealthy beyond counting, or caring. […] With his friend Chester Yee, he developed a process for allowing computers to create their own time, recognizing signals intended only for them, for instantaneously routing information to the least congested lines. (DD, pp. 23-4)

Concerning the gender issues and migration policies focusing on women as a specific group, the Intergovernmental Organization for Migration (IOM) registers that migration is neither desirable nor safe for women, unless they are 'protected' by the institution of marriage or get an employment as skilled workers. The restrictions upon those 'unprotected' migrants, who tend to be vulnerable in social and economic terms, are provoked when they are found defenseless – unmarried, unskilled or unemployed. In cases when they do not possess formal education, such group assumes the risks of vulnerability by making use of illegal methods and practices of migration by undertaking services offered by a parallel economy. In an attempt to ensure their well being as citizens, such women find the need to protect themselves from the gender specific nature of the exploitation they may be subjected to.

Tara Chatterjee represents a special group of migrants: "Tara Bhattacharjee [single name], B.A. (English Honours) Calccutta University, and, after a twenty-year-gap, Tara Chatterjee [married name], M.A. (English), San Francisco State University" (TB, p. 8). Those qualifications grant her a 'free pass', supposedly enabling her to go anywhere and do anything she wants to. She is a rich educated woman who belongs to a high caste (Brahmin), living in a country known as 'the land of the free'. Furthermore, her wifehood is a guarantee of stability and protection.

Throughout history, migration has been the prevalence of men. In the absence of a well-structured women´s movement in relation to migration policies, women have been made speechless. They have not had the right to have a voice to express their needs and denounce the abuses perpetrated against them.  In the third world countries, especially in the Indian subcontinent, State policies which would have assured protection to the interests of women migrants – for instance, some social sanctions on poor women who resort to migration through unsafe means as a way of escaping from unfair and oppressive regimes – have never been created. By directing her narrative focus on the portrayal of a woman´s successful move into the U.S., Mukherjee´s novels elide such historical circumstances underlying an important part of the women´s migration experiences.

## 2. The identity composite of South Asian women writers in a diasporic movement

With the possibility of immigrants staying in the U.S.A., and with the strengthening of policies regarding the 1946 Act[11], South Asians have had the opportunity to have their citizenship recognized. To a large number of these immigrants, women particularly, living in North America or becoming a U.S. citizen provided a place and a condition in which they could exercise the right to speak their minds in a democratic way.

The rising tide of globalization has transformed the contemporary literature panorama. Ideas converted into written texts cross the national borders revealing myriads of voices from a group still unknown until recently– South Asian women writers, once, and not long ago, considered to be subaltern subjects. According to the traditional patriarchal culture they belong to, such women barely had the consent or the permission to express themselves either in privacy or in public. Gayatri C. Spivak, in her essay "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988), questions the possibility of speaking as the underprivileged part, by asking whether it is possible for the 'speechless dispossessed' individual person to speak at all. Spivak defends that speech is an action strategy, capable of removing a line of demarcation, in terms of identity representations, thus leading to self-emancipation. The article is considered to be a major text in the context of postcolonial[12] theory and questions the way subaltern gendered subjectivity is framed during the British imperialist period.

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[11] "After the passage of Luce-Celler bill in 1946 immigration increased and between 1945-1965, from India 6907 and from Pakistan 1497 immigrants were admitted." Cf. MACMAHON, 2001.

[12] I favor the spelling of the term 'postcolonial' instead of the hyphenated form, observing McLeod's concept: "the hyphenated term 'post-colonial' seems more appropriate to denote a particular historical period or epoch, like those suggested by phases such as 'after colonialism', 'after independence', or 'after the end of the Empire'.

From the beginning of the twentieth century until recently women have not been allowed to speak or write their thoughts and beliefs, to inherit or to possess valuables. In literature, despite the existence of a few feminist writers, such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, women were very often limited and relegated to a less important place in history. They have fought until these days to conquer "a room of their own", to use Woolf´s famous words.[13] Considering the gender disparities which still remain all over the world, I argue that Bharati Mukherjee portrays female characters that are able to subvert patriarchal systems, by means of action strategies which lead to the characters' self-emancipation. Tara Chatterjee, in particular, represents a distinct group, that formed by the rich, educated and free part of Indian women. Therefore, she is free to make decisions on her own. Considering the wider universe of Mukherjee´s fictions (and including minor characters in the novels being discussed as well as characters in her other fictions), one observes the portrayal of such gender disparities as a very perceptible trace.

It should be taken into consideration that disparities between men and women regarding basic rights, access to resources, power to make decisions regarding their own lives continue to exist in virtually all countries in the world. Women have born the largest costs of legal, social and economic rights inequalities. In many countries, especially in Eastern nations, there is still an abysmal gender gap in relation to economic and educational opportunities, power and political voice.

> Traditionally, marriage for women – except in certain matriarchal tribes in the south that remained unaffected by the Aryan invasion that began in 1500 B.C.E. – has entailed a most submissive feminine role. Although a woman ideally had power as a mother, as a wife she submitted to her husband and her family. Only recently have South Asian women in the dominant patriarchal tradition started to question aspects of this role, or decided against marriage altogether.[14]

Concerning the portrayal of women in South Asian novels, critics such as: Shirwadkar (1979), Landow (1991), Kumar (1993), Grewal (2005), and Myles (2005), have pointed out changes in the depiction of women characters. The authors have moved away from

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The author uses a single word to reinforce the idea of "disparate forms of representations, reading practices and values. These can circulate across the barrier between colonial rule and national independence" (Cf. MCLEOD, 2000, p. 5).

[13] I make a reference to the lecture written and delivered on October 1928, by Virginia Woolf, on "Women and Fiction" at Newnham and Girton, the two women's colleges at Cambridge, England. The following year, Woolf expanded the essay into what is now *A Room of One's Own*. The essay is considered to be the first major work in feminist criticism. In it, the author questions the restricted number of women writers, their material limitations (concerning socioeconomic aspects), and their lack of privacy. And she presents a solution and a remedy to such gender marked restrictions: to earn money and get oneself a place.

[14] This fragment, quoted by Shoshana M. Landow in 1991, is taken from an earlier work entitled "South Asian Women Writers: Another Approach to Feminism", 1989.

representing women's victimization towards the most recent literary trend – the identitary quest. Commentators, like Landow (1991) for instance, have noted that the focuses have shifted. According to the critic's perspective, contemporary fictions are not only restricted to the abuses perpetrated against women, but they also indicate the way women have overcome the obstacles, and how they are outpacing the new barriers imposed by repressive patriarchal systems, and taking advantage of the opportunities arising from Western influences, such as freedom of choices.

The question why Indian women have figured so poorly as writers was asked to Lalithambika Antherjanam, the fearless and prolific Malayan writer and activist who lived from 1909 to 1985, and was the first feminist of Kerala, in the India subcontinent, in the beginning of the 20$^{th}$ century. It was not, she said, because

> women have no talent, but because it is considered a great sin for women to speak their mind... A woman's reputation is a matter of life and death for the whole extended family. Under the circumstances, no woman will be courageous enough to hurl herself into literature. (1998, p. XXVIII)

South Asian women writers have arrived like courageous fighters into the diasporic English literary scene. These women were willing to fight for their rights: the right to have their work published and read, and to help others to do the same by overcoming obstacles of every nature. They have come prepared to tell, reveal and denounce the Eastern social-economical-political restrictive practices towards women. Works by South Asian women writers have dominated bookstore shelves in English speaking countries in a way those by South Asian men writers have never done. Such women writers tell their stories in many various mother tongues, such as Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali among others.[15]

In their narratives, such women writers present claustrophobic and dystopic worlds regarding the patriarchal systems in which women are located and the severe cultural patterns that they are supposed to follow through. In general, they reveal a routine of hard physical labor in smoky kitchens and brutal human conditions. In Bharati Mukherjee's fiction, a mosaic of immigrant images is portrayed, and transnational displacements assume a

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[15] According to the Non-Resident Indian Online source, "about 80 percent of all Indians - nearly 750 million people based on 1995 population estimates - speak one of the Indo-Aryan group of languages. Persian and the languages of Afghanistan are close relatives, belonging, like the Indo-Aryan languages, to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family. Brought into India from the northwest during the second millennium B.C., the Indo-Aryan tongues spread throughout the north, gradually displacing the earlier languages of the area.[…] Despite the extensive linguistic diversity in India, many scholars treat South Asia as a single linguistic area because the various language families share a number of features not found together outside South Asia. Languages entering South Asia were 'Indianized.'" Cf. NRIOL, 2010.

privileged *locus*. As Peonia Guedes argues, "Mukherjee […] explore[s] relentlessly the contradictions in her own native culture and present[s] a dramatic revised vision of India, America, the world and the new immigrants" (2002, p. 277).

## 3. Bharati Mukherjee: the problematic of the construction of a U.S. writer

"I see myself as an American writer in the tradition of other American writers whose parents or grandparents had passed through Ellis Island," writes Bharati Mukherjee in the introduction to *Darkness* (1985, p. ix).[16] By using such words, Mukherjee pledges allegiance to her adopted country. The author chooses the symbol that represents the 'entrance door' to the U.S.A. for immigrants from everywhere, searching for the fulfillment of a dream, an ideal. This is epitomized by the monument located at the New York Harbor entrance: the Statue of Liberty, which functioned as a lighthouse from 1886 to 1902, and represents the freedom pursued by the newly arrived immigrants.

By providing such a metaphoric image of freedom, the Statue of Liberty itself, the author constructs a poetic perspective on the symbolic entrance to the U.S., the place she elects to be her land. The monument presents the following inscription engraved on a tablet within the pedestal on which the statue stands: *"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest – tost to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Emma Lazarus, the author of the poem from which this fragment was taken, wrote "The New Colossus" (1883) to help raise funds for a pedestal upon which the Statue of Liberty would stand. Contemporary readers may relate the inscription in the monument to Mukherjee's literature in the sense that the lighthouse may be read as a metaphoric image that enlightens the reflections over the social-historical conditions of the Asian American women in their transnational, transcontinental displacements, when they come to meet the "land of opportunities", the "promised land". That is the idea: the poem depicts the "Mother of Exiles" offering a "world-wide welcome" to the weary, hungry, and downtrodden.

The newly arrived should feel welcome in the new land, as the inscription suggests:

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[16] *Darkness* is a collection of twelve short stories that depicts the complex lives of the newly arrived Indian immigrants to the U.S.

> Emma Lazarus, in writing what she cared about, gave a very urgent, human message to a cold, colossal statue. Her small sonnet would – with time and the help of a friend, a composer, and the voices of schoolchildren across the country – shape the hearts and minds of a whole nation. It would forever declare that the Statue of Liberty and her torch stand as a welcome to immigrants and that the United States of America is a country that cares about those who come to our shores. (Cf. GLASER, 2010)

As Glaser points out in her remarks about Lazarus' poem, the welcome message proposed by the lines of the sonnet may be seen by Mukherjee's readers as an attempt to celebrate the "new winds" of changes with the arrival in the land of freedom. The author, as "an immigrant and a global cosmopolitan" (GUEDES, 2002, p. 277), elects the global city of New York as the setting of many of her stories: "Mukherjee's favorite fictional setting is New York, a syncretic and linguistic hodgepodge, a heterogeneously multicultural milieu, a thoroughly decentered system of circulating differences" (GUEDES, 2002, p. 278).

According to the critic and biographer Fakrul Alam (1996), Bharati Mukherjee was born into a wealthy Brahmin family in Calcutta in 1940. Mukherjee has manifested her literary tendencies since she was very young, by the age of three. Alam adds that the author moved to Britain with her family in 1947, living in Europe for about three and a half years. By the age of ten Mukherjee started writing stories. Her academic formation was partly done in India, where she got her B.A. degree from the University of Calcutta in 1959, and her M.A. degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture from the University of Baroda in 1961. Then, she went to the U.S., the country where she earned her M.F.A. (Masters in Fine Arts) in Creative Writing in 1963 and her Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature in 1969 from the University of Iowa, starting her professional life.

While studying at the University of Iowa, she met and married a Canadian student from Harvard, Clark Blaise, in 1963. The two writers met and, after an extremely short period of acquaintance, decided to get married. Mukherjee's career as a professor and marital status have given her the opportunities to teach and live in cities located in the United States and Canada. Bharati Mukherjee is currently a professor at the University of Berkeley, California.

In an interview with Bradley Edwards, in 2007, Bharati Mukherjee explains that, when writing *Desirable Daughters*, she felt compelled to undertake an identitary quest which was similar to the one she fictionalizes by means of her protagonist Tara's. She felt the need to rediscover her past, and come to terms with her own history, as it is perceptible in the following fragment:

> […] I began to realize that I and my character had to do roots search, which is a very American phenomenon. If I had married an Indian, stayed on in Kolkata, and written novels about Kolkata, I would never have really worried about who am I, what is my identity. I *am* my class, caste, mother tongue, and ancestral village; and that would have been it. That would have been enough. But having moved cities, countries, continents, like Tara, like Jasmine, and having gone through the process of discarding the communal identity that I was given and groping for an individual identity that's still evolving, I realized that now I had to relearn my family history and Bengali's history, especially the history of middle-class Bengali freedom fighters resisting the colonial British. I had to understand my upbringing as a thinking adult. And I was rediscovering my past from the perspective of an expatriate Bengali and a naturalized U.S. citizen. So, it was a very American phenomenon – a root search – that I was going through and my character, Tara, was going through. (EDWARDS, 2009, p. 143)

The major themes in Mukherjee's fictions focus on the "phenomenon of migration, and the status of new immigrants, and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates" (ALAM, 1996, p. 7), as well as on Indian women and their struggle to become independent and to feel free to build their own paths.  Mukherjee's own personal struggle started by assuming an amalgamated identity: first as she leaves India, then as an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as an immigrant in the United States of America. This has led her to a current condition of being an assimilated North American in a country whose history is permeated by the phenomenon of immigration. According to the author, by having emigrated, by choosing another language, and having married somebody from a different ethnic group, out of her caste, she crossed the line, and broke with tradition. She presents such a rupture by narrating a part of her own experience and family beliefs and traditions in a magazine, in an article entitled "American Dreamer", published in *Mother Jones* in 1997.

> In Calcutta in the '50s, I heard no talk of "identity crisis" – communal or individual. The concept itself – of a person not knowing who he or she is – was unimaginable in our hierarchical, classification-obsessed society. One's identity was fixed, derived from religion, caste, patrimony, and mother tongue. A Hindu Indian's last name announced his or her forefather's caste and place of origin. A Mukherjee could *only* be a Brahmin from Bengal. Hindu tradition forbade intercaste, interlanguage, interethnic marriages. Bengali tradition even discouraged emigration: To remove oneself from Bengal was to dilute true culture. Until the age of 8, I lived in a house crowded with 40 or 50 relatives. My identity was viscerally connected with ancestral soil and genealogy. I was who I was because I was Dr. Sudhir Lal Mukherjee's daughter, because I was a Hindu Brahmin, because I was Bengali-speaking, and because my *desh* – the Bengali word for homeland – was the East Bengal village called Faridpur. (Cf. *MOTHER JONES*, 1997)

Several common points between Mukherjee's biography and her characters' trajectories can be identified. However, the latter are not created with the purpose of representing the author's life, for they have their own autonomy and distinct histories in the fictional worlds imagined by the author. Concerning her identity perception, Bharati Mukherjee affirms to be

an assimilated citizen, which is justified by the absorption of Western and, particularly, North American experience incorporated in her cultural life.

Fakrul Alam (1996) categorizes Mukherjee's writing into three phases. Her earlier works, such as *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) and *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), represent attempts to pursue her identity by following the threads in her Indian heritage. The second phase, according to Alam, is depicted in works like the short story named "Wife" (1975), and an essay entitled "An Invisible Woman" (1981), for example. These works originate from Mukherjee's own experience of racism in Canada. In her third phase, Mukherjee is described as having accepted to be "an immigrant, living in a continent of immigrants" (1996, p. 9). Still according to Alam's categorization, Mukherjee starts from an identity search, going through racism experiences, until she recognizes herself as a global immigrant.

Considering such a trajectory in her life experience, Bharati Mukherjee defines herself as a U.S. American:

> I maintain that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I'm ashamed of my past, not because I'm betraying or distorting my past, but because my whole adult life has been lived here [the U.S.A.], and I write about the people who are immigrants going through the process of making a home here… I write in the tradition of immigrant experience rather than nostalgia and expatriation. That is very important. I am saying that the luxury of being a U.S. citizen for me is that I can define myself in terms of things like my politics, my sexual orientation or my education. My affiliation with readers should be on the basis of what they want to read, not in terms of my ethnicity or my race… (MUKHERJEE, 1997)

In her writings of the 1980's and 1990's, Mukherjee focuses on the immigrant experience, as in *The Middle Man and Other Stories* (1988), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993) and in *Leave it to me* (1997). The three last novels together compose a trilogy which explores the encounter of East and West due to immigrant experiences in the U.S.A. and Canada, developing the idea of North America as the great melting pot[17] of cultures. The author then publishes another couple of novels *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004), in which the same themes are revisited, but from renewed perspectives, as it will be shown below.

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[17] The term Melting Pot represents a metaphor for a heterogeneous society, with different ethnic elements, that melt together in order to become more homogeneous. It is very much used to describe the assimilation of immigrants from different parts of the world in the United States. This expression gained a huge importance with the play by Israel Zangwill, in 1908, and received applause from President Roosevelt, when he watched it during the opening night. The play depicts the idea of a land of universal love and brotherhood: "America is God's Crucible, the great Melting Pot, where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!" (Cf. ZANGWILL, 1939, p. 33).

And, in the beginning of this year, her latest novel entitled *Miss New India*[18] (2011) was released, completing the trilogy and introducing another protagonist, named Anjali Bose, who lives in Bangalore, India's fastest-growing metropolis; that is, the New India. This time, Mukherjee goes in the opposite direction in relation to that of her previous narratives. The story happens in India, which is presented as 'new India' – populated by

> the Aussies, the Canadians, the Germans, the Finns, but especially the North Americans – the ones who stayed a few months, then years – […] Among them, one in a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, became reborn, with no interest in returning home. (MUKHERJEE, 2011, p. 1)

Mukherjee presents rich Western immigrants that pursue something that goes beyond freedom: the wealth, symbolically materialized by the rich Western countries. In this narrative, such rich immigrants "settled down in towns and villages, learned the languages, and lived Indian lives" (MUKHERJEE, 2011, p. 1).

In her novels, Bharati Mukherjee strives to understand what is meant by the idea of a U.S. American identity, and opens up the possibility of reflecting about the construction of such an identity in a world characterized by hybridism and multiplicity. The author says that, as a writer, her literary agenda begins by acknowledging that the experience of living in the United States has transformed her. "The transformation is a two-way process: it affects both the individual and the national-cultural identity." She points out that many writers who focus on migration in their works "often talk of arrival at a new place as a loss, the loss of communal memory and the erosion of an original culture. I want to talk of arrival as a gain" (MUKHERJEE, 1997, p. 3).

The author deconstructs a unified and concrete notion of the Self, an action which represents an important issue for feminism. If one considers that the very categories that are used to construct identity are themselves indeterminate, it is easier to justify the fluid identitary aspects of Mukherjee's characters which are central to questions regarding parenthood, the body, and agency, a concept that is explained below.

Mukherjee's characters rely on many external factors in determining who they are and who they will become. The dynamics of identitary construction for the South Asian diasporic women continue to evolve, and the process of assimilation for the contemporary generation of

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[18] *Miss New India* (2011) is the third novel and completes the trilogy. In the beginning of my study, in 2007, I intended to work with the three novels, but just two were already published at that time: the first one, *Desirable Daughters*, in 2002, and the second one, *The Tree Bride*, in 2004. Considering the time limit to finish this study, this novel is not analyzed.

women, the complexities and paradoxes that will still emerge in future diasporic generations will produce new means and new mechanisms that will redefine what it means to be a South Asian woman in the U.S.. Mukherjee's fiction sheds light on such complex issues and interweaves the historical experience of immigration and the characters' personal identity quests.

By describing the experiences of the three sisters in the novels analyzed, Mukherjee exposes the trajectories of those women who 'break away from their traditional Indian communal identities and negotiate individual identities', in their own ways.

> […] I was interested in three sisters who find themselves for different reasons in the United States at a fairly young age breaking away from their traditional Indian communal identity and negotiating individual identity. Now the three sisters are in very different ways trying to think through what does home mean? Is it homeland that you inherit, which is a kind of imaginary ancestral village that you may never have been to? Is it just the caste that you have inherited, the class that your father has made accessible to you, or is home something that you carry inside you or that you fashion, invent on your own? The three sisters find very different ways of discovering the trauma of derailment. I had Tara who revels in the kind of individuality that gives license to act out your desires, and thought that was going to be it – individual accommodations in the context of American race relations, social relations, changing gender relations for the immigrant Bengali wife. (EDWARDS, 2009, p. 143)

Padma, Parvati and Tara, the three sisters referred to above, develop cultural identities that differ from that of their ancestor's – the Tree Bride, who abdicates her own personal life for the sake of a community in the village of Mishtigunj. They are not as tied to the Indian cultural tradition to the point of giving up their personal choices; they experience tradition in their own ways.

Being the first born, Padma or Didi, had to be the first one to get married, according to custom. But, as a matter of fact, at twenty-two, Didi goes to New York and starts to work at a theater selling tickets. "She lives now in Montclair, New Jersey, and is married to Harish Metha, a non-Bengali businessman previously married, and with grown children" (DD, p. 52). Parvati, the middle sister, "had done the unthinkable: she'd made a love match. They've met in Boston, where he was working at a bank while finishing an M.B.A." (DD, p. 51). She lives now with her husband and three teenage sons in Bombay, "on the fifteenth floor of a spectacular high-rise that from the back three bedrooms overlooks the Arabian Sea and, from the glass walls of the living room, the sweep of Marine Drive, ending in the skyscrapers of Nariman Point" (DD, p. 50). And Tara marries according to tradition, goes to live in the U.S. with her husband; they have a son named Rabi, but then, she decides to live her own life.

In spite of living separate lives in different places, and being adapted to them, the three sisters share a common feeling: the home connection. Such a perception may be represented by the image of a stable place loaded with authenticity and nostalgia. According to Massey (1994), "home is where the heart is" (p. 180); in Padma, Parvati and Tara's case, due to their spatial mobility, such a place is related to their shared memories of native homeland.

## 4. Reading *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*: a cultural perspective

A series of displacements takes place throughout the narratives of *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*, impacting on the protagonist's cultural understanding. Tylor's introductory consideration on culture, discussed by Greenblatt, is helpful in the context of the present discussion in the sense of relating the ethnographic perspective in the composition of a cultural identitary mosaic, a process which can be observed in Mukherjee's protagonist.

> The term "culture" has not always been used in literary studies, and indeed the very concept denoted by the term is fairly recent. "Culture or Civilization", wrote the influential anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in 1871, "taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [and woman] as member[s] of society." (GREENBLATT, 1990, p. 225)

This way, by relating the concept of culture to the identitary composite of the individual in a given society, it is possible to reflect on the relations developed by the characters of Bharati Mukherjee's novels. By resorting to the observation of the phenomenon of cultural assimilation, represented in the narratives, not only can I identify a utopian aspect, to the extent that one observes a movement or tendency towards reaching a reconciliation by means of the convergence of the cultural influences from the two worlds: Eastern and Western, which is manifested in the character's construction of a hybrid identity; but I can also notice a dystopian one in the sense that the female characters experiment subjection to patriarchal culture and feelings of alienation.

Throughout Mukherjee's fictions, both dimensions can be noticed. In the following fragment, for instance, the nostalgic utopian vision of a lost past is broken by the depiction of dystopic urbanization under colonial rule. In the depiction of the ancient village of Mishtigunj, before the British invasion. In the following fragment, a world made of beauty

and perfection can be initially identified in the description of the geography. The utopian space is, in turn, suddenly disrupted by the image of the "sprawling city" which takes over it:

> Last century's green-gold village of Hindus and Muslims set between the forest called in British days the Sunderbans, and the clean, fish-rich river called the George is now a sprawling city renamed Razakpur […]. There was a time when the extensive forests of the Shoondar Bon, the Beautiful Forest, protected all the southeastern Bengal from destructive storms. Wetlands filtered the salt and silt and sorted out the fisheries between shrimp and carp. (TB, pp. 28-9)

The idealized description above evokes an idea of a perfect and happy society, typically utopian. The idea of a place shared by Hindus and Muslims peacefully leads to a harmonious sense where nature assumes a fertile and abundant aspect. And the use of the expression "there was a time" emphasizes how far that time is from now. Besides, the presence of the 'Tree Groom' is also brought – Shoondar Bon, the Beautiful Forest who exercises his protection against natural destructive forces only, in a time before the British invasion. The image of a lost perfection is dismantled by the interference of Western political and cultural forces associated to the British permanence in the Indian subcontinent. Such an invasion brings several unfoldings to the notion of the Indian national identity composite.

Many critics have developed studies on the fictional construction of cultural identity. Among them, I emphasize the work by Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, who states her perception of the reconfiguration of the idea of national and cultural identity in Mukherjee's discourse of nationalism:

> By reformulating the "mosaic" and "melting pot" tropes of multiculturalism as a concept of cultural citizenship, Mukherjee's work suggests how multiculturalism as a narrative of exclusion which demands a model of homogeneous people can be reconstituted into a view of multiculturalism as a discourse and practice in continuous remaking, representative of the "routes" of identification brought into play by diaspora. (2005, p. 13)

Still according to this author, in the last three decades Mukherjee has been engaged in "redefining the idea of diaspora as a process of gain, contrary to conventional perspectives that construe immigration and displacement as a condition of terminal loss and dispossession, involving the erasure of history and the dissolution of an 'original' culture" (GABRIEL, 2005, p. 1). Thus, it may be argued that the dystopic principle manifested in Mukherjee's fictions by means of the colonial rule and patriarchal oppression leads towards a utopian trend in the dynamics of process and change implicit in the diaspora.

For Bharati Mukherjee, diasporic subjects before being dispossessed gain something valuable which can be associated to positive new perspectives, as they become displaced from their own homelands. I argue that Mukherjee probably has a more positive view of the diaspora because she considers herself a successful example as far as her process of

assimilation of North American culture has been thoroughly and maybe unproblematically accepted by herself.

Stuart Hall's considerations regarding the issue of diaspora are relevant in this context. His comments can be taken as an acknowledgement of the problem which arises from a normative universalisation of the diasporic identity: "a concept of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference, by hybridity" (1990, p. 235). In her narratives, Mukherjee represents what she defines as the hybridization of the United States of America and portrays the status of the new diasporic identity/ies of the ones who personify and embody several ethnicities together. This, in turn, results in the complex cultural composition of U.S. "real life" envisioned in her fictions.

Much has been discussed about the interconnections between Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies. According to Terry Eagleton, "[…] Indeed, the most flourishing sector of cultural studies today is so-called post-colonial studies… Like the discourse of gender and sexuality, it has been one of the most precious achievements of cultural theory […]" (2003, p. 6). The concept of cultural identity plays a central role in postcolonial struggles, once the processes of displacements and replacements in a new world order are leading to new geographical and cultural reshaping. The subject of diasporic experience may (re)discover something that was once hidden underneath history: the possibility to retell his/her own story by resorting to renewed personal perceptions that may generate, in turn, new conceptions of identity within new practices of representation. Thus, through such processes, the negative connotations of the experience of diaspora, resulting from forced displacements, victimization and alienation feelings, are gradually being replaced by a new scenario of recognition of the different as taking part in the construction of new patterns of identification.

This redefinition of the diasporic process in a positive perspective, in Mukherjee's literary production, can be identified in her first trilogy – *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World* and *Leave it to me*. The protagonists of each novel – Jyoti / Jasmine, Hannah / Salem Bibi, and Debby / Devi[19] – are strong women who long for a juster and more generous world than the one they inherited at birth. All the three characters in the above mentioned novels believe that they can gain recognition, respect, and above all, they hope to construct an unprecedented individual identity – with rights and confidence, so they embrace their recent experiences in the new world. But this does not mean that these three women abandon their cultural,

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[19] The doubled names refer to the fact that the protagonists undergo a change in their names as a symbolic part of their identity fluctuation.

ethnical, social heritages; instead, they try to come to terms with their own heritage. They do not erase their past, but they accumulate their experience by drawing a multicultural mosaic.

According to Hall, "identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact […], we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1990, p. 222). Thus, the unfolding identities which the protagonists develop can be understood as a part of the process of identitary production.

As it was already mentioned, Mukherjee's characters undertake transcontinental journeys, in order to acquire new perspectives, new experiences by means of which they may develop their potentialities. I argue that, in her writings, the author enables readers to reflect on culture from a renewed perspective by depicting characters that displace themselves throughout continents; and that, by doing so, they may represent the multicultural mix, opening up the possibility of the recognition of cultural 'minorities' which is opposed to a centered definition of culture. That is what Bish, the narrator's husband, does at Stanford, during his student time, for example.

> Americans agonized and complained, they worked too hard for too little recognition, they got extensions, they slept through classes, they doped themselves up for tests, but Indians just did their work on time and did it better and reaped the appropriate honors. Our training, not only in the old classrooms with second-rate equipment and uninspiring teachers, but also our training at home, duty and honor, obedience and respect, the whole dharma of studentship, spared us doubt and second thoughts. […] The Asian students plowed ahead. They handled duty very well. (DD, p. 44)

As a twenty-year-old girl at that time, the narrator perceives how Asians are able to achieve recognition more easily than the Westerners. This is not just to prove they are better, but because that is the way they were taught to act. And as a consequence, according to the author's positive perception of such a cultural mix, the 'minorities' become respected, admired and incorporated to the 'major' groups.

According to Gabriel, the author recognizes her authorial Self in terms of cultural identity process. Gabriel also brings the issue of the critical reception of the author's work into light:

> Concomitant with her literary and ideological reinscriptions of diaspora, Mukherjee has elected to describe herself as an "American" writer and has announced through various forums that it is the cultural narrative of America that has provided the

enabling site for her own identity transformations as well as those she celebrates in her fictions. Her revisionary cultural politics has aroused considerable critical interest, itself a measure of the author's rising stature, and it is necessary at this stage to briefly gesture to the wider discourse of literary criticism in which Mukherjee is placed with a view to understanding some of the meanings accrued to her and to her writings in a diasporic context. (2005, p. 1)

Bharati Mukherjee's discourse on migrants in the United States may locate them on the margin of contemporary U.S. society, when they are newly arrived. However, as they get the opportunity to interact with the 'dominant' groups, once they can interweave the cultural fabric of society, they prove to be capable of assimilating the culture completely and become recognized members of it. The author characterizes her work about migrants "not as oppositional to mainstream America but as representing the voice of 'new America'", and thus, it has been argued that she announces a "neo-nationalism", by reinventing the American nationalism (BREWSTER, 1993, p. 50).

The novels *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* are different from Mukherjee's previous work, especially from those of the first trilogy. Such difference may be perceived in the sense that, in Mukherjee's earliest narratives, the characters tended to be immigrants or outsiders, focused on rethinking their tradition and roots and reinventing themselves again in the United States, a precious but dangerous land, with myriads of possibilities but also with all the hazards implied by dislocation, rejection and prejudice.

Regarding *Jasmine*, one of the novels of the first trilogy, one might argue that Mukherjee's romantic ending[20] is a rather courageous portrayal of the diasporic experience, suggesting that readers must be more critical of the notion of agency and they must remember that, in this text, identity is created and recreated by one's surroundings, and not only by one's will. In my reading, I defend that Judith Butler's notion of agency, an account of women's capacity for individualized choice and action, may illuminate some aspects in the depiction of Mukherjee's characters. Butler states that "the question of locating 'agency' is usually associated with the viability of the 'subject', where the 'subject' is understood to have some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates." And she points out another possibility: one in which the subject being "culturally constructed is nevertheless vested with an agency, usually figured as the capacity for reflexive mediation, that remains intact regardless of its cultural embeddeness" (2008, p. 195). In my view, this can be observed in Bharati Mukherjee's characters' choices and actions.

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[20] By romantic ending, I refer to the protagonist's elopement with her U.S. lover, leaving behind a dull life in Iowa, and heading out to California.

A second notion of agency which is relevant to the context of the narratives must be emphasized at this point: in Tara Lata's time, a colonial India ruled by the British Raj is described, and in Tara Chatterjee's, that is, in contemporary times, India is an independent country, and the protagonist lives in the U.S. of America. Regarding the two distinct periods of time, it should be observed that these two women perform actions bearing in mind the resistance to imperial power and patriarchal regimes. In this sense, agency is important to "refer to the ability of post-colonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power" (ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS & TIFFIN, 2005, p. 9). Their actions are discussed below.

The protagonist's perception of her own identity can be understood *vis à vis* Frantz Fanon's description of self identification: "… if I were asked for a definition of myself, I would say that I am one who waits; I investigate my surroundings, I interpret everything in terms of what I discover, I become sensitive" (1967, p. 120). I argue that Tara Chatterjee's identitary construct may be perceived as she decides to undertake a roots quest. By doing so, she recognizes prior cultural elements that are negotiated according to her conscious choices and decisions.

Similarly to what happens to the protagonist in *Jasmine*, Tara Chatterjee rethinks tradition, reconsiders her roots, and questions her class, her caste, her gender, among other identitary traces, and this, in turn, leads her to reinvent herself in the United States. As stated above, however, there is a major difference between Jasmine and Tara: the fact that, in spite of the latter´s cultural background, she is not an outsider like Jasmine. She is an upper-class woman trying to come to terms with her cultural identity, and this involves the exploration of her ancestral history – The Tree Bride.

In the second trilogy, some aspects assume a different configuration from what may be thought of diasporic displacements. In *Desirable Daughters* (2002), tradition is represented by the protagonist's memories of her homeland – India and her family's ancestral roots. Tara Chatterjee finds herself tired of her wealthy life as the wife of a Silicon Valley tycoon, and begins to search for clues to her identity in her family's past, in India.

> In the two weeks that Rabi and I had been in the hotel without a telephone or a television set, I'd been writing at night on a rented typewriter, and the story that had begun to emerge was of the Tree Bride and of the class of Calcutta girls born a century later, both of them witness to dying traditions. Tara Lata Gangooly had turned the tragedy of her husband's death and a lifetime's virginity into a model of selfless saintliness. My story was different, perhaps even an inversion. But I'd been having hot Calcutta flashes, moments of intense recollection, smells so strong I sneezed. Just the memory of my mother bent over the fish stall selecting the freshest and firmest by smell and the iridescence of scales and eyes, had set me crying. If I

> didn't write their stories I'd explode; there'd be no one to mark their passing. (DD, p. 280)

The experience of a double identity leads the protagonist to her identitary quest. Tara Chatterjee's hybrid identity shakes the concept of her previous fixed identity, her "Indianness". As she enters the U.S. cultural context, she oscillates between being an Indian and a U.S. subject. For this reason, she needs to find out who she has has become.

Whereas *The Tree Bride* is a long narrative that portrays Tara's life in a continuum with a series of violent events that occurred in India during the British Raj, these savage events can be associated, in the past, to the aggressive measures of the British imperialism and to the Indian efforts to become free from it. And in relation to the present fictional time, these historical events are fictionalized in the representation of the terrorist attacks, which include the bombing Tara's house narrated in the beginning of the novel.

> Bish and I were standing on the back porch of my house in Upper Haight on a warm, November, California night. […] Rabi, our fifteen-year-old, came running out of his front bedroom asking, "Did you hear that?" Voices and scuffling on the sidewalk at three o'clock in the morning, he said, then the *slap-slap* of running sandals. […] And that's all I remember, until I found myself in the backyard under a shower of glowing splinters and balls of flaming tar that had been my home. My hair was singed off, my face and arms pitted by embers. Poor Bish lay beside me, his cotton pajamas burned into his skin and his feet transformed into blackened blocks from having carried me over the coals and flames that had been the back stairs and the lower deck. Rabi, the first one down, had leaped over the deck and railing. He was unhurt, but he was moaning and shivering in the heat. (TB, pp. 3-4)

This event triggers a series of investigations which also leads the protagonist back to her native homeland – India. Once there, Tara Chatterjee explores the paths of her ancestor's trajectory and finds out the connections between her family and the bomber's: the Gangoolys and the Hais. Tara tries to understand the implications which led the young man to destroy her house and almost kill her family. She states, "I know that somewhere in the wire-web of history, our lines have crossed" (TB, p. 246).

While *The Tree Bride* indicates tangential connections between Tara Chatterjee and many different historical figures she had never met before, *Desirable Daughters,* in its turn, portrays the hidden sympathies and dissonances within her family. After the bombing of her San Francisco house and a coincidental meeting during an ordinary visit to a doctor, Tara Chatterjee is compelled to try to decode who she really is. Her task is to trace the story of her great-great aunt, Tara Lata Gangoolly; and her search takes her into the heart of her family history, as well as the history of her ancestral village and of the individuals who live there.

*Desirable Daughters* introduces, at first, the story of the protagonist's ancestor, which is going to be pursued in the narrator's quest. The contemporary Tara finds a connection between herself and her great-great aunt, which sets the stage for the undertaking of her roots journey: "All of my life or at least ever since my mother told me the story of Tara Lata the Tree-Bride – and that I had been named for her – I had felt, for no discernible reason, a profound connection" (DD, p. 16). By questioning her life status, she wonders about her family origins. This conducts her to investigate the composition of her own cultural identity.

In the beginning of *The Tree Bride*, the protagonist recollects the stories she was told in her childhood. These include some Hindu legends that make her look back to her cultural origins, a useful and necessary knowledge for Tara's identity search. By examining the Hindu version of the stork legend, for instance, another connection between the two Taras may be traced as the soul of Tara Lata may have waited awhile to be embodied again – in her great-great-niece's body, Tara Chatterjee.

> When I was a very small child back in Kolkata, my paternal great-grandmother told me a very strange, very moving story about life-before-birth. Call it the Hindu version of the stork legend. Between incarnations, she said, the individual soul wanders in a dreamless state, like a seed between plantings, in the windy realm of *vayumandala*, waiting for its allotted time to reinhabit a living body. When the time arrives, it slips through a seam in the fetal skull and begins its phase of deep dreaming. The bodies it has previously inhabited have perished, but the soul persists. Fire cannot burn it, nor water drown it. It dreams of its past tenancies. It remembers the terrors and triumphs of its many lives on earth and links them together with the logic of dreams. (TB, p. 4)

According to the Hindu version of the stork legend, the ancient soul is reborn in a new living body, which bears its "past tenancies": Tara Lata's soul is reincarnated in Tara Chatterjee's body. In this sense, the fragment above functions as a metaphor for Tara Chatterjee's birth and epitomizes further approximations in the two characters' trajectories.

Their transgressive attitudes in the face of the establishment, for instance, provide another clue to such parallelism between the characters. Tara Lata provoked the British Raj by sheltering revolutionaries under her roof. The authorities considered her to be behind an insurrection, a fact which probably may have caused her death. In a similar way, Tara Chatterjee proved to be equally challenging, by breaking with the Hindu (Bengali) tradition – getting divorced and having a foreign lover – and also, by deciding to follow her own path. The ancestor's courage is brought back into life in the protagonist's attitudes, starting from

the very simple act of moving to a far different country, to the challenging attitude of breaking with her cultural tradition.

According to Gabriel, Bharati Mukherjee's fictions give a special and benevolent treatment to the process of gaining citizenship to her characters. The critic also emphasizes the negative representation of Indian culture and traditions in contrast to the Westernized view:

> […] her [Mukherjee's] optimistic narration of the American saga of immigrant incarnations elides a consideration of the material realities impinging on the Third World immigration, namely the role of race, class and gender in the workings of identity politics in America. Resident Indian critics and reviewers, on the other hand, have taken issue with her negative portrayal of Indian culture and traditions, viewing it as setting the context for her jettisoning of her past and cultural history so as to gain the full benefits of Americanization. Yet other scholars have attacked her pro-US orientation in the present world order, viewing it as mark of a compromised post-colonial praxis, and there are others who argue that her works, in particular the novel *Jasmine*, represent a co-optation into Eurocentric, colonial discourses of identity. (2005, p. 1)

To some extent, Mukherjee's fiction is indeed blind to the evils of the Third World's immigration process. That is to say, although her characters go through oppression, violence, they find redemption in the process of forging their U.S. cultural identity. I tend to agree with Gabriel regarding the absence of a more critical approach concerning the issues of "race, class, gender in the workings of identity politics in the America". It must be emphasized that the author seems to take a benevolent perception of the North American culture, while she is heavy on her native culture and traditions. I understand that Mukherjee possesses such an optimistic view for she has never been a poor or illiterate immigrant; on the contrary, she immigrated to the U.S. with a good academic background and married a North American citizen. This may indicate a possible way to understand her positive attitude to the West, North America particularly.

In her provocative article entitled "Looting American Culture: Bharati Mukherjee's Immigrant Narratives", Jennifer Drake affirms that Mukherjee depicts people and nations scattering and gathering. The critic emphasizes that "assimilation is cultural looting, cultural exchange, or a willful and sometimes costly negotiation: an eye for an eye, a self for a self." Drake defends her argument by pointing that

> Mukherjee's stories do not simply promote American multiculture or celebrate assimilation; rather, precisely in order to confront the historical circumstances of ethnicity and race in the United States and the complexities of diasporic subject-formation, Mukherjee fabulizes America, Hinduizes assimilation, and represents the real pleasures and violences of cultural exchange. (1999, p. 204)

In this sense, in the depiction of such individuals, the author seems to problematize, more deeply than Gabriel is willing to recognize, the difficulties presented by the assimilation process. So, Mukherjee's diasporic subjects are portrayed as newcomers who assimilate the dominant culture "as the result of a process of absorption of new cultural patterns" (BURGUESS and PARK, 1921, p. 735). And, her narratives are focused on the processes in which such negotiations happen.

The critic Susan Koshy, on the other hand, in her essay "The Geography of Female Subjectivity: ethnicity, gender, and diaspora" (1994), suggests that in Mukherjee's stories there is a celebration of U.S. assimilation and crucial erasures of differences that mark individual characters such as refugees (like Du, the son adopted by the protagonist Jasmine, in the novel under the same name), illegal entrants (like Jasmine herself, when she enters the U.S. as an illegal immigrant in an illegal vessel), highly educated professionals from Asia (like Bish Chatterjee, Tara's husband in *Desirable Daughters*). Her commentary, thus, anticipates Gabriel's opinion quoted above regarding the fact that Mukherjee's fictions "elide a consideration of the material realities impinging on the Third World immigration."

I perceive that Bharati Mukherjee, in her own experiences, first as a person from a privileged social class, who was partially educated abroad (in Europe and then in the United States), may have experienced some hardships as an immigrant, but she has not lived in extreme situations, that is to say, for having the financial conditions necessary to afford her studies, much of the feelings of rejection were not experienced by the author herself. But, on the other hand, I defend that Bharati Mukherjee's experiences as an immigrant in Canada, for instance, produced a huge impact on her impressions as an outcast. In Canada, she experienced feelings of rejection and prejudice. Therefore, I agree with Fakrul Alam, who points out that the prejudice suffered by the author in that country gave shape to her works of the second phase. The constraints experienced result in works such as the short story "Wife" (1975), and the essay entitled "An Invisible Woman" (1981).

It appears that, due to her own perceptions, the author feels confident to portray, the characters' feelings of rejection and acceptance in her stories. Hence, Mukherjee represents a convergence which is only apparently impossible: living the local life and being able to adapt elsewhere. As Avtar Brah affirms, "a combination of the local and the global is always an important aspect of diasporic identities." Brah emphasizes the peculiar way diaspora is experienced in recent times. She stresses the impact of technologies (electronic media, for

instance) as an important thrust in redefining what was once distant into somewhere close: "fast travel, […] simultaneous transmission to countries linked by satellite means that an event happening in one part of the world can be 'watched together' by people in different parts of the world" (1996, pp. 191-192). This way, great geographic distances are getting shortened by technologies, and such phenomena play a key role in promoting cultural dialogues. Thus, I tend to think that it is an inclusive process that is being offered to the global communication.

Such factors reconfigure the idea of community. Both the local and the global, here and elsewhere, are reconfigured in Mukherjee´s fiction, as evidenced in the following excerpt from *Desirable Daughters*: "The rhetoric of modern San Francisco makes me invisible. I am not "Asian", which is reserved for what in outdated textbooks used to be called "Oriental". I am all things" (DD, p. 78). By assuming to be "all things", Tara Chatterjee declares her globalized cultural identity/ies. In her eyes, she attempts to embrace a desired status – invisibility. In the U.S., she is not a rich Bengal-Brahmin woman; she may be just any woman.

In a transnational world where cultural inequities continue to be reinforced by economic and political influences and interferences in multiple levels, women need to open up maps and reinvent routes in order to facilitate their access to the circuits of power, a realm traditionally known as being a male prerogative. Efforts to deconstruct hegemonic, global, universal centers are being undertaken. "Nevertheless, recognizing the limits of a politics of location does not obviate the need for terms and concepts that help us address the tensions between conventional oppositions such as global/local and West/non-West" (KAPLAN, 2006, p.148). In this sense, Mukherjee's protagonist makes an effort to "demarginalize" her Indianness in the U.S., her new cultural territory.

Another issue addressed by Bharati Mukherjee in her narratives is the gender aspect, as already mentioned above. The author depicts, vividly, what it means to be a woman in India, according to a patriarchal system of a Third World country. The author herself points out how profitable the label 'Westernized' has become, especially, to a U.S. citizen. This process is observed in *Jasmine* in relation to the protagonist´s trajectory, which involves transnational and transcontinental movements; to her displacements throughout the U.S. territory; to the changes in her name(s) in order to 'adapt' better to the new status of an assimilated U.S. citizen. Such dynamics are part of this character´s construction of a 'brand

new', reconfigured U.S. identity. Jasmine dislocates herself from a strict and traditional view of the world into a 'modern' assimilated perspective which involves the acquisition of new ideas, values, desires, abilities and habits. Her onomastics mutability provides a metaphor for that: Jyoti/Jasmine/Kali/Jazzy/Jase/Jane… In the flux of the events she experiences, initially through the eyes of an Indian girl who was born in a village, to the displacements which she undertakes throughout continents, and finally throughout the United States, her identity is dramatically changed.

The protagonist of *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*, on the other hand, does not need to change name(s), to fight for inclusion or acceptance. I already mentioned the fact that Tara belongs to a high social group, not only in India for being a Brahmin Bengali, the highest caste in the national hierarchy, but also for being extremely rich in North America. And I also highlighted that although she has a wealthy and successful life, having reached a high standard in the so-called "American way" of life, she opts to track down her cultural-historical background in order to understand who she is/represents, by undertaking a journey back to India. It is symbolic that this happens after Tara Chatterjee's Californian house is bombed by mysterious people, causing serious wounds to Bish Chatterjee seriously, once she considers herself to be partially responsible for that occurrence. So, Tara understands that the probable reason for the bombing was an attempt to end her life. Thus, these events add to her necessity to find her identitary roots, which, in turn, make Tara return to India in order to pursue her family origins. Tara wants to write about her family history: "Bish, I have stories to tell. […] If I didn't write their [family members'] stories I'd explode; there'd be no one to mark their passing" (DD, p. 280). In the following extract, Tara presents the reason for returning to India:

> The Tree-Bride, the aged virgin who did not leave her father's house until the British dragged her off to jail, the least-known martyr to Indian freedom, is the quiet center of every story. Each generation of women in my family has discovered in her something new. Even in far-flung California, the Tree-Bride speaks again. I've come back to India this time for something more than rest and shopping and these gin-and-lime filled evenings with my mirror-self. I'm like a pilgrim following the course of the Ganges all the way to its source. (DD, p. 289)

Tara Chatterjee feels compelled to fill the gaps of her own identitary mosaic. In this sense, she returns to the India of her childhood, and tries to follow her ancestor's track, which takes her to building up a different perspective on the country in which she was born. This time, she concentrates her attention on the past, getting in contact with the story of Tara Lata

and the evils committed against women those days. As a result, she attempts to narrate her family story in order to understand her present in more depth, and be in peace with herself.

Concerning the fictional treatment given by Mukherjee to reveal the atrocities perpetrated to women in the East, particularly, in India, emphasis must be given to the very title of the novel *Desirable Daughters*, which clearly denotes a rather ironical sense. In Hindu societies, especially in over-protected patriarchal families, daughters are not desirable at all for they only foretell trouble. In fact, a mother who brings forth only daughters is looked down upon and considered to be an unlucky woman. The plot of the novel is conceived in a tone of defiance to this belief. The three daughters are three Brahmin upper-class sisters. They are three years apart from each other, and they also have the same birthday. The sister-characters are named Padma, Parvati and Tara. Their mother named them after goddesses[21], due to her belief in the power of the deities, longing for strength, capacity for survival and prosperity to her three daughters. All of them reach such things throughout the narratives, but in different ways.

Padma, or Didi, as she is called by her family, lives in New Jersey, but she can be associated with her Indian roots in her way of dressing, her taste for typical food, and her profession as the television anchor of an Indian television program set in Jackson Heights, Queens, run by her Indian lover. However, she is still married to a man who was once successful, and who now lives off her fame. Parvati is also characterized by having identity traces which are close to Indian cultural identitary elements, and this can be perceived, for instance, in her allowing her husband's relatives to be houseguests for long periods of time in their sophisticated apartment. Her wealthy lifestyle is ironically described by Tara as very stressful. And Tara, the protagonist, is the most "un-Indian" of the three sisters. She lives in San Francisco and, in the first novel, and gets divorced from an Indian Silicon Valley millionaire named Bishwapriya Chatterjee; while, in the second narrative, she finds herself as a divorced woman and in the process of getting back to her husband.

In *Desirable Daughters*, the story of the narrator's ancestor is presented: Tara Lata Gangooly who married a tree. In order to avoid family misfortune and death, "the god of Shoondar Bon, the Beautiful Forest, come[s] down to earth as a tree to save her from a lifetime of disgrace and misery" (DD, p. 16). And in *The Tree Bride*, the protagonist tries to understand the bonds which unite the Tree Bride and herself. In the passage below, the

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[21] The mythical symbolism of the names of the three sisters is discussed in chapter II below.

unfolding of the tree bride's unusual wedding is presented, which leads her to become an agent of changes, despite never having left the Mishtigunj village.

> 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. (DD, pp. 16-7)

Tara Chatterjee tries to figure out her ancestor's transformation from a docile Bengali Brahmin girl-child into an impassioned organizer of resistance against the British Raj. In this sense, the contemporary Tara feels the need to discover the 'real' bonds that connect herself and her ancestor and wonders there must be more to her than just a name. Despite the chronological and situational distinctions, as indicated in the passage below, both of them break with the rigid Hindu system in which they locate their origins. In the passage that follows, the protagonist lays claim to her bonds between herself and Tara Lata and to unacknowledged elements in her North American identity:

> Tara Lata the saint, the freedom fighter. Whatever the bond between us, it is less than obvious. Until six years ago, I had been a married woman, though never with vermilion in my hair, living in a gated community in Atherton, California. I have given birth to a son. I have become, as befits an educated, thirty-six-year-old Californian, free and well traveled. I suspect I will grow old, but I know I will never change the world. (DD, pp. 17-18)

Despite the chronological distance between them, they both develop similar roles, but in different ways. Tara Lata becomes a wife by marrying Shoondar Bon, a mother of "the exiles" (the dispossessed, refugees, unprotected…), free to act according to her beliefs – in short, she becomes a freedom fighter. As Tara Chatterjee marries Bish, she becomes the mother of two children, and draws her own destiny.

Considering Tara Chatterjee's search for roots, and also the elements of her amalgamated identity, I believe that there is a utopian seeking that motivates both narratives. In her attempt to reconcile the part of her Indian heritage with her life as an assimilated North American woman, some unorthodox attitudes provoke astonishment in both Indians and U.S. Americans, but for different reasons: one example is the fact that her ex-husband continues hiring her lover as his driver, even after finding out about their love affair:

> He [Bish] considers that fact that Andy [the lover] sleeps with his ex-wife the best possible guarantee of quality work. It's one of those San Francisco things I can't begin to explain in India, just like I can't explain my Indian life to the women I know in California. (DD, pp. 25-26)

Another example of a cultural crossover is the use of *mehndi*, the henna decoration of the Indian women's bridal hands, by non-Indian girls. "A couple of giggling younger girls were non-Indian, Greek or Latina, getting their hands painted purely for fun. […] I [Didi] think it's fascinating that you girls have discovered a contemporary American use for an ancient Indian tradition" (DD, p. 202).

This way, two examples of unorthodox attitudes are portrayed (the family arrangement and the ex-husband´s attitude towards Tara´s lover; and the use of henna as fashion trend), which can be viewed as contemporary (re)readings of traditional relations and uses. In both instances, there is change in human relations: in the first one, the 'unthinkable' coexistence of the divorced woman, her ex-husband and her lover. And, in the second one, the 'new' symbolism of bodily inscriptions can be observed. In both cases, westernization is clear; and so is a utopian tendency in the idea of alterity as bearing a positive connotation: it is feasible that an ex-husband and a lover may coexist in the same space, as it is also possible to face otherness as some sort of excess in culture, something that acts to complete a(n always unreachable) whole.

In developing the idea of a utopian aspect in the search for cultural identity, I draw attention to the village of Mishtigunj as a remote, peaceful landscape where Tara Lata Gangooly isolates herself from the rest of the world, after the night of her strange marriage. The character is beyond people's reach and assumes an attitude of a "saint", of a special and "untouched" being. And Mishtigunj is described as the place which receives and protects her. "The narrow world of the house and the city felt as secure to me [Tara Chatterjee] as it must have to Tara Lata in Mishtigunj" (DD, p. 23). The utopian dimension, in this case, is perceptible in the representation of the isolated space as an enclave, a haven, which is a recurring motif in utopian literature.

I also perceive a transformation and reconfiguration of the village into the headquarters of young soldiers and rebels, which signals a shift in perspective from utopian to dystopian tendencies. When Tara Lata decides to open her house to receive such people, she takes part in the rebellion, also becoming a fighter and supporter herself, a different person from that one she had become in the night of her uncommon wedding. The portrayal of the evils of violence and oppression in Mishtigunj characterize dystopian aspects, going in the opposite direction from the utopian aspirations of happiness, prosperity, benevolence and good conduct initially associated with that space.

Considering the idea or motif of utopia as an ideal place, a refuge from a troubled reality, it must be emphasized that Tara Lata's house is transformed from an idyllic place into

a 'bad' place: a territory where violence is perpetrated against the inhabitants whose lives the authorities want to control. Thus, the idea of the refuge as an alternative 'good' place is subverted. In a passage of *Desirable Daughters*, the evils committed against the people during the rebellion period in Mishtigunj are presented. In this passage, Bharati Mukherjee makes use of a different graphic strategy in her narrative. The atrocities are introduced in a list format, in which the violent actions appear as statistics, like a report.

> MISHTIGUNJ
> Killed by bullets - 9
> Wounded by bullets - 35
> Rape and assault on women - 65
> Assaulted by lathi-charge - 359
> Homes looted by police - 100
> Homes burglarized by miscreants - 70
> Houses burned by soldiers - 20
> Arrested - 617 (DD, p. 308)

Talking about the past is always a way of telling a story, that is to say, it arises a connection between history and fiction. According to Hutcheon (1988), "narrative is what translates knowing into telling, and it is precisely this translation that obsesses postmodern fiction" (p. 121). However, the subjectivity of those who write history must be taken into account. She proceeds by stating that "historiographic metafiction incorporates intertexts (textual antecedents) from both literature and history" (p. 132). Concerning the fragment above, the textual antecedents, which are the reported atrocities perpetrated against women taken as an interpretation of the historical events during the colonial period in the narratives must be emphasized, as they lead to the comprehension of a reading of growing violence in the Indian territory, due to the conflicts between the nationalists (the ones who wanted to free the nation) and the invaders (the British officials).

As I have exposed so far, the effect of this strategy, in this extract, works as a "condensation of evils" in the form of a list, which provides the rendition of dystopic reality in a very dramatic way. Therefore, I may say that both utopian and dystopian tendencies are presented in the novels discussed. On the one hand, there is irony in the utopian traces indicated by the utopian seeking for the protagonist's identity: "Mishtigunj has always been there. Everything and everyone had always been there, without origin or ending" (TB, p. 28). An ironic aspect can be perceived in the narrative when the protagonist states that the place has no origin and no ending. And, even so, she goes to the village to search for her "identitary roots". Tara Chatterjee affirms that, "We've been trained to think of Mishtigunj as home in ways that our adopted homes, Calcutta and California, must never be. Ancestors come and go, but one's native village, one's *desh*, is immutable" (TB, p. 29). Utopian traces are depicted in

relation to the ancestral village of the legendary character – Tara Lata Gangooly – as the notion of magic can be associated to the image of perfectness, typical of an ideal society: "That's how it goes; you put the word out, and magic things happen" (TB, p. 28). Another point to be stressed is the suspension of linear time, a sense of timelessness which suggests a utopian time-space outside history.

As it has also been pointed out above, a dystopic reality can be observed in the novels. First, in ancient times, violence is manifested in Mishtigunj by the imposed marriage of a five-year-old child. Then, more violence is presented in the lists of atrocities committed against women, culminating with Tara Lata's murder. And in more recent times in the narrative, violence and destruction compose the chaotic narrative setting – the bombing of Tara Chatterjee's house, leaving Bish crippled, as he suffers the impact of the explosion, and the violence committed against Victoria Khana, her doctor friend, causing her death.

The representation of dystopian elements in Mukherjee's fiction is characterized by a perceptible gendered point of view. This aspect enables us to emphasize the convergences between the textual strategies deployed by the author and theorizations on the literary genre of the feminist critical dystopia. For Cavalcanti, such narratives "portray, in most cases in an exaggerated way, women's oppression under patriarchy, thus provoking a cognitive response and satirical attitude with regard to our gender-polarized social environment" (1999, p. 14). As mentioned above, one of the textual strategies observed in the feminist dystopias is the structural condensation of historical acts of oppression against women in a fictional form (CAVALCANTI, 1999). In Mukherjee's fiction, an inventory of atrocities perpetrated on women is made.

By registering the violent acts in a list format, Mukherjee calls attention to the "gender- polarized social environment," in which Indian women are subjected to male's aggression and authority. Tara Lata writes the facts "quickly on lined sheets of an exercise book." As she longs to let to world know (by her acquaintance with an English journalist who writes about) the horrors caused by the interference of the British Empire. "The results will be dispatched to a sympathetic English journalist. It will be on the wire and tucked somewhere in the world's papers behind the war news, in three day's time" (DD, pp. 307-308). Meanwhile, the police surround the rajbari[22], which means palace, as the Tree Bride's house was called by the locals, as she finishes her evening prayers. Here is the list she makes:

Details of atrocities perpetrated on women:

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[22] "Rajbari" means king's palace, in Bangla, Dubalhati Rajbari was originally the residence of the Maharajas of Dubalhati. Cf. ENCYCLO, 2007.

> Kanonbala Devi (pregnant); raped repeatedly by 4 policemen
> Sonamoni Devi (widow); raped once before daughters-in-law
> Shefali Dutta (virgin); molested before being taken into detention
> Chhaya Devi (mother of six-week-old infant); beaten, raped twice
> Radha Devi (new bride); stripped naked, beaten, raped repeatedly
> Charulata Devi (pregnant); kicked in the stomach by five policemen
> Manoda Devi; skull broken by lathi for waving Congress flag
> Giribala Devi; shot in both legs for giving water to fallen fighters (DD, p. 308)

*Desirable Daughters* ends up with familiar stories of female victims on the verge of personal enlightenment and freedom from the oppressive patriarchal and political Hindu systems. The passage quoted above brings to light some polemical and shocking elements that require a reading from a feminist perspective. Considering the cultural context in which those women are inserted, I observe that some categories such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, among others, must be taken into account. These may have worked as an 'allowance' for the atrocities to be perpetrated, having in mind the targets: women who supported the rebellion against the British Raj.[23]

Tara Lata´s murder functions as a message of intolerance to those who may represent opposition against the establishment. In this sense, she personifies the resistant spirit by taking contrary positions to the official government. She is the woman who may represent all women, once her class and caste allow her actions. In terms of material aspect, she comes from a rich, Bengali Brahmin family, inheriting a house from her father, which serves as refuge against the oppressive regime.

According to Vita Fortunati, in the traditional literary representations of utopian projects of societies, women are not portrayed as having an alternative way of getting free from the tensions incarnated by the male figures. Fortunati points that there is a tendency of

> […] repeating myths and customs of the patriarchal society of the time. On the one hand, women become the object of his [man's] desire, on the other, there is the prevailing image of women: as life-givers and providers of goods and values. Reviewing the history of utopia in a female perspective revealed the duplicity of the image of women in Western culture: on the one hand, women as 'land to be cultivated', 'womb', exalted and sublimated because of their naturalness, on the other, women as obscure, threatening force, with insatiable sexual appetite. (2006, p. 2)

One may observe connections between Fortunati's remarks on utopian writing, which stresses the role of women as being "the object of man's desire", as well as their image "as life-givers and providers of goods and values", and their representation in realistic fiction. In Mukherjee's novels, this is evidenced in the reproduction of the patriarchal structures in the ancestor's trajectory, and in the male dominance prevailing in such an idyllic place, as in the

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[23] An examination of cultural identities through a gendered perspective, favoring the analysis of the intersections between gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality and agency, is developed in chapter three below.

village of Mishtigunj. As shown above, the decisions made and the relations established through the use of force are triggered by the authoritative presence of men. For instance, the young Tara is forced to get married by her father, in order to follow the traditions. Another example is that the women in the village become targets of men's violent actions, for disobeying male authority, by acting against the British Raj. Thus, Bharati Mukherjee's approach to the issues of power in her fictions reveals a tendency to reproduce the *status quo,* but in a critical way as evidenced by the ironic and dramatic dystopic principle identified as a textual strategy which may function to question male dominance.

According to the colonial administration, Tara Lata is characterized in the role of a leader, becoming a freedom fighter; the authorities want her support for such a reason. "[W]e wished to work cooperatively with all native elements, especially those in leadership positions. […] since she occupied a revered place in the community, we expected greater signs of cooperation from her than we did from ordinary folk" (TB, p. 210). For having strength and courage to defend her ideas, the Tree Bride becomes a leader, but at the same time, it may represent quite a contrast, she is also characterized as a "saint", not only by the locals but also by some officials. They say that "she'd managed to take the curse of virginity – the worst thing a woman can be in that country – and elevate it into something worthy of a Catholic saint" (TB, p. 211). Therefore, for loading these two labels, she is identified as someone highly dangerous, a person who defies the system – a prerogative of male subjects.

Tara Lata develops strategies to resist and confront the colonial control over "a bunch of literate savages that reserve the right to second-guess your [Winston Curchill's] every decision" (TB, p. 212). She also turns her house into an ultimate resistance place, sheltering all kinds of people: from violent and wanted men, according to official reports, to fragile children and women. By doing so, she is referred to as a saint, as a god (an instance which is rendered in an ironic and sexist narrative discourse):

> In her youth she'd trained all her servants to read and write and then she'd sent them out into villages to teach five others. Every day there'd be a knot of women sitting outside her door praying to Tara-Ma. Praying for children, if you can believe it, praying for sons, praying for healthy sons, praying for a husband, for a sober husband – she who knew nothing of husbands. (TB, p. 212)

Judith Butler, in her *Gender Trouble*, considers the existence of an identity and of a subject that is represented in politics and language. For Butler, "women" and "woman" are fraught categories, complicated by other categories like class, ethnicity, sexuality, and others. I quote Butler in order to clarify the need to rethink the identity concept of woman / women.

> Apart from the foundationalist fictions that support the notion of the subject, however, there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption

that the term *women* denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, *women*, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety. As Denise Riley's title suggests, *Am I that name?* is a question produced by the very possibility of the name's multiple significations. If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate our "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (2008, pp. 4-5)

By making the list referred to above of atrocities perpetrated on Indian women by the male members of the British Raj, Bharati Mukherjee focuses on abuses committed to the weakest elements in the Indian society, lower caste village women. I defend that, as a textual strategy, the portrayal of such atrocities is used by the author as a sexual political issue. By incorporating the violent acts against women, the author exposes an ideology of oppression and enables an examination of how thoroughly culture and society are dominated by men. Actually, violence against women, especially sexual violence, has been a key issue for feminist criticism for decades. In early feminist critiques, like Kate Millet´s *Sexual Politics* (1970), the author focuses on male sexual violence against women as displayed in modern literature. Mukherjee addresses a similar issue to the extent that her fictions also figures the male degradation of women´s bodies. Chapter three below provides further analyses of such traits.

In her fictions, Bharati Mukherjee seems to call the readers' attention to the abuses women have been subjected to by means of drawing from historical circumstances of dystopic situations lived by women in remote societies. The author represents and contextualizes an oppressive system which is emblematic of patriarchal societies, by depicting the parallel stories of the Tree Bride and of the protagonist and her sisters. Despite being born into wealthy Brahmin families, these women are constrained by a society which still shows little regard for women. The desirable daughters' subsequent rebellion leads them to different directions, to distant continents, under different circumstances. In spite of all different situations they undergo, they converge in relation to their historical background and share a common pursuit: they want to know who they are, and to become themselves.

## 5. Culture and identity: the survival of difference

Throughout human history, the question of identity has usually been associated to the politics of place, space to be inhabited, and the connections developed in relation to it. Today,

the meaning of place has been reconfigured. The former idea of somewhere static has been replaced by the notion of place as an encounter with global processes. However, some experiences which are favored by the globalization process cannot be replaced by the perceptions of a place, for instance, sensations such as taste, smell, touch, among other forms of interaction. A McDonald's shop in New Delhi makes this premise true, but still, the experience of eating there is something unique (Cf. ROSALDO, 1988). In this case, a dialogue between the global and the local can be verified, and such a confluence may produce and reproduce identity/ies.

In recent conceptualizations of the notion of place, emphases have been given to its varied configurations: "photos (images of places), shops, rural environments, different images of black/white[red/yellow] women, a pregnant body, the Earth, web site, …" (Cf. ROSALDO, 1988, p. 180), but for now, I concentrate on a specific notion of place represented by the concept of 'home'. According to Doreen Massey's idea of 'home' as being "a source of stability, reliability and authenticity" may "reverberate with nostalgia for something lost", which can be "coded female" (p. 180). For many women, home represents the most important private and political space from which their social roles and identities are derived. Paradoxically, home may offer the idea of a safe space where women may exercise their power and influence, but also of a place where they may experience, to some extent, violence and oppression. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's interest on the meaning of home for immigrants and migrants is relevant for this study. Mohanty believes that the understanding of such an issue is related to a political perspective.

> A number of actions, decisions, and organizing efforts [friends, colleagues, comrades, classes, books, films, arguments, and dialogues were constitutive of Mohanty's political education] led me to a sense of home and community in relation to women of color in the United States: home, not as comfortable, stable, inherited, and familiar space but instead as an imaginative, politically charged space in which the familiarity and sense of affection and commitment lay in shared collective analysis of social injustice, as well as a vision of radical transformation. Political solidarity and a sense of family could be melded together imaginatively to create a strategic space I could call "home." (2003, p. 128)

Thus, the renegotiation of relationships within the home, and with the surrounding environment, is not limited to the private realm, but involves a multi-layered web of aspects such as economic, political and social issues. And when the space becomes public and the individual is a female subject, new political practices must be thought of. Considering that such a scenario used to be, historically, a space of male prevalence, to which women had

limited access or were consigned to oblivion, much has had to be done in order to widen the restricted roads of gender inequities.

In a reconfigured world context where women are putting themselves in movement, literal and metaphorically speaking, and trying to propose new practices in negotiating their own roles in society, the construction of a gendered-oriented political agenda appears. When women undertake transnational movements, they long to achieve a different/better condition (social, economical, political, impacting on the subcategories: gender, race, class, sexual, etc) than the one they had before, in their own country. But "citizenship and immigrant laws are fundamentally about defining insiders and outsiders" (MOHANTY, 2003, p. 67). Mohanty points out that the history of immigration and naturalization in the United States "parallels the process of racialization that has occurred through the history of slavery and civil rights" (p. 68). In the recent U.S. context, immigration laws continue to be strictly enforced.

Chandra Mohanty has also called for a modified and extended practice of the politics of location that includes the "historical, geographical, cultural, psychic and imaginative boundaries which provide the ground for political definition and self-definition" (MOHANTY, 1987, p. 31). Thus, she emphasizes the necessity of an examination of the production and reception of discourses of difference from a feminist perspective. Mohanty is interested in the way location determines and produces experience and differences.

An important aspect to be observed relates to the ways the production and reception of discourses of difference have been operated, particularly in India. Inderpal Grewal brings an example of how transnational corporations, in the case she is looking at, Mattel, have moved to "a newly liberalized Indian economy", implying modifications in the assembly line and "interrelated changes in discourses about femininity, gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationalism" (GREWAL, 2005, p. 81). Grewal exemplifies how Mattel's goods and practices are altered in India, producing new versions of consumer feminism that have taken Indian roots. Thus, it may be argued that discourses of difference have been put into practice within the transnational connectivities, and, in many cases, they involve diasporic displacements.

The rising importance of Western fashion, among other factors, has produced economic and cultural impacts in India. Such impacts have, in their turn, led to 'demystifying' the process of exoticism, as well as forging identities based on ethnicity, gender, and class in a world in which borders are claimed to vanish increasingly, and difference has acquired the meaning of non-exclusion, as another aspect to be appreciated.

> The term "exotic" was a reminder of the long history of romanticizing and commodifying difference within cultures of tourism and travel. Furthermore, Barbie in a sari materially evidenced the movements of transnational capital to India. It also suggested that difference, as homogenized national stereotype, and as a marker of race and gender difference, could be recuperated by multinational corporations: that the national and the foreign could exist in this "global" economy. As a white female tourist in an India opening itself to investment from abroad, Barbie, an icon of white, heterosexual American femininity, was able to put on the sari, a signifier of Indianness, and be "at home." An embodiment of the Indian state's policy of economic liberalization and its need for foreign investment, Barbie was ready to enter India. (GREWAL, 2005, p. 82)

Considering the exposition above, I argue that, in Mukherjee's novels, particularly in the ones studied here, there is an attempt to celebrate difference by the assimilation process. In her fictions, the author constructs a convergence between the Indian and the U.S. cultures, and proposes a dialogue between them. One illustration of this point lies in the fact that the three sisters – Padma, Parvati and Tara – are characterized according to U.S. magazine standards: "I read an article once about middle daughters, shortly after arriving in the United States as a newlywed. […] Middle daughters, Parvatis, are less assertive and more pliant than their older Padmas or younger Taras" (DD, p. 43). The same narrative also suggests differences, meaning opportunities, as a reinforcement of what attracts the immigrants most. "Jackson Heights is a landscape of potentialities that had been denied in India. […] No caste, or regional or familial strings to pull, no favors to trade" (DD, p. 200). As hinted in passages like these, Mukherjee updates ancient Indian traditions, by putting them into a cultural dialogue with contemporary U.S. upper-class society, thus, emphasizing the encounter of the Western and the non-Western worlds.

Barbara Abou El-Haj conceives the formation "global-local" as a "quantitative step forward" and as a possible equivalent term of power relations. "It suggests no charged hierarchical divisions, is less concordant with spatial boundaries or geographical regions, is capable of encompassing unequal distribution *within* as well between national and regional entities" (ABOU EL-HAJ, *apud* GREWAL, 2006, p. 11). For some critics in the United States, the global-local binarism seems to be real, because they relate it to what is understood as 'reality', that is to say, the relationship between 'federal' and 'local' governments in the United States, for instance. But, in other parts of the world, for some other people, such expression does not make any sense. Therefore, what may sound inaccurate in such a binarism is that the parameters of the global and the local are usually undefinable and inapprehensive in given contexts.

Ranajit Guha believes that the global-local expression as a 'monolithic formation' may also erase

> [t]he existence of multiple expressions of 'local' identities and concerns, and multiple globalities. In this particular way, global-local binaries dangerously correspond to the colonialism-nationalism model that often leaves out various subaltern groups as well as the interplay of power in various levels of sociopolitical agendas. For instance, the Subaltern Studies group, in rethinking India nationalist history, identifies several 'dominant groups'. First they demarcate the 'dominant indigenous groups' from the 'dominant foreign groups'. Then they further subdivide the 'dominant indigenous' groups into three parts: the 'all-India level', and the 'regional and local' levels. (GUHA, *apud* GREWAL, 2006, p. 11)

Guha's divisions continue to be problematic in terms of gender distinctions, which are not mentioned in his classifications. It may be deduced that gender is contained in those subdivisions, although it is not considered explicitly. However, according to this critic's view, what matters is concerned to the variability of what is considered to be 'local'. And, still reasoning on the global-local compound, Stuart Hall, "argues that global and local are two aspects of the same phenomenon" (HALL, *apud* GREWAL, 2006, p. 12). Hall proceeds by saying that the global and the local may cover the similarities or links in the process of globalization. He associates globalization to a cultural homogenization, emphasizing that "the oppositional nature of postmodernity; the return to the local as a response to the seeming homogenization and globalization of culture can only work for social change if it does not become rooted in exclusivist and defensive enclaves" (p. 12). Hall believes that "the boundaries crossing aspects of postmodernity" are valued when expressed in "transnational debates about identity and culture" (p. 12).

From all that was mentioned above in relation to such a binarism, ranging from Abou El-Haj's position that conceives it as something "indefinable and inapprehensive", to one that is argued by Hall, as being "two aspects of the same phenomenon", I favor an understanding of such a relationship as being a combination of those two conceptions of what is useful for a comprehension of Mukherjee's novels.

Inderpal Grewal, a theorist in feminisms and diasporas, who looks especially at the Asian/North-American diaspora, investigates the connection of diasporic, national, hyphenated subjects located in the United States to the various concepts of cosmopolitanism that are rooted in cultural, literary, feminist, Asian-American, and postcolonial studies. Grewal studies the impact of cultural influences, transformations, and representations that can affect the understanding of those major transnational human movements that form the basis of diaspora studies. She examines authors who reside in the United States, with cosmopolitan

discourses. One of them is Bharati Mukherjee, who sees herself as a nationalist, but also takes part in a "cosmopolitan network of knowledge production". In Grewal's words,

> Mukherjee's cosmopolitanism coexisted easily with her belief in the nation-state as the guarantor of rights and privileges as well as with a stable ethnic identity that was not seen as conflicted with her American identity; her work was not anti-colonial or even written in response to the continued power of the West within late-twentieth century globalizations. Consumable in the United States and India within a genre of Asian immigrant women's writing that rapidly became popular by the end of the twentieth century, and participating in the transnational production of works that depicted Asian "traditions" as unmodern, this text [*Jasmine*] was able to create connectivities that articulated knowledges about women within transnational and cosmopolitan, feminist and literary circuits. (GREWAL, 2005, p. 39)

Considering the current transnational/transcontinental movements performed by individuals, the notions of boundaries, borderlines, limits, 'contact zones', 'in-between spaces', and other related terms have come into use and have attracted world interest in cultural discourses, reconfiguring earlier conceptions of the subject in terms of social, psychological, and intellectual life. Anthropological dimensions of the subject and its multiple ways of representing the world characterize a challenge among the concerns in the area of the humanities. Such presuppositions are related directly to my aim, in this study, to understand the representation of the formation of cultural identities due to the protagonist's transnational displacements in Bharati Mukherjee's novels.

I perceive a reconfiguration of the connections between the local and the global in Tara Chatterjee's identitary processes. In this sense, the novels construct a dialogue between global-local social and spatial dimensions which enable the crossings over boundaries. For instance, the village of Mishtigunj and its most illustrious inhabitant, Tara Lata, have their local aspects revealed in a documentary made from a global perspective, through a Western look. In the passage below, the dwellers of Mishtigunj are talking to Tara about the referred project and Rabi plays two roles, that of a video maker and also that of a participant in an Indian ritual:

> "Your son is making documentary? Sometimes foreigners see our city through cataract-eyes. You want I explain Kashi [a sacred city, considered to be the City of the Dead] to him?" [...] Rows of bamboo biers are lined up on the cremation grounds as we arrive. The smoke, the flames, the heat, the soot, and the grease: they become part of Rabi's project. Some of the corpses are of men and women who were brought to Kashi to die, because to die here is to be saved instantaneously. "A hundred pyres, no waiting," Rabi quips. We have no corpse of the Tree Bride. Instead we have a raffia figure the head funeral priest's assistants have made as a proxy. A proxy-soul for a proxy-bride. [...] Rabi hands me his videocam. It is his duty as the only living male blood relative present, the Tree Bride being a mother's side connection. He seizes the kindling and touches the raffia mouth of the Tree

Bride. If it were a real corpse – as someday Bish and I will be, and when Rabi performs our ceremonies – the skull would explode and the soul escape its fleshy prison. (TB, 2004, pp. 290-292)

From the reflections made above, we can observe that, once culture inscribes the human being in a social-historical context, it is possible to perceive structural changes, as they transform societies and our own personal identities, provoking fragmentations in many cultural aspects, such as class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality. In this sense, Rabi is changed by socio-cultural influences he has received from his family and from the Indian spatial dimensions. Cultural identity plays a role in emphasizing the relations established with the social-political transformations, constructing one moment as effect, the next as participation in such changes. Homi Bhabha suggests a dialogue between culture and identity, which may function as an instrument of articulation between those two categories. He states that

our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the 'present', for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftness of the prefix 'post': postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism… (2006, p. 1)

The "sense of survival" described by Bhabha may be verified in several struggles employed by many immigrants, in their attempts to get rid of the label of outsiders, and be recognized as citizens. Bhabha defends that in the contemporary individual's identitary quest there is "the move away from the singularities of class or gender as primary conceptual and organizational categories", which resulted in an awareness of the individual's attitudes, as regarding factors that may create the identity in the postmodern world scope, such as: gender, geopolitical locations, sexual orientation, among others. Bhabha proceeds by indicating the necessity of shifting to "beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences – the 'in-between' spaces" (2006, p. 2).

Those borderline locations offer the possibility of the elaboration of new identitary signs as a result of a diversification of cultural aspects. By questioning the identitary formation of the individuals arising from the 'in-between' spaces of culture, Bhabha focuses on the cultural conflict which takes place in the relation between tradition and postmodernity, indicating the impossibility of "any immediate access to an originary identity or a 'received' tradition" (2006, p. 3). What must be understood is that the borderline undertakings of cultural differences "may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the costumary boundaries between the private

and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress" (p. 3).

Concerning the novels being analyzed, I defend that the encounter of tradition and postmodernity may be observed in two different levels: the one in which the protagonist, who lives in a postmodern world, struggles with her tradition as a way of trying to adapt to new U.S. cultural patterns; and another one in which she attempts to reconcile her Eastern cultural background to the acquired Western experiences. Whereas the fragment below brings evidence of cultural elements which contrast values (old and new); at the same time, it proposes a typical postmodern reconciliation between them.

> "I want you to notice how much freer Rob's brush strokes are," she said, as we riffled through his portfolio. I was astonished not just by his freer brush strokes, which were, as always, a wonder to me, but his art teacher. Her nametag said Indy Verma, which stood for Indira, I imagined, and Verma denoted her caste and region and native language as plainly to me as mine did to her, if she cared, or knew. She couldn't be more than twenty-five, wore a linen jacket over faded jeans and a T-shirt, and talked like a Valley girl with "likes" and "totallys" in every sentence and "he goes" and "I'm like" instead of "he said" and "I said." She had gone to UC-Santa Cruz. How do our children learn the language, I wondered, thinking back to our elocution lessons in Calcutta, the prime directive for convent education being Cambridge-standard English, and the memory still fresh in the minds of the older nuns of language Inspectors coming out from London every year to grade Loreto girls' degree of acceptable Englishness. Like Rabi, she was probably born here, a flawless American with American ways and "issues", as they like to say. (DD, pp. 157-8)

By means of the incorporation of cultural aspects of a dominant group, the assimilation process is thoroughly successful. The excerpt above evidences such a success by giving some examples of an individual arisen from the "in-between" spaces of culture, such as the "Americanized" naming, Rob for Rabi and Indy for Indira. Another example is Rabi's teacher´s way of dressing, with "linen jacket over faded jeans and a T-shirt" instead of the traditional saris; as well as her way of talking "like a Valley girl". All of those assimilated elements contrast with the old values reminded by Tara: elocution lesson in Calcutta, the strict convent education. In a sense, the old and the new values and patterns come to a reconciliation – with American ways.

In the discussion of the idea of identitary construction, one must also consider the concept of belonging. Mukherjee narrates her stories from a wide variety of perspectives, concentrating upon the concept of Self within a conception of society in a large scale. She has

a special eye on characters that are adventurers and explorers, rather than refugees, perhaps because of her own historical experience.

It is clear that Mukherjee's themes focus on the phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, their feeling of alienation as expatriates, and the Indian woman's struggle for identity in such transnational movements. The author identifies herself as no multiculturalist. She declares:

> multiculturalism emphasizes the differences between racial heritages. This emphasis on the differences has too often led to the dehumanization of the different. And dehumanization leads to discrimination. And discrimination can ultimately lead to genocide. (MUKHERJEE, *apud* LALL, 1981)

The author claims no interest in the preservation of cultures, the veneration of tradition, obligations to the past or the nostalgic aspects implied by such preservation. A comparative line between Mukherjee's statement on multiculturalism and Roger Scruton's can be established. He is a conservative British philosopher, who was recently interviewed by a Brazilian magazine journalist and criticized the politics of immigration in European countries. According to him, European countries encourage the immigrants

> to keep their culture and their identity, and not to mix. Hence, immigrants start to define themselves as different, detached, excluded from the community, and this is what increases the tensions among ethnic groups. Multiculturalism, in part, is to take the blame for the recent London riots.[24] (SCRUTON, 2011, p. 21)

By criticizing multiculturalism, Mukherjee and Scruton seem to share a position, which may sound astonishing when one considers that each of them belongs to a distinct side in the process of colonization: while Scruton represents the colonizer, one who holds conservative positions; Mukherjee, as a former colonized, shouldn't associate multiculturalism to genocide. However, she states not being interested in the preservation of cultures. What can be observed is that she may be paying a very high price because, understood in these terms, the process of becoming "American" may ultimately lead to the erasure of her own origins.

In a 1988 interview given to Alison B. Carb[25], she discusses the origins of her fictional characters' immigration experiences, which are actually, as already discussed above, parallel

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[24] This excerpt is part of an interview published in *Revista Veja*, on September 21st, 2011. It was translated by Professor Izabel Brandão, Fale, Universidade Federal de Alagoas.
[25] This interview is published in Tandon's *Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction: A Perspective* (2004).

to her own route from Bengal to the United States, and then to Canada before returning to the United states. The author points out that her style has changed as she becomes more "Americanized".

> We [immigrants] have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived. When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable, often heroic… Although they [the fictional immigrant occupations], they do not give up. They take risks they wouldn't have taken in their old, comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are reborn. (TANDON, 2004, p. 135)

By considering the notion of "rebirth", we may come closer to an understanding of the process Mukherjee's characters go through when they cross borders, change countries, learn new languages and try to adapt to different cultures. They are "reborn" so that they can develop new performances of being. In a way, this may be viewed as a spiritual change, with religious connotations, that leads to a new kind of life. According to the Hindu beliefs, the concept of *karma*, which is a Sanskrit word that means "actions" or "deeds", presents a broader principle in which all life is governed by a system of cause and effect, action and reaction, with one's deeds having corresponding effects in the future (Cf. FLOOD, 1996). Thus, I understand that the idea of "rebirth" perceptible in Mukherjee's depiction of her characters can be associated to the "law of karma": it offers a way of explaining evil and misfortune in the world, that is, the actions that affect one's fortunes in this life and the next. Her characters' (trans)formations may be understood in this perspective. As stated by one of her most important and well-known heroines, Jasmine: "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake ourselves. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (1989, p. 29). Implied in her remarks are the violence ("murder") and the projection of a future Self ("the images of dreams") involved in this process.

Tara Chatterjee looks back at her family's past and ahead at their future in order to come to terms with her own history and legacy, from which she has become distanced. She circulates through the two worlds between which she travels back and forth. Tara goes back to India, once more, at the end of the narratives, but this time she is married again to Bish, and she is also accompanied by their two children: Rabi and the infant Victoria, to perform the rites that will set the Tree Bride's spirit free. This way, according to the Hindu belief, Tara

Chatterjee has the possibility of rebirth, and, by envisioning a new picture of the universe, a renewed alignment, of bringing peace to her own world.

> Tara Lata's spirit is restless because she suffered a bad death. Her spirit is stalled from starting on its yearlong journey to the Abode of Ancestors. A ceremonial cremation, conducted in accordance with funerary rituals laid down from ancient times, is necessary for its liberation. Until rites are completed, she cannot acquire the in-between body she needs to go on her journey. Until then, she is doomed to remain a *preta*, a ghost, instead of a *pitr,* an ancestor. […] I've always been a little frightened, just as an outwardly observant Christian or Jew might be: Sorry, you cursed. You didn't keep the Sabbath holy. You covered your neighbor's oxen. A Hindu has even more prohibitions. What if Yama [the Lord of death, in Hindu mythology] demands perfect ritual adherence to every aspect of one's caste duty? *I warned you! I commanded you*! […] Hinduism is very scientific, very mathematical. At the center of consciousness is a zero; at the extremities, infinity. The universe collapses and expands in fifty-two-billion-year cycles – which seems about right – and has been creating and destroying itself forever, life recomposing itself endlessly around the cores of collapsing stars. (TB, 2004, pp. 282-284)

By performing the rituals of death, in order to set her ancestor's spirit free, the protagonist has to return to her *desh* – homeland – in India, to deal with traditions and to celebrate an encounter between her ancestor's ancient world and her "new Self". By the end of the narratives, Tara Chatterjee is changed by her choices and experiences, (re)designed by the necessity to expand her consciousness into endless possibilities of being. As suggested by the meaning of Tara's own name – the cheater of death – the protagonist manages to deceive her opponents (by surviving bombing attacks, for example), and to turn them into new elements that help reconfigure her already amalgamated identity.

Mukherjee has eloquently written on the notions of identity, ethnicity, gender, class, nationalism, and emphasizes the increasing complexity of the world characterized by transnational and global exchanges. In order to accomplish such aims, she portrays complex characters – products of a postmodern world. The major characters in the novels *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*, illustrate this point. Tara Chatterjee and her husband (who creates a network of communication via the Internet), become very rich living in North America. They have a teenage son, who is born in the United States and declares himself to be gay. The protagonist has a Hungarian Buddhist yoga instructor as her lover. By creating such characters, the writer stresses how multifaceted, in terms of ethnicity, language, gender, class and socioeconomic level, some of the U.S. citizens from Indian origin group have become.

The construction of transnational identities is propelled by the possibility of displacements of all kinds of people travelling the routes of a globalized world. As mentioned above, if one considers presence of the Asians in North America, specifically in the United

States, a huge mass of immigrants that came to the new continent from 1850 to the World War II is observed. They certainly helped to provide a work force for the developing economy and the growing country at that time. Many waves of people crossed continents; some of whom were illegal workers who arrived in the new land with a dream to be pursued: freedom. The United States were in the process of expansion of capitalism.

> Refugees, businessmen, diplomats, family members seeking each other, undocumented workers, and as we know, terrorists, all travel the routes created by transnational diasporas, now made more complex, yet perhaps easier to negotiate due to the globalization of technology and capital. But the ease by which people, capital, and ideas move across spatial and cultural boundaries because of globalization has also increased the global reach of the exploitation of labor, often along gendered and racialized lines. (WONG, In: ANDERSON and LEE, 2005, pp. 47-48)

I argue that the position of the United States in contemporary times is not that different from the other historical experiences of contact between Asia and North America, in and across the Pacific Ocean. According to David Palumbo-Liu, "the defining mythos of America, its 'manifested destiny', was, after all, to form a bridge westward from the Old World, *not just* to the western coast of the North American continent, but from there to the trans-Pacific regions of Asia" (1999, p. 2). Palumbo-Liu proceeds by stressing that the advance of geopolitical and economic interests of modern North America "would also test the social and cultural fabric of the nation and its ability to accommodate a race heretofore deemed to be radically different" (p. 2). Such crossings formed a two-way route undertaken by North Americans to Asia, and by Asians to the United States, mainly. Thus, Asians in the United States have participated in the constitution of what that nation has become.

As already exposed, crossing boundaries, movements of going and coming have produced the diaspora experience. The recognition of necessary heterogeneity and diversity has been detected by a conception of identity which is configured and reconfigured by difference and also by the interaction/integration of such differences. The individuals' identitary differences help constitute what they were, are, and might become due to their historical background and to the diasporic movements they go through. Such dynamics also indicates a range of possibilities of future performances, considering that history is part of people's lives. It helps in the understanding of an individual by locating him/her in the world, considering his/her history and displacements. As Hall states, "there is a past to be learned about, but the past is now seen, and it has to be grasped as a history, as something that has to be told. […] It is grasped through reconstruction. It is not just a fact that has been waiting to ground our identities" (HALL, *apud* GREWAL, 2006, p. 12). So, I defend that cultural

identity/ies can be (re)formed by a constant flow in which history and the subject's trajectory interweave, proposing integration, by (inter)connecting the global and the local.

Mary Louise Pratt describes "transculturation", as "the process of inter-cultural negotiation and selection", that is a constant flow related to the experiences of colonial "transactions", such as the one of the British presence in India. Pratt emphasizes that "although colonialism engendered the ideologies of difference, in practice it also brought different peoples into intimate contact with one another" (PRATT, *apud* LOOMBA, 1998, pp. 68-9). Despite the endless efforts to keep cultural and racial segregation, in fact, the interactions occurring between different peoples, the colonizers and the colonized, for example, proved to be a challenging phenomenon to be thought about, as it presents, as its major outcome, 'hybrid' cultural identities.

The survival of difference may be guaranteed as long as individuals continue to (re)produce identity(ies). Such productions and their connectivities can be articulated within or through the border zones. In particular, Bharati Mukherjee's fictions (re)configure such articulations by depicting the colonial constructions of the division between traditional and contemporary. In her novels, difference is converted into amalgamated identities, with the incorporation of cultural nuances from the perspective of the experiences of local and global nature – from a village in rural India to the cosmopolitan United States – lived by the protagonist.

Because Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist comes from an upper-class family, she does not face social and economical difficulties, due to her wealthy Brahmin caste. In this sense, the novels under analysis are to some extent blind in relation to the evils of transnationalism and present gaps in relation to the chaotic and violent side of such displacements for some immigrants who are less privileged. What is depicted in these two novels is an encounter that ultimately becomes a celebration of two different cultures, historical backgrounds, and two distinct times (the ancient and the contemporary), by means of the dialogue between the local and the global symbolized by the main character's interconnections. It is relevant here to refer to Whitman's fragment that opens this chapter. Its tone of celebration of crossings can be considered as analogous to Mukherjee's when identified a similar approach to the movements: Whitman's poem proposes a risky journey to distant lands, full of potential for exploration and discoveries; in her turn, Mukherjee also offers such a journey in her narratives through the protagonist's trajectory.  In addition to what is mentioned, I also emphasize the

erasure, in the novels, of the issue of difference in terms of social class, which does not appear as an issue in the fictions analyzed, being presented in Bharati Mukherjee's earlier works as pointed before.

The next chapter focuses on the representations of myths in Bharati Mukherjee's novels, as they are revisited. Furthermore, it also looks at the issue of mythical revisionism as a feminist creative strategy which has relevant implications for central issues in contemporary gender debates: agency and empowerment.

## CHAPTER II

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## THE GENDERED REPRESENTATION OF A KALEIDOSCOPE OF MYTHS IN MUKHERJEE'S MICROCOSMOS

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.

[...]

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and away into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body.
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way

back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

(Adrienne Rich - *Diving into the wreck*)

## 1. The concept of myth under a cultural reading perspective

Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the wreck" (1973) proposes an amazing adventure of self discovery and, at the same time, offers the idea of rebirth, by questioning the very origin of the Self. The poem is centred upon the image of loss experienced by all selves. The explorer can be he or she, or both – the androgynous diver holds the feelings of incompleteness and solitude. The poetic persona is not interested in treasure rescues, but in the psychological effects of the 'wreck'. Margaret Atwood's revision (1974) of Rich's "Wreck" suggests that "what she finds is part treasure and part corpse", a "half-destroyed instrument" that claims to be registered and understood not as a victim, but as a survivor. Similarly, Tara Chatterjee undertakes a journey in order to (re)discover her past, rebuild her present and prepare the path towards her future. Tara 'looks back with fresh eyes', as Rich suggests in her classical text, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision" (1973). The poet depicts someone who has not plunged into the unknown in order to change anything, but solely observe "the evidence of the damage." The poetic persona cannot modify what has already been done. This dive/journey is not about changing anything, but mainly about exploring and gaining knowledge.

Tara makes her "entering an old text" [the Tree Bride's diaries], her diving into an ancient world, "from a new critical direction" (RICH, 1973, pp. 90-1). Thus, the protagonist goes into a kind of psychological and cultural quest as she descends into the unconscious to probe, document, explore the wrecks, an action she takes in order to understand her roots, and register her impressions in the book in which she is rewriting her own story .

This chapter offers reflections on the concept of myth, from a traditional, male-centered view, and also from feminist perspectives. A brief historical panorama is provided in order to offer a broader perspective in the analyses. The similarities and contrasts between the Hindu and Greek myths are presented, with an emphasis on how deities from those mythologies are portrayed in Bharati Mukherjee's texts. And finally, inspired by Adrienne Rich's idea of re-vision, mythical revisionism as presented in the novels is focused on, by observing the connections established in the retelling of the story of the Tree Bride in three different

perspectives, as they are rendered in the novels: by Tara Lata's friend: Vertie Treadwell; by the protagonist's son, Rabi; and by her great-great niece, Tara Chatterjee.

In India, mythology is not a mere research theme or a study of the ancient culture. It permeates people's lives completely. Myths are alive and have become an influential aspect in daily life – representing stages of continuing cosmic processes, and thereafter assuming specific forms. Such a lively mythology is presented in *Mahabharata*[26], a source work that exercises a powerful influence on Indian society. There is a very popular saying in Bengal that says: "anything that could not be found in *Mahabharata*, will not be found in the land of Bharata (India)."[27] Before providing an analysis of the impact of such culture in Mukherjee´s fictions, however, I will discuss some definitions and functions of myth as they have been explored by commentators like Mircea Eliade, Junito Brandão and Roland Barthes. With regard to the gender implications of mythical discourse, the ideas by Alicia Ostriker and Carolyne Larrington will also be approached. These will, in turn, help to illuminate some points to be developed in the analyses that follow.

Mircea Eliade's (1998) classical definition of myth provides an orientation of its function, by reflecting on our place in the Cosmos. According to him,

> Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the "beginnings". In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a 'creation'; it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural Beings. They are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the "beginnings". Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness (or simply the "supernaturalness") of their works. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the "supernatural") into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the World and makes it what it is today. Furthermore, it is as a result of the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man himself is what he is today, a mortal, sexed, and cultural being. (pp. 5-6)

According to the scholar Junito de Souza Brandão (1987), myth expresses the world and also the human reality, in which its essence is a collective representation. In the attempt to conceptualize myth, Brandão sees it as distinct from fable, legend, invention, fiction; with regard to its multiple meanings. He considers myth to be a true story that tells about a new

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[26] "The *Mahabharata* is an Indian epic, in its original Sanskrit probably the largest ever composed. Combined with a second great epic, the *Ramayana*, it embodies the essence of the Indian cultural heritage." (Cf. BUCK, 1981, Introduction, XIII)

[27] This is a widely used popular saying, which paraphrases the fragment that appears in the beginning of *Mahabharata* first *parva* ("section") that says: "What is found here may be found elsewhere. What is not found here will not be found elsewhere."

reality which comes into being by supernatural intervention. The scholar states that myth is the word "revealed", and such a revelation can be an image, a gesture that circumscribes the event in the human's heart, before being turned into a narrative.

However, there are other forms of viewing the subject. Roland Barthes, in his *Mythologies* (1972), highlights myth as a type of discourse. He points out that "language needs special conditions in order to become myth. But what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is a system of communication that is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form" (1972, p. 48). For Barthes, myths serve "to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs" (1972, p. 48). Barthes proposes to challenge the 'apparent innocence' of a text. He focuses on the wide variety of connotations (his preferred term) cultural texts can produce. The literary myth challenges the reader and requires from him/her an ability to make explicit what remains implicit.

Considering the focus of this chapter, that is, the gendered representation of myths, two important voices on this issue are Alicia Ostriker´s and Carolyne Larrington´s. These two critics offer analyses of myths under a feminist perspective. In Alicia Ostriker's view, classical myths are "handed *down;*" they belong to high culture, and are largely transmitted by educational and cultural authorities" (OSTRIKER, *apud* LARRINGTON, 1997, p. 441). She considers mythology, or rather, classical myth "an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer," since few women had access to formal academic education, their participation in the literary realm was restricted. However, in such a space, mythical discourse represents "the conquering gods, heroes, the deities of pure thought and spirituality so superior to Mother Nature; […]. It is thanks to myth we believe that woman must be either 'angel' or 'monster'" (OSTRIKER, 1986, pp. 71-2). Carolyne Larrington, in her turn, emphasizes that "women need to know the myths which have determined both how they see themselves and how society regards them" (1997, p. X). Myth becomes a privileged *locus* for debate in Larrington's perspective. This is justified by the fact that mythologies offer a space in which women anthropologists, historians and writers may analyze and criticize women's representations in the past.

According to Larrington's view, "ever since myths came into existence, women have been involved in writing and rewriting them. In many cultures, women are story-tellers; it is misleading to speak solely of women's 'rewriting' of myth, since the term implies that man was its prime maker" (1997, p. 441). Thus, the critic points out that women's authorship in the activity of mythmaking should be recognized as well; although her work focuses

"particularly on the area of myth production in which women have been outsiders and latecomers" (1997, p. 441).

The idea of "revisionist mythmaking" is based on the interventions by some women writers, especially feminists, in the (re)writing of myths in order to give a gendered voice to the classical narratives. As Carolyne Larrington explains, the rewriting of myths

> denotes participation in these historical processes and the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth's disseminators. When feminists envisage that struggle, they often think of the rewriting or reinterpretation of individual stories: for example, by changing the focus of the narrative from a male character to a female character, or by shifting the terms of the myth so that what was a 'negative' female role-model becomes a positive one. (1997, pp. 441-2)

As Larrington states above, gender asymmetries are mitigated through the reinterpretation of the roles played by men and women counted in a mythical perspective. In this sense, "a myth is not a single entity, but a diversity of stories told differently in different times and places" (BARTHES, *apud* LARRINGTON, 1997, p. 441). Myths are often incorporated into the literary context. Larrington defends that "as part of that [literary] history, myths have been part of literary and academic self-definitions" (1997, p. 441). Considering the origin of the word myth, derived from the Greek "mythos", which means a traditional tale common to the members of a group, a tribe, a region, or a nation, I perceive myth as the manifested representation of culture which brings, in its materialization, ideas, values and beliefs shared by a community or group.

In the present thesis, myths are considered in the narratives in a way to illustrate and represent the relations of the characters to their historical and cultural roots. The novels present a central myth − that of Tara Lata, the Tree Bride −, and from this nucleus, other myths are brought into the story and illuminate specific circumstances with which they are articulated. The story of the central myth starts to be told in the very beginning of the narratives:

> In the mind's eye, a one-way procession of flickering oil lamps sways along the muddy shanko between rice paddies and flooded ponds, and finally disappears into a distant wall of impenetrable jungle. […] The narrow, raised trail ten miles from Mishtigunj town to the jungle's edge. In a palanquin borne by four servants sit a rich man's three daughters, the youngest dressed in her bridal sari, her little hands painted with red lac dye, her hair oiled and set. Her arms are heavy with dowry gold; bangles ring tiny arms from wrist to shoulder. Childish voices chant a song, hands clap, gold bracelets tinkle. I cannot imagine the loneliness of this child. A Bengali girl's happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. […] the bride is named Tara Lata, a name we almost share. The name of the father is Jai Krishna Gangooly. Tara Lata is five years old and headed deep into the forest to marry a tree. (DD, pp. 3-5)

The introduction of the narrative offers a detailed description of the historical events, the circumstances and the characters involved in the creation of the central myth. In Mukherjee's fictions, the Tree Bride's revisionist mythmaking, historical and cultural values, attitudes and beliefs are offered in a different perspective, ensuring a distinct (re)interpretation of the classical story by depicting a woman character as a "positive role-model".

## 2. History as a strategy to the interpretation of the narratives

As it was already remarked above, the plot of the novels brings a historical apparatus which favors the comprehension of the facts that occurred during the permanence of the British in the Indian territory, among other relevant fact-based details. Bharati Mukherjee equips the reader with such information, familiarizing him/her with those historical facts. Regarding the role of the understanding of those historical events, I also provide an overall view of the historical composition of the Indian people, putting it into a dialogue with culture, which is aimed at giving a broader perspective in the analysis of the novels. In the following excerpt, Mukherjee depicts the relationship of the Indian with the British Empire. The colonial experience is revealed in this passage:

> One day a message comes from London, relayed from New Delhi, and the structure and meaning of one's life is wiped out: *Gentlemen, the British Raj is ended. You will vacate your offices and surrender keys to your subordinate native staff. Expect a civil parting, but do not linger. Respect the men who replace you. It is understandable that bonds of affection and nostalgia might impede the smooth transfer of power. We trust you to exercise more than normal restraint. Bear in mind you are officers of the Crown, not of the Republic of India or Pakistan, and are expected to behave as such.* Officials – one hesitates to call them men – who can wipe out three hundred years of glorious history and deny the sacrifice of thousands, and wipe out the achievement of the noblest members of the British race, are capable of the foulest treachery known to man. […] The entire structure of Hindu culture made intracaste competition impossible. No Brahmin would lift his hand in labor, nor permit himself to be caste-polluted in any way. He could not permit himself humiliation at the hand of lower life form. Teamwork among Hindus entailed a fat Brahmin's sitting under a shade tree, directing the labor of sun-blackened collies. It did not include diving after a ball or receiving it still slippery with sweat from a lower caste's brow. The confrontation between Hindu and Muslim was life and death. Not may the better man win, but may the better god, the higher order of existence, exterminate the other. Look at the bloody mess they've made of their so-called Partition. At least they made short work of Gandhi, so much for the apostle of peace and forgiveness. We lacked the moral clarity to do it ourselves. Gandhi, Nehru, Bose, the whole lot of them should have been hanged or sent off to the Andamans. (TB, pp. 175-6)

The extract quoted above evidences that Mukherjee´s fiction portrays the troubled colonial relationship among different peoples and nations, and illustrates the confrontations generated by colliding positions as the example of the Partition, which resulted in new

geographical and political dimensions, redefining civilizations. Therefore, it highlights the constitution of civilization as being developed by the emergence of new tribes and by peoples' unions. Each of these had its own perspective and world view, resulting from a characteristic group of habits imposed by the strongest tribe or people, and also by the geographical conditions of the region. Western Asia was one of the areas of world confluence. It represented crossing roads to commodities exchange. India took part of such a role, by offering places of work and production. Considering India as a mosaic of different cultures inside the same country, it is observed that people may be attracted by those who are different, but they give no allowance to a foreigner's interference. By observing Hindu Conservatism, commentators have noticed this people's tendency to perpetuate differences with no assimilation (COOMARASWAMY; NIVEDITA, 2002, pp. 11-2).

There has always been a place for the dominant people (in this case, the Hindus) to impose their rules, their own habits and ideals, and to establish themselves in the interstices of the Brahmin civilization. However, another situation between two different peoples and cultures may be perceived in terms of cultural resistance. Just to illustrate this aspect, one can point out the fact that, even nowadays, there are neighborhoods in Calcutta and Mumbai inhabited by other peoples – the Chinese neighborhood, for example –, and such people do not contribute or receive any contribution from their cultural surroundings. Nevertheless, the non-racial mixing, the non-miscegenation phenomenon has not been uniform. And the "Buddha spirit", that is to say, the idea that all beings, without exception, have the same nature and potential for enlightenment, that anyone or anything can achieve progress in life, constitutes a strong religious drive not only in China, but also in a few other countries, including India. The Gupta Age represents a time in which foreign guests and foreign cultures were well received and appreciated in India.[28]

Hinduism is a huge synthesis that collected its elements from a myriad of directions and incorporated all possible and multiple religious themes such as: heaven adoration; homage paid to heroes and ancestors; father and mother adoration; prayer for the dead; mystic association of plants and animals. Each one of such elements relates to a specific period in the

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[28] The Gupta time is considered as such in much of the Indian subcontinent. "The interval between the death of Ashoka around 233 BCE (Before Christian Era) and the rise of the Guptas, around 300 CE (Christian Era), has usually been dismissed as a dark age. As so often with dark ages, and with golden ones as well, the characterizations are made by near contemporaries or by later historians and both groups have their own, often distinct, motivations for the labels. Thus, contemporaries of the Gupta age saw it as a time when vigorous form of brahmanical religion took root, springing from the polluted ashes of Buddhism and other false faiths. Modern historians have looked upon the Gupta age as golden, but for somewhat different reasons among them that it was the last great moment of autochthonous Indian development before the political and cultural impact of Islam" (STEIN, 2010: 86-7).

past, corresponding to an invasion of a certain people. Nowadays, they form a whole. In the ancient times of Hindu belief, the human mind tended to confuse its own fantasies and feelings with the behavior of birds and beasts, with the several earth and water phenomena and, finally, with the movements of the sun and the moon, the stars and the planets. As a result, the universe was seen in a humanized form. In recent times, the human figure has achieved a greater importance, leading the ancient representations to a secondary status. Thus, we can say that mythology went from an original form to a balanced and mature manifestation (COOMARASWAMY; NIVEDITA, 2002, pp. 14-5).

Taking the importance of understanding myths in the Western and the Eastern worlds into account has led to the observation of some convergences and contrasts between them. Edward Said (1994) developed theories about the boundaries and influences on these two supposedly diverse geographical regions.

> Cultural, material and intellectual relations, between Europe and the Orient have gone through innumerable phases, even though the line between East and West has made a certain constant impression upon Europe. Yet in general it was the West that moved upon the East, not vice versa. *Orientalism* is the generic term that I have been employing to describe the Western approach to the Orient; Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice. But in addition I have been using the word to designate that collection of dreams, images, and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line. (p.73)

There have always been contrasts between the West and the East – the Eastern region representing the oldest world, with its millenary traditions and peculiar habits; and the Western portion constituting the newest part, generally presenting itself with a menacing superior attitude. The Westerners, represented by Europe, frequently disregarded the previous existence of the old world and invested in several invasions, scattering its arrogance and dominion in distant lands, as the Far East and Africa; whereas the East developed a collective consciousness, with all the work and efforts aimed at the whole. Western practices maintained a tradition of individualistic accomplishments and thoughts leading to individualism and to extreme consequences, such as a series of disputes, resulting in wars.

According to Peter Hays Gries' and Peng Kaiping's analyses, such differences in culture matters and can result in deep influences on people's behavior and ways of reasoning:

> Cross-cultural psychologists juxtapose Western analytic and Eastern holistic reasoning. Western reasoning tends to focus on objects and categories, and is driven by formal logic; in the East, by contrast, reasoning embraces contradictions among objects in a yin-yang[29] field of constant change. (2002, p. 175)

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[29] "The mutuality of this pair of opposites in the universe, matter and space, being and nonbeing, must be recognized. The Way also may be likened to the yin component in the ancient yin-yang dualism, which is the

By analyzing such descriptions, one perceives that while the West tries to dissect objects and situations, aiming at the understanding and control of 'the mechanics of things' in order to achieve a panoramic view of the world; the East 'accepts' opposition as something immanent to every living being and to each existing object in the universe. Significantly, in Mukherjee's narratives, the protagonist undertakes a spiritual journey when she returns to Mishtigunj to perform her ancestor's rituals of death, attempting to find a balance between the "Western analytic and the Eastern holistic reasoning" by incorporating the yin-yang aspects to her life. Actually, the protagonist's family has never truly accepted the Westernization interference.

> Our family, whatever its outward signs of Westernization (and they were plentiful), had never joined forces with the truly Westernized, progressive traditions of nineteenth-century Bengal. Those progressives, Hindu reformers, scientists, writers, and artists are called Brahmo-Samaj. The communal reaction against the secularizers is called Arya-Samaj. Our family, beginning with Jai Krishna Gangooly, father of the Tree Bride, became antisecular, and the traditions of piety remain. (TB, p. 43)

One of the biggest divisions that led to the antagonism between East and West was based on what was originally thought of as Europe and Asia. First, the geographical aspect was predominant, but then it began to lose its significance. Probably, the ancient people, the Assyrians, were the ones

> who first made a distinction between what they called *ereb* or *irib* – "lands of the setting sun" and Asia, Asu – "lands of the rising sun." For them, however, there was no natural frontier between the two, and they accorded no particular significance to the distinction. The awareness that East and West were not only different regions of the world but also regions filled with different peoples, with different cultures, worshipping different gods and, most crucially, holding different views on how best to live their lives, we owe not to an Asian but to a Western people: the Greeks. It was a Greek historian, Herodotus, writing in the fifth century B.C.E., who first stopped to ask what it was that divided Europe from Asia and why two peoples who were, in many respects, quite similar should have conceived such enduring hatreds for each other. This East as Herodotus knew it, the lands that lay between the European peninsula and the Ganges, was inhabited by a large number of varied peoples, on whose strange peculiarities he dwelt lovingly and at length. Yet, for all their size and variety, they all seemed to have something in common, something that set them apart from the peoples of Europe, of the West. Their lands were fertile, their cities opulent. They themselves were wealthy – far wealthier than the impoverished Greeks – and they could be immensely refined. They were also fierce and savage, formidable opponents on the battlefield, something all Greeks admired. Yet for all this they were, above all else, slavish and servile. They lived in awe of their rulers, whom they looked upon not as mere men like themselves, but as gods. (PADGEN, 2009, pp. X, XI)

As a consequence, scholars from many fields of study – History, Sociology, and Anthropology, among others – developed explorations in relation to the rise, interactions,

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paired harmony of female and male, dark and light, low and high. Both members of the duality are needed, but yang has been overemphasized and yin must be restored to its rightful place" (MORTON, 1995, p. 39).

achievements, decline, and fall of civilizations. For this, certain criteria were elaborated. Some people were considered to be 'civilized', in a comparative analysis of societies. For instance, by presenting a more "developed" intellectual, diplomatic, and political aspect, when compared to others who were classified as "primitive", for not having focused their efforts on the same interests. Therefore, biased concepts of what it meant to be "good" and "superior", to be seen as "civilized" – in dichotomous, polarized, and oppositional contrast to the notions of "bad", "evil" and "inferior", the latter being considered "uncivilized" – were gradually crystallized.

There has always been a kind of clash between Western and Eastern civilizations. The three distinct Western narratives of Tara Lata's retelling story may be examined according to such a perspective. In chronological terms, the British national Virgil Ernest Reginald Treadwell is the first to retell Tara Lata's story, from a male-centered view. His version is given due to his personal acquaintance with the tree bride. As the following excerpts inform: "'It would give me great pleasure if you addressed me as Vertie. And if I may call you Tara Lata.' 'Why not, Vertie, we are both of us beyond the ceremonial threshold, are we not?'" (TB, p. 217). Nevertheless, Treadwell's loyalty to the British rule guides his 'cruel' actions towards the colonized Indians, which irritates Tara Lata. The latter accuses him of having burned "tons of rice rather than see them distributed to starving villagers" (TB, p. 218), an instance of some of the 'justified' procedures which are registered in his memoirs.

> After retirement to England, many of those old Raj administrators wrote memoirs of their Indian experiences. They'd kept diaries and copious notes; they were Victorians, after all. They believed in their mission, they felt their lives had contributed, somehow, to hope and progress. How much more interesting than any of them Treadwell's cold have been! There's so much bitterness and rage, so many glimpses into a dark and unknowable world. […] Treadwell came along after the game of empire had been exposed and everyone from London to New Delhi and Calcutta was fatigued with the masquerade. I wonder if Treadwell ever looked into his Indian life, perhaps in the years between the death of Tara Lata and independence and thought about condemning the whole experience, and then backed away because of the outrage such a book was likely to stir up. Disloyalty on that scale would not be like him. He would have tried to write a self-justification for the Raj and his role within it, his own less-than-Churchillian *History of the English-Speaking Peoples Trapped in the United Provinces and Sunderbans*. (TB, pp. 227-8)

Along their coexistence, Vertie and Tara Lata have many quarrels; however, Vertie feels passionate for her. "Vertie Treadwell was a man of a late, unspoken, unacted passion – who would have guessed it? He was in love with the Tree Bride" (TB, p. 232). With the collapse of the British Empire, he leaves India in 1947 and then writes his experiences in that place, which includes Tara Lata's story, the first report on her life.

Rabindranath Chatterjee, Rabi or Rob (as called by his U.S. art teacher and colleagues), brings a very particular view to the retelling of his ancestor's story. Rabi is a U.S. born whose parents had been born in India and then become assimilated North Americans. He is a fifteen-year-old gay in a patriarchal family tradition, which turns him into an eccentric subject, and whose artistic gifts make his father, Bish, think of him as a 'weak male figure'.

> Rabi was an artistic child. His earliest talent was for drawing. […] But his special gift was for cartooning, which is hard to justify to a very serious-minded father. […] To Bish, Rabi was too dependent, except when he was too adventurous. He was too fanciful, but not sufficiently bold. […] Bish could not tolerate a son who was not a perfect replica of himself; hardworking, respectful, brilliant. Soberly sociable. Effortlessly athletic. […] Rabi hated all sports, and therefore played none unless his father was watching, in which case he would deliberately stumble on the field and proceed to muck it up. He refused to play with other boys, he'd spend hours in his bedroom, drawing and listening to old albums scrounged from yard sales. (DD, pp. 152-5)

As a creative and sensitive young person, Rabi develops a video documentary when he goes on a visit to India with his mother. As he registers the people, the setting, one of the locals, a graduate student from Benares Hindu University, comments with Tara Chatterjee the difficulties that the foreigners face to understand the Indian culture as they seem to "see our city through cataract-eyes" (TB, p. 290). Yet, Rabi "begins a story that threatens to end in a moral. It's about a virtuous king, the testing of whose faith involved his kingdom, his wife and son, and working at a burning ghat in Kashi (a sacred city of the dead) as a lowly watchman" (TB, p. 290). Rabi's metaphorized narrative proposes to tell his family's story by adding Indian historical and cultural elements, which also includes Tara Lata's story. The protagonist predicts the result of her son's project: "Rabi will create something resembling a new American consciousness" (DD, p. 155). In telling his story, he depicts the Eastern 'fable' through a Western perspective.

Tara Chatterjee starts to build the third version of the Tree Bride's story through a woman's point of view. It begins during her second visit to Mishtigunj, after she "gain[s] possession of the documents" (TB, p. 41) which lead her to her ancestor's story. As a result, she feels compelled to return to the village for a third time in order to track Tara Lata's paths. This time, she says: "I felt myself a vulture, like someone picking through the trash" (TB, p. 41). Tara gets the opportunity to read her ancestor's trajectory through a primary source.

> When I first encountered the Tree Bride as an adult, it was through her own writing in a little pamphlet stored deep in my parents' Calcutta memorabilia. I thought they'd rid themselves of all books, except for holy tracts and the ubiquitous volumes of Tagore's stories, novels, and poetry. Rabi and I were making our first visit to their cottage in Rishikesh. Rabi was starting to take an interest in his Indian heritage, at long last, and his grandfather was embracing his every question. (TB, p. 66)

By having access to some of the Tree Bride's own reports, the protagonist gets to know the beginning of the story and its implications as the ancestor provides memories of her earlier childhood. Two decisive facts are narrated: the precocious widowhood followed by an unusual marriage and religious practices being vandalized by the British troops, evidencing neglect and a feeling of superiority. By witnessing such barbaric acts and several others along her lifetime, Tara Lata decides to stand against the British Empire, seeking freedom as a primary purpose. She says: "No boy is too young, no sudra (the caste of servants) too poor, no woman too weak, to fight for the freedom of India" (TB, p. 61). By sharing the desire for freedom especially with her ancestor, mainly for being a woman in an extremely unequal patriarchal society, Tara Chatterjee decides to get to know the family legend better, which leads her to "dream of the past" (TB, p. 252) as a way to find the key to promote her own independence.

By resorting to the three versions of Tara Lata's story, it may be observed that Mukherjee utilizes them as a self-reflexive strategy with a meta-narrative function. The three different points of view are brought as a means of relativizing and modalizing her own narrative. The employment strategy of a revisionist mythmaking becomes interesting for a gender-marked reading, as the narrative progresses gradually as follows: Tara Lata's story retold by Virgil, then the ancestor's own voice, after that, there is the recovery and appropriation of such a voice by another Tara who becomes the author herself. This points to the characteristic of cultural construct of the narratives, which destabilizes the definitive and final versions.

The imposed presence of the British in the Indian territory and their ways of dealing with the "natives", which are portrayed by Mukherjee, expose a complex system of the composition of the Indian subcontinent, the caste hierarchy, and the difficult interactions among the different peoples who inhabited the colonial India. The author's depiction of such historical inferences by means of her character portrayals functions as an attempt to rearrange Eastern values according to the West, considering one such character – Tara Chatterjee - has assimilated some its values by becoming a U.S. citizen herself.  In the following excerpt such a fragmentation can be observed:

> […] I grew up inside a group mythology that blamed our expulsion from that eastern paradise – modern-day Bangladesh – on the beastliness of Muslim fanatics. And I grew up with a more generalized second myth, reinforced by the schools I attended and the class I belonged to: The British were, with many famous exceptions, generally decent. It has taken me twenty years to realize that Muslims had nothing to do with our "relocation". It was the British, always the British. And it wasn't the

1947 Partition. It started in 1833.[30] Here is my rant. It is easy for an English-educated, middle-class Indian (or Pakistani or Bangladeshi) to fall in line with colonial prejudice. Thirty thousand British bureaucrats and "factors" were able to rule ten thousand times more Indians by dividing Muslims from Hindus, Persian Zoroastrians from Muslims, Sikhs from Hindus, and nearly everyone, including Hindus, from castes like lazy Brahmins and money-grubbing banias. Sikhs and Muslims were declared "martial races" and rewarded appropriately with army and police positions. Muslims and Jews and Anglo-Indians were traditional, Western-style monotheists in the way that Hindus were not seen to be, and were rewarded appropriately. Parsis were fairer-skinned, leaving dark-skinned Hindus to be treated with contempt and labeled potbellied vegetarians and sensualists, deceitful and cowardly. But behind gymkhana doors, all of us, martial races or not, fair-skinned or dark, were referred to as niggers. (TB, p. 44)

By the protagonist's description of the Indian cultural mosaic, quoted above, the Indian and the British relations are made evident as the historical background to the fictional setting. Since Calcutta was the headquarters of the British Empire, the "natives" had a long exposure to the English language and culture, which impacted on the Indians' cultural formation. The British – "the East Anglia" (TB, p. 167) – cultural influence and its unfoldings in India are portrayed in the novels in the colonizer´s voice: "There was nothing wrong with India. […] The only problem with India was the bloody Indians, God's test for Englishmen" (TB, p. 171).

The consequence of such an effect creates a 'subcaste' in the complex Indian social structure 'tapestry'. "High-caste Hindus were generally the better educated, the more proficient English-speakers. Without external restraints, the minority upper-caste Hindus would dominate, an unstable situation for any society" (TB, p. 63). The Brahmins, who are at the top of the caste system, and in great number become the Empire's allies, being ridiculed by the British despite reproducing their habits. Treadwell in his youth "had participated in the glory days of Bombay Gymkhana cricket, played on a pitch of perfect green. […] he'd introduced it to Bengal, as far as the Sunderbans" (TB, p. 172). The Indians who become allies are made 'helpers' of the British Raj, even though they are considered unskilled when compared to the 'superior' Western formation. As it is shown in the following fragment: Treadwell "had trained his secretaries to get off their useless haunches and go out twice a day, sometimes more often, to gather a sheaf of meteorological facts" (TB, p. 173).

## 3. Myth: a guiding line in the narratives

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[30] The protagonist refers to the year which the "seeds of Brahmo-Arya split, the active encouragement of English, and the creation of a native, English-speaking intellectual aristocracy. It's the year that created my hybrid family of orthodox Hindu, Bengali-speaking, cricket-loving, Shakespeare-acting, Gilbert and Sullivan-singing, adaptable-anywhere brahmins." (TB, p. 45)

The presence of myths in the novels is of fundamental importance to tell the protagonist and her ancestor's stories. In the fictions analyzed, the representation of the Hindu myths reinforces the significance of mythology in the lives of the Indians, as well as in the lives of the descendents of people from that culture. This section proposes a survey of some of the Hindu myths, in order to study their representation in the literary texts by Mukherjee. Considering the influences of such deities on Indian society, a general overview of its mythology is provided. This is carried out in relation to the references to the gods and goddesses portrayed in Bharati Mukherjee's narratives studied in this thesis.

In order to understand the encounter of East and West, and the ramifications of the clash of powers and cultural influences among these two regions, it is important to resort to the work by scholar and Indologist Heinrich Zimmer, who dedicated his studies to research and theorize on South Asian philosophies and their manifestations. He examines religious images and their meanings for Indian philosophy and its religious history. His work was appreciated by Joseph Campbell who also developed an extensive work on myths, divided into four volumes, entitled *The Masks of God*[31], which covers mythologies throughout the world, from the ancient to the modern times, starting with a mythical dialogue between East and West.

Zimmer proposes a review on Western philosophies in general. He classifies them as academic and secular philosophies that focus more on information than on the redeeming transformation demanded by our souls. The scholar states that such a contrast is concentrated on a distinctive trace of the Western philosophy represented by its intimate and continuing interrelation with the sciences. In opposition, Indian philosophy remained traditional. It is helped and renewed not by the laboratory experiences, but by the inner experiences of Yoga practice. He justifies such an interest in Indian philosophies as a way to help to discover and recover the sense of being lost in ourselves. Following his intention to understand

> The basic aim of any serious study of Oriental thought should be, not merely the gathering and ordering of as much detailed inside information as possible, but the reception of some significant influence. And in order that this way come to pass – in line with the parable of the goat-fosterling who discovered he was a tiger – we should swallow the meat of the teaching as red and rare as we can stand it, not too much cooked in the heat of our ingrained Occidental intellect (and, by no means, from any philological pickle jar), but not raw either, because then it would prove unpalatable and perhaps indigestible. We must take it rare, with lots of red juices gushing, so that we may really taste it, with a certain sense of surprise. Then we will join, from our transoceanic distance, in the world – reverberating jungle roar of India's wisdom. (1989, p. 14)

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[31] Originally, the title was divided into four volumes respectively published: the volume I, in 1959; the volume II, in 1962; the volume III, in 1964, and the last one, published in 1968.

By highlighting this parable, Zimmer proposes some openness and tolerance in the process of learning that may seem awkward, according to certain patterns, to a specific culture, which may be classified as "civilized" and "uncivilized". By assuming such an attitude, one may identify possible bonds in 'apparently' different civilizations. Heinrich Zimmer concentrates his efforts on the values of mutual knowledge (Eastern and Western) and on the necessary respect to consolidate any links in the horizon of philosophies. He considers the well-known saying: "each one according to his/her culture". Therefore, he tries to establish a bridge, a dialogue between the Western interest on information and the Eastern focus on transformation.

A good example of the West and East "fusion" is represented, in the novels, by Vertie Treadwell – Victoria's uncle, the protagonist's doctor-friend – a member of the British Empire, whose self-image is identified with the "noblest of beasts": a tiger. Treadwell does not see himself as a lion. On the contrary, he says: "'Painted Tiger' would have majesty and a tie to Empire. Tigers had dignity. Lions were as mangy and moth-bitten as the country they symbolized on the coat of arms" (TB, p. 180). Treadwell no longer feels tied to the Empire, as indicated by his use of such an ironical metaphor, which contrasts a fragile and decrepit image of a lion to the importance and power of Britain. Considering the representations of those two animals, we can relate and contrast them: the lion is the top representative of the food chain, arguably the most feared animal. The tiger, in its turn, is "stealth and cunning tethered to a placid ferocity" (TB, p. 181). Lions are more dangerous when they are outnumbered, revealing a cowardly attitude towards their prey; tigers, on the other hand, act with greater loyalty: they hunt alone, becoming the masters of their territory, tolerating no menaces.

In terms of national symbolism, Britain has "the lion" "on the coat of arms" (TB, pp. 180-1); while India bears both the lion and the tiger. The symbol of the lion is derived from the Sarnath Lion Capital of Emperor Ashoka and the tiger, which is considered the national animal, is respected for its strength and grace as well as for its incredible power (STEIN, 2010, p. 80). By considering the lion's and the tiger's procedures in relation to the prey, Vertie Treadwell establishes a connection between Britain and India, metaphorized by the fearsome image of the lion.

> Lions hunt in pairs, or even in female packs of fours and fives. They crouch in the grass, pulling themselves closer to a herd of prey, and when they fall upon the fold they select the slowest reactor, the most confused, and close in relentlessly, ignoring hundreds of others in the pursuit of the weakest. (TB, p. 181)

By drawing such a depiction of the lions' attacks, Vertie Treadwell proposes an analogy to the procedures taken by the British to defeat and control their "prey": India. Arrogance and cowardice are manifested by the attacker who makes use of unfair strategies to conquer the weaker opponent. He states, "[t]here seemed to be nothing noble in their lives or practices" (TB, p. 181). The portrayal of a clash between unequal forces has been observed in many distinct sources, especially in mythology: gods and goddesses, the supreme immortals, amuse themselves by playing with the fragile lives of the mortals. In this sense, several devices are used to control, dominate, and play with human lives, by creatures considered to be "superior".

A wide range of myths and their representations associated to several themes may be found in world mythologies. One of the major themes is the myth of creation that describes the origins of the world. There are other themes which attract deep interest in cultures worldwide: the myths of humanity – causes of life and death; cosmic disasters – the end of the world; heroes as agents of change; animals and plants as providers of energy and transformation; material and spiritual worlds – body and soul as aspects of existence; among others. Since the beginning of times, peoples have told stories about myths that could offer some pedagogic learning. For an adequate analysis of myth, one must take into account the culture in which it is inserted.

Concerning the gendered aspect of mythological societies, the time span between gods and goddesses in the West should be taken into consideration. In earlier times, the experienced energies which were present in all living beings were not classified or personified in male or female. Later in "sacred history" (RUETHER, 2005, p. 278), "the goddess worship (as being) the universal religion, expressing the feminine life principle of the universe" (p. 278) is identified. However, there is a shift in the representations of the ruling-class deities' hierarchy.

> Gods and goddesses were presumed to exist in some space in the heavens, separated from humans, mostly personified as humans, although sometimes with animal attributes (especially in Egypt). These deities were immortal, in contrast to humans as mortals, although some also died and rose. They were much more powerful than humans, imaged as an aristocracy writ large. The idea of gods and goddesses, therefore, enshrined a concept of cosmological hierarchy that itself was built on and reflected the development of class hierarchy. (RUETHER, 2005, pp. 300-1)

Two of the most advanced and complex mythologies are those of the ancient Greeks and the Hindus (Indian). Their religions were correspondingly called Hellenism and Hinduism. These two religions and cultures existed in different parts of the world and were separated by considerable geographic distances. Nevertheless, a few similarities may be

pointed out in order to illustrate how similar these two mythologies are. In Hindu mythology the *Kashyapa* fathered the *Devas* (Gods), but these gods did not include the *Trimurti – Brahma, Vishnu,* and *Shiva*, who are considered to be superior to the *Devas*. The ruler of the *Devas* was *Indra*. In Greek mythology, the gods were fathered by *Cronus*. Similarly to *Indra* in Hindu mythology, *Zeus* is the ruler of the gods. *Indra* and the other gods resided upon *Kailash* while *Zeus* and the other Greek gods lived on the top of Mount Olympus. Both *Indra* and *Zeus* are gods of thunder and lightning (ZIMMER, 1989, pp. 19-45).

Another similarity between Greek and Hindu mythologies is found in the example of *Cronus,* who becomes aware of a prophecy that he will be overthrown by one of his children. In order to prevent this fate from happening, *Cronus* begins to swallow each one of his newborns. But when the sixth child is born, *Zeus*, *Cronus'* wife, *Rhea*, arranges for *Zeus* to be educated in exile. Later, *Zeus* comes back, and this leads *Cronus* to flee. In Hindu mythology, King *Kansa* is foretold that the eighth son by his sister *Devaki* will kill him. In order to prevent this, *Kansa* imprisons both *Devaki* and her husband *Vasudeva* and allows them to live on the condition that they would give back all their newborns to him. *Devaki*'s eighth son was *Krishna* and, as *Kansa* had killed all the previous children, they arranged for this child to be brought up in exile and presented another newborn to *Kansa* in his place. Later, the grown up *Krishna* returns to avenge the death of his brothers and kills *Kansa* (ZIMMER, 1989, pp. 19-45).

As it was exposed above, Greek and Hindu mythologies present similar inheritances that were assimilated by the dominated people, or changed a little during the conquering times. Some myths were preserved the way they were, and some others were adapted, in some cases, according to the conqueror's culture:

> When the proto-Greeks began entering the Balkan Peninsula around 2000 B.C., they carried religious and narrative traditions with them. Since they were speakers of an Indo-European language, some traditions were developments of their Indo-European inheritance, as we can infer from parallels in other Indo-European peoples. Certain features of Greek mythology, such as polytheism, anthropomorphic deities, and traditions about the past structured as narratives and transmitted orally, were characteristics of all ancient societies of which we have much knowledge and were not peculiarly Greek. In other respects the newcomers borrowed much from local and neighboring peoples, since the Greeks, like most other polytheistic peoples, displayed a nonexclusive attitude toward religious traditions, making the assumption that societies worshipped many of the same deities as they themselves did and allowing that different nations called their deities by names if for no other reason than that they spoke different languages. Because of this attitude, the Greeks readily identified their own deities with similar deities of other nations and sometimes took over associated mythological narratives. They also borrowed the cults and

> mythology of foreign deities with no Greek analogues, adapting them to their own religious and mythological system. (HANSEN, 2004, pp. 6-7)

For absorbing other nations' influences, such as religious traditions and the worshipping of several deities in Greek mythology, different traditions can be identified and these were reconfigured by a polytheist society. For this practice, the Greek pantheon is composed by many narratives that can be associated to other previous mythological stories.

Regarding mythical representations in India, one of the first points to be raised is that its pantheon gathers an immense amount of deities. Such huge quantity is even more noticeable when compared to the mythologies relating to monotheistic religions, whose representations are organized by following a certain historical event. There is an enormous difference between monotheistic and polytheistic religions. The Hindu pantheon is overpopulated by goddesses. Hinduism possesses "a textually documented history which stretches from very roughly 1200 BC to the present day." Such texts are called *Vedas*, and have the purpose "to supply hymns for ritual use, and to expound what was seen as the philosophical basis of those hymns" (LARRINGTON, 1997, p. 189).

In Mukherjee's novel, some fragments of the *Vedas* are recited during the Tree Bride's rituals of death.

> In Varanasi the Ganga River flows from south to north or, as Daddy explains to Rabi and me, it flows way from the Domain of Death toward the Realm of Rebirth. […] [W]e have gathered in Kashi for the Tree Bride's cremation. […] The logs and kindling are drenched with oils and ghee. Prayers are chanted, the raffia body of the Tree Bride is placed on the pyre, ghee drizzled on it, and all prelighting rites completed. (TB, pp. 287, 292)

By reciting the *Vedas,* which constitute an "encompassing symbol of the brahmanical tradition" (HOLDREGE, 1996, p. 9) and performing the rituals, Tara Chatterjee attempts to answer her ancestor's plea in order to set her soul free. "I feel her presence, I hear her urgent whispers. 'I am trapped in your world of mortals', she pleads. 'Perform the rites'. […] 'set me free, Tara'" (TB, p. 279). The *Vedas* "are portrayed as having the ability to station their awareness on that subtle level where they could "see" and "hear" the impulses of knowledge reverberating forth from the transcendent as the fundamental rhythms of creation" (p. 9). Therefore, as soon as she recites the prayers, she reestablishes 'the balance of the Cosmos' – restituting the Tree Bride her stolen peace.

Some of the divinities in Hindu mythology are related to nature, the Cosmos. The central gods compose what is called the triad of gods, or *Trimurti,* as stated above. Together,

they maintain the balance of the universe, that is, the *Dharma*. According to Carolyne Larrington,

> [...] The best known of these attemps to represent the ultimate reality in mystical form is the concept of the *Trimurti* or 'triple form', in which the divine functions of creation, preservation and destruction are divided respectively between *Brahmã*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*. [...] Thus, in post-Vedic mythology *Brahmã*, often called 'grandfather', is always the direct agent of creation. [...] *Vishnu*'s myths, too, are often appropriate to his function in the *Trimurti*. He supports earth and heaven, and the bulk of his mythology relates how he took animal or human form in order to save the earth. [...] But destruction is more prominent in the myths of *Shiva*. Dissolution is perhaps a better word than destruction; *Shiva* is closely associated with the state of non-separation, in which the perception of individual entities ceases to exist, and in this context destruction is seen as equivalent to 'liberation' or 'release' – the proper aim of every soul to escape from the cycle of birth and death, and to realize its true nature. (LARRINGTON, 1997, pp. 191-2)

The major principle of Hinduism, according to which the cosmic functions are kept – creation, maintenance, and destruction – is applied as an attempt to explain and reconcile different perceptions of the divine. And there is an important aspect to be stressed out: "the *Trimurti* is an all-male construct" (LARRINGTON, 1997, p. 193). During the Veda Era, in the Vedic Pantheon, there was a lack of female figures. The feminine forms were considered to be inferior in number in relation to the male representations. They appear in a more prominent way in later texts, having received more thorough exploration in contemporary literary contexts, as perceptible in Mukherjee´s choice of the main women characters´ names, as all of them are given on behalf of Hindu goddesses: the Tree Bride and the protagonist shared name – Tara – , and her two sisters, Padma and Parvati.

The absence (or the restricted number) of the female figures in the old texts reveals how the feminine roles were considered to be complementary to the masculine, or not so relevant when compared to them. Considering the political actions aimed at the Indian, women were not strong. A contrast in the awareness of the 'Western woman' to the 'Eastern woman' can be observed, taking into account the different geographic locations and factors which affect those women's lives.

> The politics of us/them or West/East divide forms of backdrop to philosophizing about, for and by women in India. Starting with the awareness that "Western woman" cannot mean the same as "Indian woman", the philosopher here is easily led to an antiessentialism and explosion of a monolithic idea of woman. With such diffusion comes from a variegation in a monochrome 'feminism': for if subjects are multiple, so also are the blueprints for their emancipation. Resting content with a plurality of feminisms might seem an obvious solution here: but then, it is also natural to wonder whether a simple grammatical pluralization can create space for genuine conceptual diversity, given the entrenched (and Western) associations of the term. (JAGGAR; YOUNG, 2000, p. 118)

In relation to what was mentioned above, one may point out the impossibility of a standardization of needs and claims of the Western and the non-Western women due to their distinct historical processes. Still, in both geographical contexts, women have figured poorly throughout history in several fields, among them, in mythology. However, in the later Hindu religious texts, Hindu goddesses do not conform to a few stereotypes but represent a diverse range of beings with their many characteristics and functions. There are goddesses associated with wealth and power, as mighty warriors, death and destruction; others are related to prominent physical features of the landscape, while others are strongly identified with villages, cities, or regions. In this sense, it can be affirmed that there are plenty of female goddesses in Hinduism, and there is a central female figure which names the land itself representing the Indian territory. David Kinsley discusses this sacred female imagery which affirms the reverence for the Indian subcontinent.

> As the earth, she is known as *Prithivi*, and as India she is known as *Bharat Ma* (Mother India). To a great extent, Hinduism is a geographical religion, a religious tradition that is intensely associated with India itself. For Hindus, India is a sacred place, and the reverence for the land of India as a goddess is a typical Hindu expression of this idea. In Varanasi, the sacred center of Hinduism, there is a temple dedicated to *Bharat Ma*. […] In the case of this Varanasi temple to *Bharat Ma*, […] there is a large relief map of the Indian subcontinent. That is, the goddess is understood to be India itself. (1993, p. 130)

The concept of woman, as many other concepts in India, brings one of the strongest aspects of the culture; the one of contrast/duality. Kinsley states that according to Hindu ideology – the female presents an essential duality – she can be fertile, benevolent, provider, but she can also be aggressive, malevolent, destroyer, and lethal. Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, for instance, opposes herself to the manifestations of Kali, the destructive goddess, in some occasions. In Hindu mythology, the multiplicity of goddesses varies according to their aspects and roles in Hindu mythical tradition.

> The goddesses, who are usually associated with popular Hinduism, often illustrate important ideas of the Hindu tradition, ideas that underlie the great Hindu philosophic visions. Several goddesses, for example, are unambiguously identified with or called *prakrti,* a central notion in most philosophic systems. *Prakrti* denotes physical (as opposed to spiritual) reality. […] Other goddesses express and explore the nature of devotion and the divine-human relationship. *Rãdã* and *Sitã*, in particular, are important examples of devotional models in the Hindu tradition and suggest a significant feminine dimension to devotion as understood in Hinduism. *Lakshmi* expresses Hindu thinking about kingship and the relationship of the ruler to the fertility of the world. The many goddesses associated with geographical features of the Indian subcontinent suggest Hindu thinking about the relationship between sacred space and spiritual liberation. Most goddesses in their mythologies and natures also express Hindu thinking about sexual roles and relationships. […] Other goddesses, in their myths and personalities, express central tensions that characterize the Hindu tradition. The best example is the mythology of the goddess *Pãrvati,* in which the tension between dharma, the human tendency to uphold and refine the

> social and physical order, and *moksha*, the human longing to transcend all social and physical limitations, is explored in the relationship between *Pãrvati* and *Shiva*. (KINSLEY, 1988, pp. 3-4)

The representation of the goddesses in Hindu mythology is a reproduction of the Indian social code. Considering the 'pedagogical function' of the feminine elements in the Hindu Pantheon, it must be stressed out that they reinforce the strict patriarchal system. The conception of *Parvati*'s son, *Ganesha*, exemplifies the limitations and strictness of physical contact according to Hindu laws. Her son is conceived through a parthenogenesis process which is – "a form of asexual reproduction where an unfertilized egg develops into a new individual in the absence of a male gamete".[32] Therefore, *Parvati*'s offspring is produced without the embryo being fertilized by a male, in her case, by *Shiva*.

The dual aspect which is represented by the Hindu goddesses can also be identified in Tara Lata, since the ancestor's protagonist personifies the contrasts of good and evil, benevolent and malevolent, protector and destroyer. Her roles are classified according to her actions: to the villagers, she is considered to be a "sacred creature" who reaches a mythical status after her murder; but, to the British rulers, she is a subversive aged woman, who goes against the Empire laws.

> The woman was a hardened case in many ways. I [Treadwell] have never met an Indian woman more obdurate than Miss Gangooly. We knew she had been financing Gandhi and then she broke with him and started supporting this Subhas Bose. She seemed to have abandoned the rational and, I might say, containable, course of nonviolence for some sort of alliance with the devil himself. (TB, pp. 206-7)

It should be emphasized that in the majority of written sources in the Hindu sacred texts, which tend towards androcentrism, women are seen as dependent on and subservient to men. In the influential Hindu Law Book, *The Law Book of Manu*, we are told that "without male guidance and control, women are thought to be socially irresponsible and dangerous. […] women are viewed almost entirely *vis-à-vis* males. Their role in society is to serve, give birth to, and nourish males" (KINSLEY, 1993, p. 134). This being so, a woman who is not married has no "use" for the Indian society, considering the fact that when she marries, she leaves her home village, moves to her husband's village, and assumes the identity of his "lineage". In Tara Lata's case, there is rupture with such assumptions, since she remains "single" and assumes a fundamental role in the village of Mishtigunj. She becomes a strong political figure characterized by the image of a freedom fighter. "We (the British officials) can drop the pretense of her virginity, with her house and compound practically bristling with a

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[32] Cf. the definition provided in the Biology Online Dictionary, 2009.

small army of virile young men, her steady gaze and brazen confidence, even in the company of males and superiors" (TB, p. 219).

In India, issues such as class, caste, political convictions, among others are very much disregarded when the subject of analysis is a woman. Through the lenses of the patriarchal system, the position of a woman subject is less worthy than that of the working-class woman in other parts of the world. So, it may be assumed as an obvious solution to form organizations composed by women, in order to fight for their rights, to find their voices, in other words – to start feminist movements. However, the differences between West and East must be taken into account. In Tara Lata's case, she could have had another treatment, had the historical context in which she lived been different from the reality she faced: late nineteenth century, strong patriarchal values, and rigid traditions. Even though she resists and fights for a more just system, which includes a better treatment to be given to women, she is the least recognized freedom fighter in the Indian independence process. Regarding her gender-oriented activism, she can be considered a "proto-feminist" figure. However, we must be cautious when using the term "feminist" to classify any active women's movement. According to Madhu Kishwar, who rejects the label,

> Feminism, as appropriated and defined by the West, has too often become a tool of cultural imperialism. The definitions, the terminology, the assumptions, even the issues, the forms of struggles and institutions are exported from West to East. (KISHWAR, 2000, p. 118)

Kishwar relates contemporary feminism as being "sanctioned ignorances" and "skewed knowledges", traces which she identifies as characteristic of "Western feminism" (1990, p. 3). By observing the nuances in the social, political and cultural women's representation in the West and the East, the multiple presence of female figures in Hindu mythology must be emphasized, manifested through the goddesses – not simply as a part of the gods' universe, but as a companion to them. In recent texts, those female divine creatures reveal their power.

> As 'consorts' of gods, it might seem that goddesses are basically appendages. But iconographically, divine sexual union is often depicted with the female in the dominant position. Conceptually, women are the embodiment of power [*Sakt]*, the absence of which renders male deities 'unable to move even a blade of grass.' However, power is not necessarily autonomy, and the cult of the *Mahādevi* abandons the image of consortship altogether for that of the Cosmic Queen who creates even the gods. In Tantric literature, the Goddess [*Devi*] assumes ten forms – the *Mahāvidyās* – [which are, to mention a few] *Kali* dancing naked with a garland of skulls; pot-bellied [pregnant?] *Tara*; *Chhinnamastā*, who, having decapitated herself, holds in her hand, her dismembered head into whose mouth flows one of the three jets of blood spouting from severed neck; a buxom *Bhuvanesvari* giving nourishment to the world; *Sodashi*, a sixteen-year-old astride the body of *Shiva*;

> *Dhumāvati*, old, disheveled, and widowed. In the smaller traditions, we find mention of a group of goddesses who are inimical to children but are, fascinatingly, called *Mātrkās* [meaning "mothers" and also, "phonemes"] and *village goddesses* with demanding, ambivalent natures. (JAGGAR; YOUNG, 2000, p. 121)

Women empowerment[33] may be observed in the Hindu pantheon. The embodiment of power (*Sakti*) is bestowed to women, an aspect that reinforces the view of powerful female figures in the transcendental world – the female gives life to the male: "the Cosmic Queen creates even the Gods" (JAGUAR; YOUNG, 2000, p. 121). The previous expression points out the concept of power by mothering, that is to say, the one who is responsible for another being, if the figure of a male god is 'superior' to the female goddess, something must be (re)considered: a god is born from a goddess. This fact defies/questions the notion of power. Interaction is what brings power to male deities. The absence of *Sakti* renders male inability to perform even simple movements, according to the Sacred Texts. But such actions, concerning female goddesses, cannot be taken as feminism in themselves. As proposed by Jaggar and Young, they should be understood as "a compensatory device that gives to women in the other-worldly realm what they are denied in the empirical world" (p. 122).

I have argued that Bharati Mukherjee revises the myths in her narratives, and already mentioned that one of the ways in which this is made evident relates to the naming of the three sister characters after three important goddesses in Hindu mythology due to their roles/functions in the Pantheon: *Padma*, *Parvati* and *Tara*. My point is that the author uses myth as a device and metaphor to empower such women characters, considering that they constitute central figures in the novels. For this reason, I believe Mukherjee characterizes those three women with different aspects and attitudes towards culture and their own social roles, in association to the different aspects of the goddesses in the Hindu pantheon, as it will become clear in the discussion below. The author also spots the similitude of such women in relation to their common Hindu inheritance, a connecting link: the embodiment of power by the lively presence of myth in their lives, as they live in their own ways.

By portraying the story of the three desirable daughters, Bharati Mukherjee brings the meaningful symbolism of the number three to the narratives. The three sisters' relationship can be considered complementary in the sense that each of the three is a part, an aspect which forms the whole. The number three suggests and a wide range of interpretations and connections in different cultures, such as: God's attributes – omniscience, omnipresence and

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[33] The term 'empowerment' and its relations to women oppression are discussed in a detailed way in chapter III below.

omnipotence; the divisions of time – past, present and future; the kingdoms of matter – animal, vegetal and mineral.

The symbolism associated to this number is also connected to the triangle image which assumes a very mystical and spiritual feature in several stories, folktales, and mythologies: the three wishes referred to in popular tales; the three fates, also known as "daughters of the night, were three sisters who controlled destiny"; the three sirens: Legeia, Leucosia, and Parthenope, "their lovely singing lured sailors to their deaths by crashing their vessels into rocks in the Mediterranean Sea"; the Shakespearean three witches in *Macbeth*; the three graces, "the handmaidens of Venus and often shown with the nine muses and Apollo"; and trios of deities, in Hinduism, the *Trimurti – Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*; in Christianity, "the Holy Trinity represents three persons in one God – Father, Son and Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit" (CALTER, 2008, p. 438). Paul Calter (2008) states that in "elementary symbolism, three was called the triad by the Pythagoreans", also representing "the triad of family: male, female, and child; beginning, middle and end; and birth, life and death" (p. 438).

I notice that the marked symbolism of the number three is interwoven in the narratives mainly in relation to the representation of family relations: Padma, Parvati and Tara, the three daughters and sisters who were born on the same day, with three-year intervals between them (as will be shown); the protagonist, her husband and son. It is further perceptible, though, by means of other narrative features, such as the iconic images associated to Tara Lata Gangooly (the Tree Bride, the saint, the freedom fighter); and the time setting in the narratives: the past represented by the reports of the colonial history of India, the present associated to the protagonist's current time, and the future is related to the unfolding of her acts.

Focusing on the portrayal of the three sisters, although they were born in Calcutta, they do not follow the Hindu traditions, all the way, preferring to find their own paths:

> *Sisters three are we ... as like as blossoms on a tree. But we are not.* My oldest sister, *Padma*, was born eight years after that marriage ceremony in the *Shoondar Bon*. My second sister, *Parvati*, was born on the same date, three years later, and I [*Tara*] came along with the same birthday three years after that. Yes, we did our calculations and privately celebrated the same October night as our collective inception day. And just as our mother hoped in naming us after goddesses, we have survived, even prospered. (DD, p. 21)

Padma, is the oldest sister who lives in New Jersey. Despite living abroad, she can be considered the one who follows Indian traditions, in her dressing saris, her cuisine; however, she keeps herself away from the meaning of her name, which means purity, when the issue

involves relationships. She is not a married woman, according to the Hindu Bengali traditions; she has an Indian lover who runs an Indian television program where she works as a television anchor. Parvati, the second sister in the family line, is so Indian to the extent of allowing her husband's relatives to be houseguests in her own house, which is a kind of common routine in Indian families. She lives a futile life, occupying herself with amenities in the attempt of pleasing her Indian husband. Perhaps she is the most "Indian" one in the way of living her life according to traditions. She is close to the female myth that "is usually depicted as a docile wife next to her husband, smaller in stature than he and equipped with only two arms in contrast with his four" (LARRINGTON, 1997, p. 199). And Tara, the protagonist and narrator, is the most 'un-Indian' of the three, considering that she is divorced, has different relationships to male lovers, many of them foreigner. And not only does she live abroad, but also leads a foreign way of life: "the American way". There is a bias with the ironic appropriation of Hindu mythology by Mukherjee. In a way, the incorporation of this 'tradition' indicates that the author is paradoxically deconstructing to incorporate these mythic narratives.

According to Hindu mythology, Tara or Arya Tara is the 'mother of liberation', representing the virtues of success in work and achievements.

> She is revered as a divine mother who watches over all beings and acts in myriad ways to deliver them from suffering and lead them to enlightenment. […] Tara is a beacon and guiding light for those tossed on the stormy seas of life. She helps her worshippers cross the ocean of worldly existence (*samsara*) and safely reach the other shore: *nirvana*, the ultimate peace, liberation. Tara is endowed with exquisite beauty and unlimited saving powers. (SHAW, 2011, p. 115)

As it has already been emphasized, motherhood is an important issue in the Hindu mythology. The goddess Tara is depicted as pot-bellied, a characteristic which may be associated to her representation of the feminine principle in association to motherhood. According to Larrington, "Although "mother" is one of the most frequent titles of the Goddess of cult, the goddesses of mythology are not conspicuous for parenthood; neither are the gods" (1997, p. 212). In Mukherjee's novels, Tara Lata is considered to be the 'virgin mother'. Among the three sisters, Padma is known to be childless, Parvati has two sons: Bhupesh and Dinesh, to whom she is also dedicated. In mythology, Parvati "is the only goddess to act as mother in myth" (1997, p. 212). And Tara Chatterjee is the mother of Rabi and, later in the narrative, she becomes the mother of Victoria.

Thus, such pot-bellied depiction in the myth of Tara may be related to Tara Chatterjee's pregnancies in the novels, which, in their turn, may be connected to the idea of world regeneration and to the notion of renewal of the universe order, leading to the reestablishment of *dharma.* I have already stressed out that, according to tradition, Tara also means 'the cheater of death', the one who survives, and this meaning may be related to Tara Chatterjee's ability to survive and reinvent herself, as she does after the bombing attack discussed above.

Another important feature to be emphasized is the duality embodied by Tara Lata, as a complementary aspect of the goddess Tara. The ancestor personifies the ambivalent natures of goddesses: she represents the savior figure when she shelters and protects the rebels who fight against the Bristish Raj. At the same time, she represents the powerful appearance by becoming the fearless freedom fighter, as it was signaled above. Tara Chatterjee's second pregnancy may represent the reorganization of the Cosmos order, according to the story that she was told by her great-grandmother:

> The cosmos is created, sustained, destroyed, and re-created over and over again, but only one town on earth is spared during the period of cosmic dissolution: Kashi. From my parents and my two older sisters, I [Tara] knew Kashi by its secular name, Varanasi, the old British Benares. But my great-grandmother set me straight. Kashi, she explained, is both the City of Light and the City of Liberating Cremation. The god Shiva carries Kashi on the prongs of his trident. When the cosmos chars into total blackness, Kashi glows because Shiva created it as a sacred space where to die is to be saved. (TB, pp. 4-5)

With the birth of Tara Chatterjee's daughter, the possibility of (re)creation is sustained, according to the Hindu beliefs of successive incarnations. Some interpretative possibilities may be pointed out in relation to this passage: first, Tara, "the cheater of death", is symbolically reborn by means of her daughter. And, by giving the baby the name of her friend Victoria, she reinforces the loaded meaning of being a survivor. By receiving the name of Tara's friend, the child takes part in the *dharma* process. In the Hindu version of the stork legend it is remembered that: "[…] the individual soul wanders in a dreamless state, […] waiting for its allotted time to reinhabit a living body" (TB, p. 4).

Considering the mythical theme of virginity and power, the 'virgin mother' of Mishtigunj, the Tree Bride, Tara Lata, appears to be 'empowered' by her virginity, as she is married to a sacred tree, and lives an isolated life in the forest. In a way, Tara Lata may also be considered a village goddess, in the sense that she is not married to a mortal person, to a man: a village goddess declares herself happy without a spouse. According to the myth, "[…]

virginity sometimes has positive connotations: the virgin has greater power, certainly greater aggressive power, than the married woman" (LARRINGTON, 1997, pp. 203-4). Carolyne Larrington argues that the role of virginity in such a context is:

> A social, not a biological, phenomenon: the non-virgin is not the 'maid no more' of English folk-song, who is forever changed by one experience, but a married woman for whom sex, childbearing and caring for a husband are normal life. On one level, then, it is only the woman who rejects woman's normal experience who can be powerful, just as only the man who refuses to procreate and rejects the status of 'householder' attains power and spiritual eminence. (LARRINGTON, 1997, pp. 204-5)

Following the line of thought of the fragment above, a parallel can be drawn in relation to Tara Lata's power. According to Hindu mythology, it can be said that such power comes from the mythical aspect she assumes, that is, she is the one whose normal life had been denied to her due to the incident occurred on her wedding day, and not only from her political attitudes.

Another relevant issue is the illicit love among deities. As an example, I mention the contemporary Tara's sexual life, which represents a transgressive attitude towards the Indian precepts of morality. "Neither men nor women are encouraged towards extramarital sex by traditional morality, but as in many societies it is the transgressing woman who in practice is more severely condemned" (1997, p. 210). In Hindu mythology this role can be associated to the goddess Radha, "who is more usually regarded as human than divine, becomes the paradigm for the devotee who risks everything in the quest for God as lover" (1997, p. 210). After her divorce, Tara Chatterjee has several lovers, which challenges the morality of the Indian tradition. She is criticized by her sisters for this kind of liberal behavior, as Tara moves herself away from the family holiness. In a way, by having different love partners, she becomes the one to be avoided for her dangerous attitudes against the institution of marriage. And by association, she becomes inferior to her ex-husband, Bish, who continues being the provider of the family, that is, he keeps supporting Tara and their son, Rabi. It must be stressed that the male subjects' relations are never questioned by Indian tradition.

To illustrate extramarital attitudes, Carolyne Larrington comments on the relation of Krishna and Radha:

> Krishna's youth is spent in a village, among farmers and cowherds; he is so attractive that all women fall in love with him and desire him – sometimes attaining him, though only temporarily – for their lover. [Among these women, it is Radha who] after a relatively late appearance in the story rapidly becomes the best loved and most important of the group. […] Yet, despite some attempts to make her Krishna's lawful wife, it is awkward for a cowherd who is really a prince to marry a

> milkmaid who is really a milkmaid, and the majority view has always been not only that she and Krishna were not married but that she 'belongs to another'. The metaphor is a moving one, but it implies a model of gender relations in which the female is the lover, the natural servant of the higher male. […] Thus the lovers defy the costumary hierarchy which insists that the woman serve the man, as Krishna dusts down Radha's feet, or even tells her to place her feet on his head. Not only conventional morality, but the basic social norms expressed in gender relations are transgressed in this all-consuming love. (pp. 210-1)

Mukherjee's narratives focus on the gendered representation of myths, and their functions as metaphor and criticism of Indian women's roles in society. As an outcome of the story, the protagonist's quest for her identitary roots leads her to return to India, she goes to Kashi to perform the ritual for the death of her ancestor – Tara Lata, making her free at last. As Heinrich Zimmer reminds, "each one according to his/her own culture."

> Wood-bearers had erected the pyre before we got here. The logs and kindling are drenched with oils and ghee. Prayers are chanted, the raffia body of the Tree Bride is placed on the pyre, ghee drizzled on it, and all prelightening rites completed. […] Rabi hands me his videocam. It is his duty as the only living male blood relative present, the Tree Bride being a mother's side connection. He seizes the kindling and touches the rafia mouth of the Tree Bride. If it were a real corpse – as someday Bish and I will be, and when Rabi performs our ceremonies – the skull would explode and the soul escape its fleshly prison. On pyres all around us, as sons light the bodies of their mothers and fathers, heads are popping´, bodies twich and shrivel, family members erupt in joy and sadness, shreds of Sanskrit prayers and other languages escape their lips. The raffia sizzles as more ghee is added. And in the hiss of the burning raffia and wood, I hear a whispered exclamation. Ram! Ram! (TB, pp. 292-3)

As the protagonist's son, Rabi, performs his ancestor's death rituals, he reinforces the Vedic tradition which restricts the participation in order to execute the rituals to male relatives. Vedic religion focuses on human existence in the world, and it is also concerned with life after death – the afterlife – as a continuation of earthly life. It can be affirmed that "it's a male's principal religious duty to insure these blessings by performing appropriate sacred rituals" (KINSLEY, 1993, p. 87). Thus, by all human actions, not just the ones performed in the rituals, it is believed to contribute to the maintenance of cosmic and social order, which is signaled by the term *dharma*, representing the orderliness of human society and individual duty to maintain that order through every single human action. And in this sense, Rabi Chatterjee contributes to the maintenance of the family order. Yet, it should be emphasized that in portraying the picture of a "happy family following tradition", that is, when the protagonist is accompanied in the rituals by her husband and children, after having lived an uncompromising life, free from rules, the values of tradition are reconsidered. Bharati Mukherjee questions the rigid patterns of Indian religious precepts which influence people's attitudes. Throughout the narratives, the author portrays the fragmentation and subversion (divorce, sexual issues) of the concept of family according to the strict Hindu tradition,

whereas by the end she describes the Chatterjees as a "happy family" since they return to their homeland to perform religious rituals and resume their marriage, what reveals an ironic approach by dealing with such issues.

## 4. A re-vision of the myth of Tara Lata, the Tree Bride.

According to Alicia Ostriker, 'revisionist mythmaking' occurs when the poet, understood in a wide sense as the literary author, "employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends" (1986, p. 72). Ostriker reminds us that, since the 1960's, several revisionist myth works published by women authors can be found, among them, Anne Sexton and Angela Carter may be mentioned. The critic proceeds by saying:

> […] revisionism correlates with formal experiment. This is important not only because new meanings must generate new forms – when we have a new form in art we can assume we have a new meaning – but because the verbal strategies these poets use draw attention to the discrepancies between traditional concepts and the conscious mental and emotional activity of female re-vision. (1986, p. 87)

Bharati Mukherjee constructs the myth of the Tree Bride by resorting to the 'interference' of the goddess *Manasha*, worshipped throughout rural Bengal and considered to be "the goddess of snakes, cause and cure of snakebite. […] She is the sister of the cosmic serpent *Adisesa*" (LARRINGTON, 1997, p. 219). The death of the infant Tara Lata Gangooly's fiancée by snakebite brings forth the dramatic unfolding: the little girl is married to a tree, which leads to the construction of the myth, thus, the child becomes the Tree Bride. The death of the thirteen-year-old bridegroom results in several thoughts concerning to the ideal cosmic conjunction. "The goddess must not have been sufficiently appeased [.]" Or maybe "the snakebite had occurred to remind Jai Krishna, [Tara Lata's father], and Surendranath [the bridegroom's father], how precarious social order and fatherly self-confidence are" (DD, p. 13). Therefore, it may be argued that Tara Lata's fate suffers an impact on her life and in future deeds by the supernatural interference of the Goddess Manasha. In this sense, it may be understood that the order of the Cosmos can be affected according to the interests of the superior beings, redefining the fragile destiny of human lives.

Regarding the importance of the goddess *Manasha* in Tara Lata's fate, it may be argued that by the 'interference' of the former, the ancient Tara begins to undertake her mythical path. The myth of the tree can be found in different cultures, and read in distinct

mythologies. In Greek mythology, for example, it can be associated to the legend of Daphne. Daphne was a Naid nymph of the river Peneios, in Thessaly or the Ladon of Arkadia. According to this legend:

> Apollo was not invariably successful in love. On one occasion he tried to steal Marpessa from Idas, but she remained true to her husband. On another, he pursued Daphne, the mountain nymph, a priestess of Mother Earth, daughter of the river Peneios in Thessaly; but when he overtook her, she cried out to Mother Earth who, in the nick of time, spirited her away to Crete, where she became known as Pasiphäe. Mother Earth left a laurel-tree in her place, and from its leaves Apollo made a wreath to console himself. (GRAVES, 1992, p. 78)

The idea of being 'beyond reach' may be associated to the legend of Daphne. In a similar fashion to Daphne´s fate, who was transformed into a tree as a way to be rescued/saved from Apollo's persecution, a turning can be traced in Tara Lata's life – she is transformed into a 'tree', that is, a 'tree bride' in order to escape from a life of disgrace, and also to get free from the attacks of the rigid Hindu society. But, a distinction must be made between Daphne and Tara Lata: the former prays for help and gets changed into a laurel tree, while the latter does not know any danger, and for this reason, does not ask for help.

> The poor child had no idea that already she had been transformed from envied bride about to be married to a suitable husband into second-worst thing in her society. She was now not quite a widow, which for a Bengali Hindu woman, would be the most cursed state, but a woman who brings her family misfortune and death. She was a person to be avoided. In a community intolerant of unmarried women, his [her father's] Tara Lata had become an unmarriageable woman. (DD, p. 12)

Considering the symbolism of trees in various cultures, as a natural world force, it is believed that trees and forests are inhabited by spirits and divine beings. Essential to life on earth, trees hold place in the images of our consciousness: they are rooted on earth, their branches may reach the skies, they are nourished by nature's elements, and they are animated by the sap running through their veins. Trees may provide a metaphor for what is considered to be human (CALDECOTT; TOORCHEN, 1993). Concerning the idea of a tree as a sacred element in nature, it can be related to what is mentioned in the Vedic *Bhagavad Gita*: "The Banyan tree with its roots above, and its branches below, is imperishable" (2003). In such disposition, the 'inverted tree', with its roots in heaven, and its branches growing downward, may represent spiritual growth. Thus, we understand that by marrying the ancient Tara to a tree, not only does Jay Krishna Gangooly, her father, avoid family misfortune, but he also believes in the idea of the tree as a symbol of life. So, he gives her daughter her life back. And by deciding to spend her lifetime rooted in the forest, and nourished by nature, Tara Gangooly embodies life itself.

In Hindu mythology, the birth of Brahma happens in the center of tender lotus petals that bloom of the navel of Vishnu who floats in the cosmic ocean. This deep rooted law of life, curiously depicted by Vishnu and Brahma, is a representation of life as it is seen in reality within the womb of the mother. The womb is the shell within which cosmic waters lie, self generated by Shakti to house the unborn, the pulsating tree of life that floats in this ocean, sustained by the lotus stem of the umbilical chord (CALDECOTT; TOORCHEN, 1993). By this depiction, it may be argued that when Tara Gangooly marries the god *Shoondar Bon*, the Beautiful Forest, the legend of Tara Lata starts as she becomes the one who begets life by saving others (the poor and needy).

The myth of Tara Lata is constructed due to her fate. In Hindu mythology tradition, the goddess Tara does not figure prominently as the other goddesses. Tara is fairly well known in Bengal. The earliest reference to Tara is found in:

> *Subandhu's Vasavadattã*, which was probably written around the middle of the seventh century. The reference occurs as a part of a pun and situates Tara in the context of Buddhist devotion. […] Despite Tara's many forms and functions it seems clear wherein lies her extraordinary power and appeal. She is approached primarily as a savior, as a being who specializes in spectacular, dramatic appearances when her devotees call on her dire circumstances. *Tara* is often said to rescue her devotees from such desperate predicaments as being lost in an impenetrable forest, foundering in a storm at sea, being under threat of imminent execution, or being trapped and bound in prison. […] *Tara*'s compassion for suffering beings, then, is revealed primarily in her role as the cheater of death. In this sense her chief blessing to her devotees is a long life, and other stories emphasize that regular worship of *Tara* brings about longevity. […] Unlike goddesses who are associated with life as embodiments of fertility, *Tara* is approached primarily as the one who protects, preserves, and saves life. (KINSLEY, 1988, pp. 166-7)

As a consequence of defying the British Raj, Tara Lata is murdered. Some time after her death, a poster is erected with the inscription written in Bengali, that says:

> The home of Tara Lata Gangooly (1874-1944?), known to the World as "Tara Ma". Behind these Walls lived an Untrained Nurse, Spiritual Healer, and Inspiration to Generations of Peace-loving and Peace-seeking Individuals from Around the World. During the Bengal Famine of 1942 she fed the Town and the Outlying Villages. She rallied the Cause of an Independent India and United Bengal and protected Young Freedom Fighters from British arrest. She herself was dragged from her Home on the night of October 12, 1944, by Colonial authorities and Never Heard from Again. Her death was announced on October 18, 1944, and Attributed to a heart attack. (DD, p. 20)

The contemporary Tara finds a woman whose British grandfather had a direct connection to the Tree Bride. The narrative moves back and forth across time and continents, as a way to find the connections and intersections of her past and present. In the beginning of

the narrative, a Hindu legend is brought to illustrate the idea of incarnations, a recurrent concept in the Hindu mythology.

> When I was a very small child back in Kolkata, my paternal great-grandmother told me a very strange, very moving story about life-before-birth. Call it the Hindu version of the stork legend. Between incarnations, she said, the individual soul wanders in a dreamless state, like a seed between plantings, in the windy realm of *vayumandala*, waiting for its allotted time to reinhabit a living body. When the time arrives, it slips through a seam in the fetal skull and begins its phase of deep dreaming. The bodies it has previously inhabited have perished, but the souls persists. Fire cannot burn it, nor water drown it. It dreams of its past tenancies. It remembers the terrors and triumphs of its many lives on earth and links them together with the logic of dreams. (TB, p. 4)

Concerning the protagonist's attempts to find out her historical background through the story of her great great-aunt, it may be said that, in the pursuit of her ancestor, Tara Chatterjee tries to recreate the stork legend story that she hears when she is a small child. She tries to discover the bonds that link the lives of Tara Lata and herself. According to ancient Indian cosmology, "*vayumandala* is the lowest of the three circles located under the earth that support the world. When a world is formed, the first to appear is the windy circle. It also represents the harmonious relationship between male and female forces of the Cosmos."[34] In this way, Tara Chatterjee presumes that her world was formed from Tara Lata's world through the position of the windy circle. Considering the legend, the protagonist is probably 'the soul that has wandered, waiting to reinhabit a living body', pursuing the balance in the order of the universe.

By telling those stories, Bharati Mukherjee makes use of a device that is, the re-vision of some popular folk-tales and myths: the Tree Bride, by the retelling of Tara Lata's story. Three characters retell the story: the first one is Vertie Treadwell, her contemporary friend. He keeps a diary in which all the relevant facts relating to the Tree Bride are registered. Such notes are read by Tara Chatterjee, and are used as a fundamental source for the latter to acquire knowledge of her actions during her lifetime. The second one is Rabi, a U.S. born citizen, Tara Lata's distant male descendant, who takes advantage of his journey to India, and starts to make a video documentary (a distinct means of retelling) based on Tara Lata's accomplishments. And finally, the third retelling is done by Tara Chatterjee, her great-great-niece. Chatterjee undertakes a peregrination in India, trying to recover information from Tara Lata's last moments.

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[34] Cf. SOKA GAKKAI, 2010. It is a non-governmental organization, a "worldwide Buddhist network which promotes peace, culture and education through personal transformation and social contribution."

In this sense, I argue that the point of making such a re-vision is accomplished as a way of having an intervention by retelling the story of the Tree Bride through a gendered perspective. It must be remembered that the story of the ancestor is revealed by Virgil Treadwell, that is, it is told from a male point of view. At this time, Tara Chatterjee has the opportunity to participate and intervene in the comprehension of the historical processes her ancestor was submitted to. Thus, by the rewriting/retelling Tara Lata's story, the protagonist offers a chance to mitigate gendered asymmetries.

The following chapter makes considerations on the concepts of power and empowerment in relation to women´s subjectivity. It reflects on the transformative narrative strategy employed in the novels for combating women's oppression. Such issues are seen through a cultural perspective, and discussed from the protagonist's interventions in social and cultural fields.

# CHAPTER III

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# EMPOWERMENT AS A TRANSFORMATIVE STRATEGY

> I live in three time zones simultaneously,
> and I don't mean Eastern, Central and Pacific.
> I mean the past, the present and the future.
>
> *Bharati Mukherjee - The Holder of the World*

> One is not born, but rather becomes a woman …
> it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature.
>
> *Simone de Beauvoir – The Second Sex*

## 1. Introductory considerations on feminism and literature: reading from a cultural perspective

This chapter presents introductory ideas relating feminism to literature from a cultural perspective. Feminist reading practices have focused on gender issues, including the representation of women, as such portrayals offer a privileged *locus* for analysis. Literary images are thought of as providing the material ground for reflections on the constitutions of gendered subjectivities. Besides exploring these ideas and reading approaches in relation to Mukherjee´s fictions, this chapter also looks at the concept of power as informed by feminist politics. This is followed by an analysis of power as empowerment, which plays a crucial role for the purposes of the present reading insofar as it may function as a transformative strategy for combating the oppression of women in the novels studied.

The idea of feminism/s itself – which should always be thought of in plural terms – has oscillated according to chronology, geographical and historical contexts. Despite the differences existing within the movement in its plurality of its philosophies, political orientations and forms of practice, one of the premises underlying such cultural trend is that the very efforts in defining woman "assume a universal connotation in that woman is

considered more as a product of cultural norms and restraints rather than as a creation of nature" (MYLES, 2005, p. 1).  It should be pointed out that to be born a man or a woman in any society means more than a biological fact; it has social and cultural implications, as already claimed in the now canonical statement by Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* (1949) used as epigraph to this chapter. Women, who constitute a distinct social group, with specific characteristics and needs, have been neglected throughout the course of history, being only relatively recent recognized as such in given contexts. Nevertheless, some writers have registered the interconnections between women and society and the implications of the cultural constructs of woman. In the Anglophone context, these include Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication for the Rights of Women* (1792), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), just to name but a few of the most notorious works by and/or about women; although it must be emphasized that gender as a cultural category is a recent area of study.

A woman's life experiences are bound by some aspects "such as her individual circumstances, society's expectation related to age, creed, class, race, etc. Thus each woman's experience of life is different and therefore, unique" (MYLES, 2005, p. 3). There are many factors that may impose suffering and oppression on women. Those can be exemplified by the aspects mentioned before, to which some others could be added, such as belonging to a certain caste, education/(il)literacy, and economical conditions. Especially in India, those features are reinforced by the still strong patriarchal system. In order to change such a drastic social/cultural panorama in terms of gender inequalities, the conflicts between the dominant ideologies of the patriarchal structures and the recognition of women's autonomy must be solved. Feminist reading practices have showed that narrative fictions undoubtedly occupy an important role in the (re)enactment of (subversive) gender performances which may help destabilize crystallized practices, thus opening up utopian spaces for thinking about alternatives in order to overcome such historical inequalities.

Sandra Almeida (2006) calls our attention to the importance and implications of a couple of words that have prevailed in the feminist critical debate: pluralism and difference. She underlines that such terms have led to a wide range of feminisms which emphasize multiplicity, diversity and to the recognition of several different feminist discourses, implying the possibility of questioning universal and essentialist values concerning feminist issues. As a consequence of those dialogues, Almeida stresses the growing number of women-authored

literary works with emphasis on female characters who live in boundary territories in displacements and uprooting, by offering narratives which favor multiple subjective affiliations and mobile identities. This critic also observes a confluence of feminist studies and contemporary criticism, a merging which encapsulates a displacement from a nationalist perspective of feminist criticism into a paradigm of a transnational dialogue (ALMEIDA, 2006, pp. 191-9). In my opinion, this perception may be aligned with the readings of Mukherjee´s works I propose.

According to Almeida, the literary production which deals with contemporary displacements has been frequently referred to as migrant writing, diaspora literature and also immigrant genre. She defends the concept of diaspora as it implies a political aspect because it is characterized by movements of people's dispersal, which, in its turn, generates strong political, social and cultural impacts on the places (countries, territories) where such peoples move into. By considering the novels studied in the present thesis, and Almeida's remarks on the analyses of the 'historical movements' that can be identified in women´s contemporary writing that unveils striking diasporic experiences with a significant autobiographical content, I observe in Bharati Mukherjee's narratives elements which provide the grounds for the analyses of the portrayal of women's decentering as subjects/agents in constant historical, social and cultural displacements resulting in renewed identitary reconfigurations.

As mentioned above, a shift in the literary imagery related to women's roles concerning the performance and different participations in society, which results in new identities, can be observed in recent narratives. For a long time in history, and also throughout literary history, women have been described as witnesses of events, or, in rare occasions, been referred to as secondary sources. But, in several different ways, women have conquered more power than it is registered in official reports. Women have not been mere observers and/or victims of oppression, but on the contrary, they have been successful in developing influence and achieving power, but, in an informal, invisible way, despite patriarchal tendencies to erase their conquests. As Gerda Lerner adequately notes:

> Women also have shaped history through community-building. While men conquered territory and built institutions which managed and distributed power, women transmitted culture to the young and built the social network and infra-structures that provide continuity in the community. A typical pattern would be that women perceived a social or community need, began to meet it in practical, unstructured ways, then continued to expand their efforts into building a small institution, often financed by funds they raised through voluntary activities. Thus, women built orphanages, homes for wayward children, old-age homes, kindergartens, libraries in community after community. Usually, when the institution

had existed long enough and established itself, it became incorporated, registered, licensed, possibly taken over as a community institution. At that point it would usually be taken over by a male board of directors. It would also – incidentally – enter history, its official status making of its records historical sources. The women who had done the work, if they appeared in the record at all, would be visible only as a ladie's auxiliary group or as unpaid, unrecognized volunteers. (2005, p. 179)

In considering women as agents who manage to transform and reconfigure reality/ies, heeding the community/ies needs, a question arises: why did/do they allow themselves to be subdued? A parallel has been outlined between patriarchal domination over women and the relation between the colonizers and the colonized. In Ania Loomba's considerations on colonialism: "[…] in reality any simple binary opposition between 'colonizers' and 'colonized' or between races is undercut by the fact that there are cultural and racial differences within each of these categories as well as cross-overs between them" (1998, p. 105). At this point, it is relevant to mention that women, the 'colonized', have been considered to be the fragile side, while men (representing patriarchy), the 'colonizers', who have been represented by being the strong and solid part of such 'colonial discourse', may assume ambivalent roles on both sides. According to Bhabha (2006), there is some inaccuracy of colonial regimes to produce stable and fixed identities, which results in the 'hybridity' of identities. Thus, the variations and differences which emerge from the colonial discourses may lead us to the identification of 'an apparatus of power' underlying them.

The achievements of women such as Pandita Ramabai[35] in recent Indian history are recounted with pride by many women, and so are those of some women saints and heroines of the myths and legends of older traditions, such as Tara Lata Gangooly's mythical story revisited in Mukherjee's narratives. Such women are often mentioned in a tone of mixed admiration, respect for their strength of character, astute nature, courage and leadership qualities. These women, both in real life and in fictional narratives, have certainly been inspired by real characters who have experienced extreme hardship and who had/have been deprived of house, and home, leading 'their' lives through the concocting plans of other (mostly male) family members. They have revealed their power in their attempts to resist and respond to several forms of segregation configured by different manifestations of physical and psychological violence.

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[35] Pandita Ramabai was born in an intellectual Brahmin family in 1852 and died in 1922. She was a well-known freedom fighter for women's rights in India. (Cf. KUMAR, 1993, p. 26)

A wide range of social, economic and cultural aspects have been discussed and have become central themes in critical feminist literary, theoretical and philosophical discourses concerning the role and the status of women in contemporary societies, particularly in Third World countries. And such a debate brings unfolding issues deriving from the marginalization of women in social, economic and cultural global contexts, resulting from the impact of colonialism on those places. Another theme is the Indian women´s fight and resistance in face of gender-based oppression. In this context, despite having a colonial past in patriarchal contexts, they have tried to achieve visibility by the recognition of their rights. I relate such experiences to Tara Lata´s efforts in order to free the Mishtigunj women from the Raj oppression, one of the themes explored by Mukherjee.

Concerning the position of women in Indian society, much has already been – and still has to be – argued in relation to social and cultural history of India as attempts to trace the changing role of women from colonial times onwards.

> Improvements in the status of women came about from the nineteenth century onwards, not as the product of a process of conscious assertion on the part of Indian women, but through programmes of social reform devised and carried out by Indian men and the colonial state. In many ways the picture, which emerges of Indian women as passive recipients in these processes, has been predetermined by the approaches, which scholars have adopted. In the 'Western impact-response' paradigm that informs their work, there is little room for women as conscious agents. Instead, Indian women are projected as a monolithic and oppressed entity and reduced to mere beneficiaries of the 'awakening' experience by their men folk because of contact with Western influences. (ANAGOL, 2005, p. 3)

It must be pointed out that such analyses are informed by Western patterns. Therefore, it has become hard to explain the situation of Indian women from a different cultural perspective. Studies like those must to be considered as a Westernized view of an Eastern context. Thus, one may argue that such studies are biased, not because there is no feminist perception in them, but because a 'specific political absence' is predetermined by Western connotations of feminism. If one examines the Indian women´s contributions to the changing panorama of modern Indian society, in terms of social and political perspectives in reform movements, for instance, the outcome may be not substantial, but misleading. This is because they are still striving to legitimize their presence in the public sphere (ANAGOL, 2005, pp. 4-5).

Yet, such overall perception is important for an understanding of how the patriarchal system operates in relation to the subordination of Indian women and of the ways and strategies they resort to in order to resist patriarchy. This helps in the knowledge of how such

women construct their identities, assert their rights. There is a need, thus, to examine the Indian women´s 'agency' in the colonial and post-colonial periods, that is, to study these women as agents of their own history, especially in face of conservative (male) authorities, who still keep the control of society. If Indian women's representations and roles are studied in (male-centered) dominant discourses, it will be easier to understand the processes those women had/have been put through. In so doing, it is necessary to focus on the Indian women's trajectories in their quest for civil, political and even religious rights which result in movements that provoke ruptures with the existing system. Considering women´s agency when they resist certain kinds of oppression and are able to determine, to a significant extent, the course of their own lives, one critic reminds us one must examine some key concepts, such as "identity and autonomy, women's assertion and resistance, and women's power and protest within the wider context of colonial political and social relations" (ANAGOL, 2005, p. 10).

In his analyses of colonial discourse, Bhabha develops the following reasoning in relation to the production of knowledge by the colonizer and the colonized:

> The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of administration and instruction. Despite the play of power within the colonial discourse and the shifting positionalities of its subjects (for example, effects of class, gender, ideology, different social formations, varied systems of colonization and so on), I am referring to a form of governmentality that in marking out a 'subject nation', appropriates, directs and dominates its various spheres of activity. (2006, p. 101)

As affirmed above, despite the fact that the "play" in the dynamics of the colonial system (which is necessary to the practice of power) may produce interchangeable positions in colonial discourses, configured by oscillations in subject positions and binary oppositions, the overall power structure is usually unshaken. In the examples given by Padma Anagol (2005), the critic perceives one such rupture: in some remote regions of India in which women were/are subdued as slaves due to social/cultural aspects (gender, caste, economical conditions) to men's authority, a widower may be seen to hold "all the men in her family 'under her thumb'" (p. 1) by being courageous and having leadership qualities. Such theoretical and anthropological analyses provide ways of thinking about the reconfiguration or subversion of women´s gender roles in patriarchal societies. Even being localized and extremely limited in view of the overall power structure – the dominating form of

"governmentality" mentioned by Bhabha above –, such instances of destabilization may provoke a cultural impact which is interesting from a utopian feminist perspective.

One notices the absence of an authority figure in utopian societies – both portrayed in fiction and as seen in the historical communal experiences – that envision a common belief in equality in different areas, such as class, ethnicity, genre, creed etc. Concerning such a perspective, women-authored literary utopian writing produced in the last decades has provided a space in which collective decision-making is favored and the women's voice are heard in their attempts to portray new social schemes and patterns of behavior. This includes women and men coexisting as equals. According to Vita Fortunati,

> Utopia, as journey in time and space, could only be a splendid metaphor for this adventure in a territory not yet completely explored by the female conscience. Therefore, utopia, as a project for a new alternative reality, also becomes a metaphor for the construction of the 'new woman', a new concept of the female far away from the discriminating concept forged by patriarchal culture. (2006, p. 4)

Vita Fortunati is referring specifically to utopian writing as a genre, which proposes "the construction of a new woman", free from the barriers created by male-centered cultural constructs. Adopting a realistic (rather than a formal utopian) writing mode, Bharati Mukherjee´s portrayal of the main characters in the fictions looked at can be aligned with the fictional creation of such a woman in the sense that her imagined women fight for their beliefs, pursue their dreams, and satisfy their needs besides trying to establish networks that may have an impact in opposing the patriarchal systems that frame them.

To this concern, Bharati Mukherjee´s narratives studied feature two women who, despite living in different times and spaces, do share a common purpose: they make efforts to reconfigure the gender roles imposed upon or expected from them. As already discussed above, Tara Lata initially faces oppression and violence as she is forced to submit herself to the Indian traditions by getting married at the age of five, and later, due to her fiancée´s death, by having to receive a tree as a groom, following the belief this would ward off the curse of bearing a widow's life. However, this situation leads quite unexpectedly to a turning point as she, by living an isolated life in the East Bengal jungle, reaches the freedom she needs in order to assume control of her fate, to combat oppression and to defend her political ideals.

> In the years following her marriage, Tara Lata Gangooly took on treelike characteristics herself. She was rooted to her father's house. She was silent as a tree. The grave little girl became a somber young lady. Uvaria trees, with their dense foliage, were imported from Orissa to shade the mansion. She communed with those

trees for the next sixty years. […] Nothing distracted her from the dream of an independent India. (TB, pp. 251-2)

The metaphor of the tree beautifully explored by Mukherjee in the fragment above in the image that Tara Lata has become "treelike" has connotations that lead to the idea of "branches", helping build the sense of community building (perceptible in: "She communed with those trees […]"). It is important to notice that this imagery has a key function in the construction of the meaning of collectivity, interconnectedness and support, all qualities associated to the utopian enclave this character founds and maintains as her major political action.

In retelling her ancestor´s story by means of her own writing, Tara Chatterjee invests in a project both to revisit her family history and to build a new citizenship. This action has gender implications to which I will now shift. As it was already pointed out, Tara Chatterjee disobeys Indian traditions (by getting divorced and living a life without impositions, getting free from cultural obligations in North America) and experiences a feeling of freedom to express her own desire which is associated with her new environment and renewed identity, with marked sexual connotations and gender undertones: "The mall was where I was at my boldest. I felt pretty and predatory; I sensed come-ons in casual stares, I wasn't Bish's wife; I was a mall siren" (DD, p. 84). In addition to this movement of assimilation of the culture of the other, Tara Chatterjee tries to find her own way to come to terms to her Indian origins and to her new experiences overseas: she also assumes control of her life and undertakes a journey to her native homeland, aiming at the recognition of her cultural inheritance, associated to her new status as an assimilated U.S. citizen.

According to Avtar Brah, "discourses of 'racial difference'[36] are saturated with metaphors of origin, common ancestry, blood, kith and kin. The figure of woman is a constitutive moment in the racialised desire for economic and political control" (2005, p. 156). She argues that discourses on racism are constructed in relation to discourses on gender differences; and treats racism and patriarchal discourses as being similar, once the former codifies "inherent and immutable difference", mapping "this imputed difference on to social collectivities"; whereas the latter "invoke[s] sex as a pre-given 'fact' that represents men and women as 'naturally' different, such that women's subordinate position is legitimised as deriving from innate differences between men and women" (p. 157).

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[36] Avtar Brah defines 'race' as "an essentialist narrative of sexualized difference. It is an allegory of centring Western dynastic genealogies of the 'ascent' and 'descent' of 'Man'" (BRAH, 2005, p. 156).

From what was exposed, another issue is brought into light: the questioning of the sex/gender system. The distinction of those categories as being determined by biological and/or cultural differences has been the subject of feminist critical debates. Judith Butler, among others, has stressed such a distinction, considering the possibility of both sex and gender being cultural constructions. Avtar Brah discusses Butler's statement and shows that the notion of gender is not just "a cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex, it is also the very means by which the sexes themselves are established as 'prediscursive', prior to culture, as a politically neutral surface on which culture adds." Brah closes her argumentation by affirming that "'sex' is no less a cultural construction than 'race' or 'gender' is" (2005, p. 157).

Judith Butler also discusses the circumstances and contexts in which such a construction happens:

> On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, whereas those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable law. When the relevant 'culture' that 'constructs' gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology but culture becomes destiny. (2008, p. 11)

Butler understands that the categories of sex or gender can be either fixed or fluid according to the function of a given discourse. She points out that "the *locus* of intractability, whether in 'sex' or 'gender' or in the very meaning of 'construction', provides a clue to what cultural possibilities can or cannot become mobilized through any further analysis" (2008, p. 12). She emphasizes that the boundaries of such a gender-based discursive analysis are related to the possibilities of plausible gender "configurations within culture" (p. 12).

Gender is not a fixed category, but an anthropological construction, that is to say, it appears in the intersections of different fields produced by culture(s) and originated from human relationships. Joan Scott relates gender to the "knowledge about sexual difference." Scott emphasizes that such a knowledge is not "absolute or true, but always relative. It is produced in complex ways within large epistemic frames that themselves have an autonomous history." It arises from/when "relationships of power – of domination and subordination – are constructed" (1999, p. 2). Joan Scott observes that

> [g]ender is the social organization of sexual difference. But it does not mean that gender reflects or implements fixed and natural physical differences between women

and men; rather gender is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences. These meanings vary across cultures, social groups, and time since nothing about the body, including women's reproductive organs, determines univocally how social divisions will be shaped. We cannot see sexual difference except as a function of our knowledge about the body and that knowledge is not "pure", cannot be isolated from implication in a broad range of discursive contexts. Sexual difference is not, then, the originary cause from which social organization ultimately can be derived. It is instead a variable social organization that itself must be explained. (1999, p. 2)

Regarding gender as a cultural construct, in which the meanings and functions vary according to social contexts, Mukherjee's works offers a privileged *locus* in which the issue surfaces as a recurrent theme, being problematized in the characters' actions and relationships. We can observe that in the novels analyzed, in which the female characters strive against the patriarchal system, and the social divisions and roles imposed by such a regime. The protagonist's ancestor, despite never having born a child before, assumes the representation of the mother figure to all of her 'protected sons and daughters' in the fight against the domination of the British Empire. Tara Lata, who is born into a traditional Hindu family and receives the first orientations concerning the way a Brahmin Indian girl should be raised, becomes something else, different from what was expected from her to be: she becomes the "Mother of the Exiles".[37] Tara Lata's attempts to rescue not only people's lives, but also to save India's sovereignty by defending the idea of freedom, leads her to become a leader in the distant village of Mishtigunj, in patriarchal India: an uncommon position for a woman of her upbringing in such a country's cultural system, especially, at that time.

By doing so, Tara Lata reacts to the interventions of the 'colonial state' and /or Indian male authority. She goes beyond the compensatory measures, in the attempt to conquer her individuality; however, on the contrary, she tries to compete, in the sense of legitimizing women's actions, and to coexist with (or build an existence within) the male-centered authoritative system. It may be thought that Joan Scott attempted to see gender as relational, signifying the power relationship between sexes (Cf. SCOTT, 1988, pp. 28-52). According to Scott, for gender to be a useful 'analytic concept', it must include a notion of politics and hence all institutions and organizations (p. 43).

Tara Lata's path causes a great impact on her descendants' lives, mainly on the women subjects, among whom is her great-great-niece, Tara Chatterjee, the author of the narrative excerpt quoted below. This fragment clearly denotes this impact, besides exposing

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[37] I make use of the expression coined by Emma Lazarus in the poem "The New Colossus", in which she addresses all the peoples, the dispossessed ones, who are newly arrived at a distant place, far away from their homelands. And I relate it to Tara Lata, who also addresses the dispossessed ones into her 'land', her house.

the gender construction effected in Mukherjee´s work, ranging from wider the sexual politics of a regime that literally perpetrates violence on women´s bodies to the more situated relationship uniting the women in Tara´s family:

> My grandmother, Didima, was the first girl in her family to be sent to school, […] she considered herself a modern woman. In her telling of the Tree-Bride's story, she played down the actual ceremony. She dwelled on Jai Krishna's proud standing-up to his Anglicized colleagues in the High Court of Dhaka and on his scornful dismissal of crude schemes for collecting his daughter's dowry. […] She lingered longest on Tara Lata's learning to read and to write; how her reading of nationalist newspapers like *Jugantar* and novels like Bankim Chandra's *Ananda Math* inspired her to shelter fugitive freedom-fighters. It didn't matter that Didima's early childhood had been spent in Dhaka and not in the isolated village of Mishtigunj. She was a natural storyteller, she could evoke the smell of rain and swamp and sweat and the panic and head wounds crusted with blood and putrefaction, and the adrenaline rush of revolution mixed with the perfume of sweetened betel nut. We lived the Tree-Bride's courage. We were child-soldiers in Mother India's army. We knew from our history books the consequences of being caught by the Raj police. […] Women in our family, however distant and legendary the connection, had been beaten by colonial police. The Tree-Bride, although we were never told at the time and perhaps no one knew until I'd gone to Mishtigunj and seen the marker, had been killed. […] The Tree-Bride, the aged virgin who did not leave her father's house until the British dragged her off to jail, the least-known martyr to India freedom, is the quiet center of every story. Each generation of women in my family has discovered in her something new. Even in far-flung California, the Tree-Bride speaks again. (DD, pp. 288-9)

This passage allows an understanding of the ways in which the clash produced by the dissonance in the interconnections of the colonial discourses, concerning the dynamics and practices of power, may be undertaken by both men and/or women. The power prevalence is not just a matter of race, sex/gender, but it is also permeated by other cultural influences. In literature, the dialogues developed by both sides of the colonial discourses, the 'colonizer' and the 'colonized', indicate a tendency to absorb the culture of the 'other', which results in identities in process. From the fragment above, we understand the source of the protagonist's courage, which leads her to combat the barriers imposed by her upbringing: the women in her family, her ancestors – The Tree Bride and Didima. Those women faced the brutalities of the British Raj, the colonial police, each one according to her circumstances. Their struggle spreads the seeds of revolution and freedom, mixed and adapted to social and historical changes.

## 2. The Western literary representation of women

Women have been portrayed in literature since the ancient times, although the majority of the works that were circulated and published were authored by men. Therefore,

the portrayal of women in literature was inevitably one-sided. Not only in the ancient world, but also up until recently, the access to literacy was severely restricted, and it was predominantly destined to men. Another aspect that must be emphasized is the difficult and limited access between women writers and literature. According to Virginia Woolf (1928), a woman subject should be able to earn her own money and have 'a room of her own'. By making such a statement, Woolf stresses the relations between the production of artistic works and the social and material conditions of the creative person. Woolf shows that, up until the beginning of the twentieth century, British women were considered to be 'second-class' citizens who were bound by their households and limited to housework. As a consequence, their competence and respectability in the public sphere were questioned and their path to literary field was hindered.

The need to have their own place and income denounces women's poverty and restricted access to education and to the labor market. Woolf outlines a woman confined to the domestic world and procreation and points out that such situation derives from the patriarchal structures framing her. Such a system promotes the drastic reduction of opportunities resulting in the impossibility of integrating women in areas considered exclusively as being the prerogative of men. Although Woolf is describing her own context – Britain in the 1920´s –, the *status* of women as second-class citizens she denounces is still a reality in many social groups to the present day.

From the 1980's onwards, women's writing starts to focus on social and cultural issues, related to sexuality, gender asymmetries, class struggles, identitary processes, immigrant identity/ies, displacements, diasporic movements, etc. Throughout this study I have argued that Bharati Mukherjee's production presents some of these as major themes.

Women have been profusely depicted throughout the course of history. However, one of the issues which has been the recurrent concern of feminists is how women are depicted in our (Western) culture. They criticize the monolithic, racist, often unreachable standards of beauty, forced into cultural constructs and imposed by the media. Nevertheless, a question remains to be asked: have they been portrayed in similar ways in the West and the East? Considering that the discussion opened up by Woolf – and later carried on by feminist critics since the 1970´s – has been mostly  centered on Western women and men writers and their literary productions, Françoise Lionnet's thought is welcome here. She observes:

> The experience of academic feminist criticism since the 1970s has created almost insurmountable differences between 'Western' modes of analysis of the concrete status of women in various non-Western cultures on the one hand, and non-Western women's subjective experience of their own position on the other. (1995, p. 1)

Women's experiences in non-Western contexts have been portrayed by contemporary women writers, many of those from Asian cultural background, resulting in contributions to the expansion of feminist criticism examined by Western standards. However, Lionnet points out that "differences of ideology fuel disagreements that threaten to preclude dialogue" (1995, p. 1). Therefore, it is crucial "to reexamine the ground from which such conflicts develop and to try to modulate and nuance the conceptual frameworks that generate these oppositions" (1995, p. 1). From what was exposed, one should consider that what seems important from a feminist reading perspective is not to solve the conflicts by trying to erase the difference(s), but to offer ways in which the dialogue proves to be possible and efficiently productive for the gender-based debates.

The apparent opposition of being a U.S. American or an Indian subject, of being a first or a third world woman, requires a reflection. The illusion of the predominant unitary subject (understood as forming an individual pattern, with common social, cultural, economical background, among other factors) is deconstructed by the questioning of the concept of otherness, with the Other being identified as 'different'. According to Gayatri C. Spivak's (1981) statement: "However unfeasible and inefficient it may sound, I see no way to avoid insisting that there is a simultaneous other focus: not merely who I am? But who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?" (1981, p. 179). The need to know the Other, as a necessary step to understand the processes by which societies and groups exclude the different, is also an imperative to understand the formation of national identities, in which the processes of inclusion and segregation can impose boundaries and reinforce a national character. Considering the fragmentation of those national identities fictionalized in Bharati Mukherjee´s novels, I argue that not only do they offer a privileged *locus* for looking at such issues, but they also present connections between the fictions and women's subjectivity – otherness – demonstrated by such identitary unfoldings.

Françoise Lionnet advises that "if 'difference' is what makes culture visible to observers, then the emphasis on difference has the merit of underscoring specificities that would be muted and ignored otherwise." She also warns us concerning the danger of an excessive attention to dissimilarities, which may "lead from racial and biographical

determinism into an essentialism impasse" (1995, p. 14). Renato Rosaldo emphasizes that the misconceived idea of valuing 'difference' or the attempt to identify authenticity and "pure products" may guide to a process of acculturation (Cf. ROSALDO, 1988, p. 78). In his turn, Lionnet defends that "however real, inevitable, and reciprocal it may have been, is automatically labeled as merely assimilationist" (p. 14). Lionnet underlines that assimilation is:

> (mis)construed by the dominant system as the elusive means of retaining or creating a fictive purity and authenticity within which the colonized "people without culture" can be absorbed; in opposition to this tendency the subaltern group, on the other hand, will seek to retain a sense of precolonial traditions, thus contrasting the past to the present and mystifying its own original ethnic or cultural purity. Difference then becomes – on both sides of this binary system – the reason for exoticizing, "othering", groups that do not share in this mythic cultural purity. (1995, p.14)

Lionnet's idea of *métissage*, the anthropological mixing, which is claimed by her to exist in different geographical contexts, which should be "understood as a dynamic model of relationality", is "universal"[38]. As long as it is present in a particular context, or in a wider one, it implies the production of new configurations, hierarchies, dissymmetries, and contradictions" (1995, p. 4). In this sense, I emphasize the interconnectedness of different (U.S. and Hindu) traditions, and the contributions to a wider understanding of composition of complex identities and to the "*métissage*" of cultures observed in Bharati Mukherjee's narratives. Her major character, Tara Chatterjee, presents an example of a dialogue in which the subject participates in the braiding of distinct traditions and in the composition of a new anthropological fabric: her transcontinental displacements impact on the dynamic process of identity transformation. Against all the probabilities of continuing the preservation of the Hindu traditions, Tara marries her chosen husband, but does not lead a traditional Hindu wife life, as she is expected to.

> I was nineteen years old, holder of a B.A. Honours and M.A. First Class from the 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, when my father said the magic words: "There is a boy and we have found him suitable. Here is the picture. The marriage will be in three weeks." […]

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[38] Françoise Lionnet uses the term 'universalism' as the practice of women who write in the interstices between domination and resistance: "They appropriate the concept of universality in order to give it a new valence and to define broader commonalities. They do not embed it in the context of Enlightenment philosophy. Rather, they attempt to distance it from the imperialist postures of the sovereign subject. Enlightenment claims about selfhood and individuality were underwritten by the simultaneous othering of those who had to be spoken for because they were said not to possess reason (slaves, women, the mad, the incarcerated, and the disenfranchised). Such 'others' could not freely exercise the same rights as 'the man of reason' – the only standard by which universality was to be measured and defined" (1995, p. 5).

> Now I live in a part of San Francisco called Upper Haight, or Cole Valley, with Rabi, and do volunteer work in a preschool two blocks away. […] 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. […] I don't live exclusively with my son. There's Andy, my balding, red-bearded, former biker, former bad-boy, Hungarian Buddhist contractor/yoga instructor, the man Bish calls "Tara's mistri", my carpenter. (DD, pp. 23-25)

The quotation above shows that Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist opens up the possibility of a dialogue between two worlds, two traditions. By not trying to erase the place and traditions of her own origins and, at the same time, assuming a new identitary configuration, Tara Chatterjee epitomizes the picture of a hybrid subject. Hence, she raises some crucial issues to this study. One of those is the representation of the woman diasporic subject, who is inserted in several dynamics of power and oppression, having to survive and conquer her 'space' in the world by negotiating her *status* and position in the interstices of colonial/postcolonial, Western/Eastern discourses and practices − in her own words, Tara Chatterjee becomes "ethnically ambiguous" (DD, p. 25). Another important theme is the relation between women and power, exemplified by the breaking of the bonds of marriage, an instance which proves to be a mainspring to self-discovery and personal liberation. By taking control of her destiny/life, Tara finds herself free to explore new alternatives for being in the world. Although, as shown above, the price she pays in order to accomplish her moves and actions is relatively small due to her social *status*, she undoubtedly becomes the seeker of her goals, the agent of her own transformations.

## 3. A feminist perspective on power

Power is one of the central concepts for feminist theories. It is not just a matter of considering women's subordination (and the possibilities of resistance), but also of taking into account, reflecting upon, establishing positions and setting up possible actions in relation to the intersections between gender and racism, heterosexism, class oppression, among other identitary categories. Because it regards social and political perspectives, power is a very complex and contested issue. In a broad understanding, a definition may relate power to someone's subordination by being dominated under oppressive conditions. In order to conceptualize power in a general way, I bring Hanna Pitkin's etymology-based definition:

> Power is related to etymologically to the French word *pouvoir* and the Latin *potere*, both of which mean to be able. That suggests, that power is a something – anything

> – which makes or renders somebody able to do, capable of doing something. Power is capacity, potential, ability, or wherewithal. (PITKIN, 1972, p. 276)

Considering Pitkin's notion of power quoted above, indeed a very broad one, her use of two words must be emphasized: capacity and potential as displayed by a subject. In Mukherjee´s narratives, the dynamics of power is triggered by (the colonial and patriarchal) oppressive systems, to which the individuals, especially, the main women characters – Tara Lata, and the desirable daughters: Padma, Parvati and Tara Chatterjee – are subdued. Those women are oppressed by social and cultural patterns; however, they exercise the ability to get rid of oppression, in their own ways.

As it was already stated above, there are innumerous ways of considering power and its relations; and Michel Foucault´s elaborations on the topic have become a major reference for studies on the subject. His analyses are so comprehensive that they evade any attempts at summarizing. For this reason, I will incorporate his general view on the subject, as it transcends 'localized' politics and pervades all societies. In this sense, he sees power as an everyday, socialized and embodied phenomenon, which cannot be seen exclusively as something negative, repressive or coercive, but which can also be considered as a positive, productive force in society. The philosopher proposes a "more empirical" approach toward "a new economy of power relations", which is:

> the definition of the exercise of power as a way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions. What, therefore, would be proper to a relationship of power is that it be a mode of action upon actions. That is to say, power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted "above" society as a supplementary structure whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of. In any case, to live in a society is to live in such a way that action upon other actions is possible and ongoing. A society without power relations can only be an abstraction. Which, be it said in passing, makes all the more politically necessary the analysis of power relations in a given society, their historical formation, the source of their strength or fragility, the conditions which are necessary to transform some or to abolish others. For to say that there cannot be a society without power relations is not to say either that those which are established are necessary or, in any case, that power constitutes a fatality at the heart of societies, such that it cannot be undermined. Instead, I would say that the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the "agonism" between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence […]. (FOUCAULT, 1983, p. 208)

This conception of power leads to the understanding of the need for the "analysis, elaboration and bringing into question of power relations" in given social contexts, so that some of those may be *transformed, abolished, undermined*. Foucault proceeds by asserting that such dynamics may result in "confrontation between two adversaries" (p. 208). In the

narratives under analysis, such a clash may be observed, for instance, in the British colonial actions in the Indian territory, as evidenced in this excerpt, voiced by old Rutledge, Vertie Treadwell's countryman: "We owned the world, and we knew it. What would this lot have to look forward to? A dreary post in a dreary ministry" (TB, p. 168). And as a response, the villagers, the nationalists who want a free country react back. "She [Tara Lata] said Gandhji was organizing a march against the British and all women could help by selling their gold and giving it to Congress" (TB, p. 60). This may be taken as an act of resistance where women play a central role. Thus, it has a strongly marked gender trace: not only is reaction triggered by a woman leader, but she also compels other women to join her: their gold, that is, material goods that denote a family wealth and women´s individual vanity acquire an interesting new meaning because it is reverted into a wider, communal, political cause.

Martin Saar (2010) discusses power in terms of either the actions or the dispositional abilities of particular actors, and broader systemic or constitutive conceptions of power, that is, those that view power as systematically structuring possibilities for action, or more strongly, as constituting actors and the social world in which they act. The systemic conception emphasizes the ways in which broad historical, political, economical, cultural, and social forces enable some individuals to exercise power over others, or inculcate certain abilities and dispositions in some actors but not in others. Saar affirms that power in "its basic scenario remains individualistic at the methodological level: power operates on individuals as individuals, in the form of 'bringing to action' or of external determination" (2010, p. 14). Power as a constitutive aspect centers on the transindividual and relational ways in which individuals and the social worlds they inhabit are themselves constituted by power relations.

Clare Le Corbelier illustrates the dynamics of power applied by some individuals over others by viewing Johannes Stradanus's *America*,[39] an illustration of the discovery of America which composes one of the most ancient atlases, as a metaphoric example of the conqueror's power imposition (in this case, the European explorer´s) over the conquered one. Or it can also be associated to an image of the wild beauty to be tamed. Le Corbelier remarks that "Stradanus depicts a very European Americus Vespucci awakening and bestowing his name on a very naked Sleeping Beauty of a Native American." She proceeds by affirming that "Americus rediscovers America." The idea conceived is that "he called her but once and thenceforth she was always awake" (1961, p. 209). Peter Hulme also comments on the power

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[39] The plate (unknown date) shows Americus Vespucci awakening a sleeping America.

relations suggested by the same picture. "This erotic image of the first contact of European Self and American Other is art as the instrument of empire, indicative that America was produced for Europe" (1986, p. 3). This, of course, acts to crystallize gender asymmetries to the extent that it displays a passive and vulnerable woman waiting to be tamed by her conqueror.

Gazing at Stradanus's *America,* Hulme notices a "discourse of colonialism" (1986, p. 3), in a sense that it reminds us of the military and economic control, that is, of power understood in an imperialistic context. According to Anne McClintock, European consciousness is encoded as masculine. Vespucci discovers an uncovered woman, which suggests a territorial conquest that may be connected to the idea of possession of the woman's body, which instigates the combination of "voluptuousness and vulnerability" (1995, p. 24), attracting glimpses. Still, McClintock questions the meaning of the "persistent gendering" (p. 24) of imperial discovery. And also relevant in this context is Joan Scott´s statement that "gender is a primary way of portraying relationships of power" (1995, p. 42). From what has been exposed above, another idea unfolds: women's identity/ies and history have been constituted and validated as a consequence of man's presence, influence and conquest.

The observation of the deployment of power relations in Mukherjee's novels from a feminist perspective leads to the idea that one of their merits is that they may play a critical role in the deconstruction of the male-oriented power prevalence in the gender relationships. Drawing from the conceptions outlined above, and extending them in terms of adding an even sharper gender lens, one may explore the concept of power in its relation to the notion of a strategy, a resource. According to the feminist critic Susan Moller Okin's assumptions, power should be '(re)distributed' equally among men and women, and understood as a positive social good. In order to illustrate her point, Okin points out the unfair distribution of the benefits and burdens in the familial life on the basis of gender. The critic argues that when a detailed observation is made concerning the

> distribution between husbands and wives of such critical goods as work (paid and unpaid), power, prestige, self-esteem, opportunities for self-development, and both physical and economic security, we find socially constructed inequalities between them, right down the list. (OKIN, 1989, p. 136)

The unjust distribution of power is perceptible in the narratives in the descriptions of men´s benefits on one hand and women´s underprivileged positions. Jai Krishna Gangooly, Motilal Bhattacharjee (the protagonist's father) and Bishwapryia Chatterjee are the ones who

make decisions and receive the benefits; in their turn, Tara Lata, Padma, Parvati and Tara Chatterjee get with the burden at first. Underlying such inequalities are cultural structures and patterns, as evidenced in the fragment below, in which Tara Chatterjee muses on her US lifestyle:

> During the twenty years I've been in California, an immigrant fog of South Asians has crept into America. Quiet, prosperous, hardworking, professional – in India they would have been blocked by social convention and family duties. […] I see Indian faces at family picnics in Golden Gate Park. […] I was still an Indian-graduate-student-wife. Wife-of-Bish-Chatterjee was my full identity. If I had plans for the future, they would be to follow my husband wherever he went, probably back to India. […] I wondered if "wife" was the only role permitted to me, if there was a way of being in this country with my own identity. (TB, p. 19)

In this passage, the protagonist reveals her plans, when she is still a graduate student in the U.S. America. She is not given the possibility to choose her future actions; they belong to her husband, who is favored by the cultural construct and also by the patriarchal system. To reinforce the subdued status, Tara wonders about her identity as a 'wife´, and questions if that would be the only allowed role in the new country. The questioning comes from experience and observation of living in the new U.S. cultural context, which enables the protagonist to search for alternative patterns.

From the perception of power as a resource, and also bearing in mind the idea of conquest, by the relations developed between the conqueror and the conquered, an association of inequalities concerning the patriarchal system may be established. According to this view, power is achieved when someone has to dominate while the other part has to surrender. However, the idea of power as a resource is contested by Iris Marion Young. The critic rejects the idea of power as a "distributive model" and points out that it cannot be taken as a kind of commodity to be possessed. She understands it as a product of the dynamic relations which occur from the societies' interactions. In her view, power is "widely dispersed and diffused". And she proceeds by stating that "social relations are tightly defined by domination and oppression" (1990, p. 31-3).

From what is exposed above, I perceive power as being an achievement condition either by means of force (oppression) and/or consent. In both cases, negotiations are involved in the dynamics of social interactions. In the former, surrender is the condition, while in the latter, permission is the requirement. The feminist views concerning power as a relation of domination concentrates several expressions such as: oppression, patriarchy, subjection,

subalternity, etc. All of those terms bring as the central importance, in a way or another, a form of domination, revealed by the necessity of getting or preserving 'spaces', that is to say, real or metaphorical places where the 'subaltern', the 'colonized' voices can be uttered and heard. Despite living in a patriarchal system, as the Indian caste-structured-society, the protagonist's mother acknowledges the gender equality achieved by her daughters through the social interactions they developed in their lives. This is perceptible when she writes back to her younger daughter stating that, "[…] Tara dear, you and your sisters have proved that a daughter is as good as a son" (DD, p. 292). One of the forms through which Tara Chatterjee invests herself of power is by assuming an autonomous behavior, represented by the resistance to the patriarchal system which is demonstrated by her own choices (deciding for divorce, for instance), which is reinforced by the statement of Tara's mother and  also related to the effort to erase gender asymmetries. Yet, such inequalities can be identified by the examination of gender relations discussed below by Grewal.

Inderpal Grewal (2006) claims the need for an analysis of "transnational scattered hegemonies that reveal themselves in gender relations." She also reminds us that the transnational feminist practices require a comparative work which may examine women's position within the geopolitical contexts in which they are inserted. The critic emphasizes that:

> […] there is an imperative need to address the concerns of women around the world in the historicized particularity of their relationship to multiple patriarchies as well as to international economic hegemonies. We seek creative ways to move beyond constructed oppositions without ignoring the histories that have informed these conflicts or the valid concerns about power relations that have represented or structured the conflicts up to this point. We need to articulate the relationship of gender to scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, "authentic" forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-juridical oppression on multiple levels. (2006, p. 17)

With regard to the transnational feminist practices, and relating them to a comparative perspective by considering women's positionality, that is, the geopolitical context in which they inhabit, and their particular historical background, the representation of the Indian and U.S. American geopolitical contexts are analyzed, by observing the displacements of the main characters in the novels. The image of Indian women in North American society, associated to social and cultural values, are examined by the interconnections controlled by the geopolitical localities in which these women live. From this view, it may be understood that the

protagonist subverts the structures of domination once she undertakes transnational movements, which lead her to the construction of new patterns of gender relationship.

The representation of the woman is initially examined by looking at the family context, which is the first cosmos this woman learns to exist in the world. In the protagonist's case, she is taught to insert herself in the patriarchal system when she is still a child and lives under such a cultural structure. However, when she moves to the North America, and relates herself to different cultural patterns she reconfigures her own relationships, as it will be discussed below. Joanna Russ raises an important consideration in relation to the necessity of recognizing the separate identity of a feminine culture in human relationships. She emphasizes that such recognition naturally leads to finding, she says, "our literary myths are for heroes, not for heroines" (1973, p. 6). And she continues by stating that

> Culture is male… There is a female culture, but it is an underground unofficial, minor culture, occupying a small corner of what we think of officially as possible human experience. Both men and women in our culture conceive the cultures from a single point of view – the male. (1973, p. 4)

Considering the *locus* of the woman subject in the anthropological context of patriarchal societies, the Indian woman faces an even more restricted territory to move and to connect herself to, due to social, cultural and economical restrictions imposed to her in that society. Meena Shirwadkar discusses the woman's role in the complex fabric of the Indian family, society and culture. She states that "the woman's sphere of life and activity was, in the past, [and still is] bound by the protective and prohibitive walls raised by the moralists, from the middle ages down to the beginning of the present century"[40] (1979, p. 23).

Shirwadkar also emphasizes that, with the spirit of patriotism, inspired by the imposed British presence in the Indian Subcontinent, many changes occurred in India, especially towards women's conditions. There were great changes related to the abolition of sati (woman's immolation), and widow tonsure (shaving her head), and child marriages started to be considered something inadequate. As a result, this form of marriage arrangement came to be looked down upon, which culminates with the Sharda Act, on September 28th, 1929. The Act was named after its sponsor Rai Sahib Harbilas Sharda to the British India Legislature and established an age limit for marriage: 14 years old for girls and 18 for boys. It was derived from a reform movement in India, considered to be the first social reform movement

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[40] All the comments and quotations related to Meena Shirwadkar are taken from her doctoral thesis, entitled "Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel", defended in 1979, in the Marathwada University, New Delhi, India, and then converted into a publication from Sterling Publishers PVT LTD.

controlled by women (1979, p.109). Shirwadkar contrasts the Indian view, opposing to the Westernized picture of girls and love (marriage). According to her, Western girls' perspective of love is strongly associated to the idea of physical love, in contrast to the "traditional ideas of obedience and faithfulness shown as the very essence of Indian girls and girlhood" (1979, p. 31).

Tara Lata's precocious marriage, in 1879, at the age of 5, is an example of what was imposed to children at that time in India. It can be mentioned that the East-West values of tradition and contemporary modernity affects Tara Chatterjee's idea of love and marriage. At first, when she moves to the United States, as an Indian-graduated-student-wife, she lives a traditional life of obedience and faithfulness, but as soon as she starts the assimilation process, the contemporary Tara conflicts herself with the Western (U.S. American) life style – free from such impositions and offering plenty of choices. As a result, she breaks with the tradition, gets divorced, and starts to make her own decisions.

Tara Chatterjee explains the idea of love understood by Indians and by the others, the foreigners: she compares the feeling through a cultural perspective revealed by her life's experiences.

> "Love" is a slippery word when both partners bring their own definition. Love, to Bish, is the residue of providing for parents and family contributing to good causes and community charities, earning professional respect, and being recognized for hard work and honesty. Love is indistinguishable from status and honors. I can't imagine my carpenter, Andy, bringing anything more complicated to it than, say, "fun". Love is having fun with someone, more fun with that person than anyone else, over a longer haul. […] "Love" in my childhood and adolescence (although we [Tara and her sisters] 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. (DD, p. 27-8)

The image of woman as wife has been depicted since ancient times, presenting as the woman's major role her responsibilities towards the family and in society. Contemporary fictions, however, reconfigure an upheaval in the social structure. Shirwadkar comments on such changes:

> It is only in the later novels that wives are shown to suffer more because of the incompatibility between her individuality and awareness of herself and the traditional views of her husband and in-laws, or a refusal to submit meekly to the double moral standards implicit in a male-dominated society. (1979, p. 49)

Bharati Mukherjee deconstructs the 'solid' and 'sacred' idea of marriage according to the Indian traditions: obeying parents' choice, by marrying a groom in an arranged way, having the same caste, belonging to a good family, and marrying in the Indian territory.

Among the three sisters, the only one to follow the rituals and honors is Tara Chatterjee, the one who becomes the 'least Indian' of the three.

> My oldest sister, Padma, the one I call Didi, didn't marry until her late thirties, and that was in New Jersey to a divorced Punjabi. My middle sister, Parvati, found her own husband in Boston and returned with him to Bombay. Purely by coincidence, he happened to be a Bengali Brahmin from a decent Calcutta family, so no one complained. I, as youngest, upheld family honor and married Bish, the perfect groom, in the old-fashioned, arranged way. (TB, pp. 14-5)

In Mukherjee's novels, the representation of women changes from the traditional perspective into a different configuration. The image of woman represented as wife and mother is not seen as a "sacred" function. Mukherjee's depiction of woman emphasizes the individuality, self-awareness, absent terms in traditional systems where men's voice prevails. She also deconstructs the rite of passage of the loss of virginity, by the use of irony in the description of the sexual intercourse, presenting the evidence of her loss soaking in the bathtub. "Where did you put your stick? […] the broomstick, the stick you used to, you know …' […] I thought he was the most extraordinary magician, surely no man in the world perform such a transformation. I must be the luckiest woman alive" (DD, p. 84).

A different portrait of mothers can be observed in Mukherjee's narratives, enriching and updating the range of perspectives. In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara Chatterjee makes a comparison between U. S. American and Indian mothers, by illustrating the distinction within the cultural values. Tara thinks of such a distinction when she quarrels with her son, Rabi:

> I look at Rabi and, for the first time in my life, I want to slap him, scream at him and tell him to shut up, but parents can't feel this way. No, that's not right; I've seen them in parking lots and supermarkets. They get furious and make fools of themselves and security guards have to be called and they get in the papers for child abuse and end up in jail. Indian mothers don't; we don't have violent feelings except against ourselves, and never against our children, at least not against our sons. (DD, p. 40)

Motherhood is celebrated in a very particular manner in Indian culture: it is an ideal position *status*. It must be stressed that the major purpose in a woman's life is to become a mother, especially, to be a mother of son(s), because they are preferred in the Indian family – they are always desirable. According to Meena Shirwadkar, in Indian tradition a wife leads a silent and shadowy existence until she becomes the mother of a son. As a result of having a male child, this woman now becomes a mother of a man, deserves the family respect and the admiration *status*. The critic affirms that the mother in the Indian tradition is the "giver of blessings, the giver and protector of life. She is the creative and protective goddess to be respected and worshipped. To a woman, to be the mother of a son is the goal of womanhood" (1979, p. 79).

A description of Tara Chatterjee's mother's three pregnancies is brought into the narrative:

> My mother remembered her three pregnancies as nine months' pure rapture, a reprieve from scrutiny and anxiety, when even her mother-in-law paid some grudging attention to her. Not to her exactly, of course, but to her as the proxy-carrier of Bhattacharjee family genes. Her little gift to the world was never "the baby" or "the pregnancy", but always "the boy." So, in those pre-amnio, pre-sono days, she enjoyed nine months' presumption of dutiful compliance. She remembered her three pregnancies as pamper-time with unquestioned permission, even an injunction, to fatten up. She got first pick of every food; "good for the boy," the servants would say, as they brought her the heads of carp, sweets, and bitter vegetables fried in special spices. "This is for the boy. Much-much vitamin," they would say, but the prayed-for "boy" never came. (TB, p. 157)

Bearing Indian tradition in mind, Bharati Mukherjee deconstructs this ideal of motherhood by portraying a woman who wants to be pampered, and by not even mentioning the circumstances and implications of such a condition. On the contrary, she transforms it into something burdened with guilt, stress and trauma. The protagonist, Tara Chatterjee gets pregnant twice during the narratives. The first time, she becomes the mother of a boy when she is still very young, at 19. The second time, around her forties, she gets pregnant of a baby girl. Mukherjee's sharp criticism over strict regimes, leads her to introduce the figure of a male child that does not represent what is desirable in a son, according to Indian traditions – Rabi is gay, despite his father's strictness concerning almost all issues. "Bish could not tolerate a son who was not a perfect replica of himself; hardworking, respectful, brilliant. Soberly sociable. Effortlessly athletic" (DD, p. 154). By having perfection as a major aim, in personal terms and professionally, Bish who is known by his brilliancy and success, according to hegemonic cultural patterns, has his figure "diminished" and "threatened" by the portrayal of a gay son, being brought into the narrative as a kind of sour joke.

In spite of being born in the United States and being a Californian resident, Rabi cannot ignore his ascendancy: he is the son of a Bengali Brahmin family. And by being aware of his father's expectations and Indian family traditions, Rabi decides to write a letter to his mother, as he recognizes Tara as being unconventional (she is the first divorced woman in the family) and less prejudiced than his father Bish. The letter reveals his anxieties and his sexual orientation. Such revelation turns both of them, Tara and her son, Rabi, into outsiders in the eyes of the family traditions.

> […] Ever since I've been a little boy, at least since I was five or six years old, I have been aware that I will only grow up to disappoint my father, which is something I can deal with, but that I might also cause you great pain, which is something unbearable to me. […] More times than I want to admit here, I thought of ending my pain, Dad's disappointment, and your unhappiness. I'm glad I didn't, of course, and I think those years are behind me. Now: here's the one thing I knew back then that might come as a big surprise to you now. I knew that I had a different

"sexual orientation" long before there was an ugly name like that for it (just bring your compass, and everything straightens out). Ma, I am gay (that's the name of my play, incidentally). It's another first for the family, another distinction we're going to have to work on. I've always known it, and I've tested it. Don't worry, I'm too Bengali to be reckless. (DD, pp. 163-4)

Ironically, Tara Chatterjee compares her two pregnancies. "Sixteen years ago, with Rabi, I'd been sick for the whole nine months and ended up weighing less at delivery than I had at conception. I wore saris in those years and looked like a high school girl, so no one even guessed I was pregnant" (TB, p. 155). And she continues "I felt I'd been ambushed, invaded by aliens" (p. 156). Tara contrasts it to the second one, when she declares: "this pregnancy is a dream. I could gain thirty pounds if I gave in to all my urges" (p. 156). Despite being pregnant of a baby girl in the second time, Tara is confident because now she controls her life, and that baby may represent the thread that leads her, Bish and Rabi to a new opportunity of getting together as a family: Tara refers to it as being "the ripening seed" (p. 159). The second pregnancy stimulates Tara in her quest of her own identity/ies, which also conducts her to (re)discovering her roots in Mishtigunj, which offers the reason for writing a book narrating the story of the Tree Bride, and her own, and giving another chance to rebuilding her family. But, this time, under her terms.

The protagonist manages to take control of her own destiny, which means she achieves power in dealing with the social, cultural and economical aspects of her life. Tara intervenes in Indian tradition, defying the whole patriarchal system.

> I have crossed the Black Waters and, by my tradition, at least, I have lost my caste. I have mingled with the casteless, I've eaten and grown fond of red and white meats. I've divorced, I've had lovers, and I've been drunk on some occasions. I'd be a little reluctant to join any club where a rigid Brahmin like Jai Krishna Gangooly sets the standards. (TB, p. 284)

In order to get free from the oppression caused by the rigid social impositions without the application of the self- immolation or sati, Tara Chatterjee also subverts the logic of the colonial discourse, when she abandons the 'subaltern'/'colonized' *status* to become an individual with a voice to be uttered and heard. Tara transforms her necessities, new experiences and learning into perseverance, that is, something that gives her strength to continue exploring the world she conquers with the power achieved by her interconnections in human relationships.

## 4. Empowerment as a woman subject's transformative strategy

Up to this point, much has been said about the issue of power from feminist perspectives. In section 3 above, concepts of power and their implications in the social, cultural and economical panorama dialogue with a gendered view. The terms 'oppression' and 'domination' appear many times in the analyses, and refer to the interconnections developed in human relationships, mainly the relations of subjection of women by men. Now, I concentrate the focus on the reconceptualization of power as a powerful strategy used in the capacity to act, the ability of doing something, but also meaning the capacity to empower, to transform oneself and others.

Empowerment is very often understood as a strategy associated to feminism. It may be seen as a process to reach equal opportunities for men and women. And it is also used as an assistance strategy that is, an inclusive process in the social groups, so that the outsiders can reach self-sufficiency, independence. Considering the possibilities to empower women, those include the right to own a property, a right that was not allowed to women not so long time ago. Another one is eliminating gender inequalities, by offering men and women equal opportunities. As a result, when women become agents of their own lives, a higher level of gender parity is established.

Hannah Arendt argues that people act as free and equal agents who create power collectively through their communicative action and interaction. She believes that "power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (1970, p. 44). Arendt's argument is that groups or communities, when acting together, have the capacity to empower their members and/or their leaders. Thus, empowerment is legitimized by the acceptance of the individual by the group to which he/she belongs. In this sense, I defend that Tara Chatterjee achieves recognition and respect from her social groups: family and friends, by their acceptance towards her decisions and risks assumed, and in her interconnections in human relationships.

A view of power that is related to the typical male-centered conception, according to Virginia Held, is the one that causes "others to submit to one's will, the power that led men to seek hierarchical control" (1993, p. 136). The critic argues against such a conception, as being central, perceiving women's particular and unique experiences as mothers, caregivers, as something conferred as a kind of power. Held states: "The capacity to give birth and to nurture and empower could be the basis for new and more humanly promising conceptions

than the ones that now prevail of power, empowerment, and growth" (p. 137). Held affirms that "the power of a mothering person to empower others, to foster transformative growth, is a different sort of power from that of a stronger sword or a dominant will" (p. 209). Held's notion of power, one may conclude, is conceived in such a way as to establish its relations in the social and political aspects of society, as being the capacity to transform and empower oneself and the others.[41] From this perspective, Tara Lata empowers herself by assuming a mother's role when she adopts the unprotected and refugees under her care. As well as Tara Chatterjee is empowered by her pregnancies. It may be affirmed that motherhood enacts and reinforces a bond of connection and dependence on multiple levels from one being to another.

Luce Irigaray's discussion of the issue of power also contributes to the analysis proposed in this study. She joins other feminist critics' voices by questioning the definition of power in "phallocratic cultures", rejecting the simplistic notion of women's subjection to a dominant male structured society. She argues that, if feminists "aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself, then they are resubjecting themselves, deliberately or not, to a phallocratic order" (1985, p. 81).

Bearing in mind these two concepts of power – by Held and by Irigaray – as transformative and empowering, according to a feminist perspective, I defend that such notions may work as valid strategies at the refinement and readaptation of the ever-changing social, cultural and historical reconfigurations. Regarding contemporary mobilizations – globalization, transnationalisms, displacements –, there is need for implementing new constitutive dimensions of power.

The issue of power serves as a more feasible resource for feminist theories to discuss the relation between freedom and empowerment. As Monique Deveaux (1996) points, "indeed, much feminist literature now stresses the importance of seeing women not as passive victims uniformly dominated but as active agents mediating their experience" (p. 223). Such a perspective can be observed in the narratives analyzed, concerning Tara Lata's attitudes of resistance in relation to the colonial authorities. She must not be seen as a one-sided view: a fragile victim who is oppressed by the colonial regime; but as an agent of change. The same may be applied to the protagonist who reconfigures her life style in order to adapt to the new cultural patterns.

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[41] The conception of Power as something transformative and empowering is also a strong theme in the areas of Queer Studies and Ecofeminism. Such approaches are not incorporated here, considering the purposes of this thesis.

Bharati Mukherjee makes use of power strategies by portraying the protagonist's process of empowerment, which is used as a transformative device for combating oppression, and that may be thought of in terms of the social, cultural, historical interconnections undertaken by Tara Chatterjee due to her displacements. She moves across continents, goes to live in a different culture, for being a foreigner, a woman and a divorced mother, without "apparent sources of income" (DD, p. 25), in the beginning of the narrative. The protagonist's power comes not only from those social and cultural confrontations, but also from the contributions given by her in the sense of transforming herself and the others, by the acknowledgement of woman's innate power – mothering and nurturing (others), reconfiguring human relationships.

As Tara Chatterjee starts to deal with the challenges imposed on her path, she surpasses the social and cultural boundaries. Tara fights against the hegemonic system, the "phallocratic order", trying to resist the prevailed establishment by not accepting to become passive and obedient, following Indian traditions. That is what she does in the beginning of the narratives. At first, when she marries Bish and goes to the U.S., then, she resists and refocuses her life breaking – perhaps – with tradition. However, in a sense, Tara Chatterjee capitulates to the tradition, considering that she re-marries Bish who is Indian like herself.

> I only wanted Bish to stay with me. Because he knew I wasn't after his money or status. I might very well have been the only appropriate woman in the world for him. And, because of his rectitude, if only bend it or dent it just a little bit, he might have been the only man for me. I think we recognized that. All we had to do was reach across an ever-narrowing gulch. He would know to include me in his world; I would know not to expect from him things he couldn't deliver. (DD, p. 268)

The Chatterjee's remarriage may be understood as the protagonist's attempt to restart her story, not under the strict Hindu patriarchal system, but under the Western experiences from which she constructs her own cultural patterns. At the end of the narratives, the protagonist is empowered by some strategies she develops throughout her displacements: she becomes a mobile subject, who cannot be caught or classified in any particular social and cultural standard – she is the result of a rich cultural mixing. She is also empowered by her new social and cultural roles – she takes care of her family needs, not only in terms of assuming the control of the housework, but also taking care of her crippled husband's health, she takes care of him, by becoming his provider, in a certain way. And, finally, she acquires another empowerment strategy, by having conquered the voice to (re)tell her family's stories. Tara Chatterjee assumes the control of the narrative of her ancestor's life. It can be said that she invests herself of power to reconstruct her ancestor's trajectories through the interaction

of her personal path and her family, considering they are part of Tara Lata's story as well, it is like a cycle being completed and restarted.

Thus, the protagonist inherits her ancestor's courage to change her cultural context, by the reconfiguration of her life, when the latter states: "It is natural for a great people to seek their freedom. Indeed it is. Everything I live and breathe is about freedom" (TB, p. 270). Both Taras seek freedom, but in their own ways: the ancestor, by trying to get free from the oppressive political regime, and attempting to legitimize the power relationship between men and women; in her turn, the descendant attempts to get free from the strict Indian traditions, identified by the patriarchal structured society, in which she was raised. She pursues her individual identity/ies from a perspective which involves autonomy as a driving force.

# CONCLUSION

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> Until I'd seen Mishtigunj, I thought I was a total Calcuttan. But when I walked through the alleys of the old town, I felt I knew the streets – nothing surprised me. It conformed to a mental image I'd been carrying since childhood, from the stories I'd been raised on. Yes, I thought, this is where my grandmother as a young girl had brought sweets to the Tree Bride, this is the old Hindu primary school she'd attended. I felt for the first time how recent my family's Calcutta identity was, just two generations, how shallow those urban roots were, not much deeper than Rabi's in California. I saw my life on a broad sprectrum, with Calcutta not at the center, but just another station on the dial.
>
> Bharati Mukherjee, *The Tree Bride*

The epigraph epitomizes one of the major themes discussed throughout this thesis, which is the notion of the protagonist's identitary decentering, perceptible in her own words as she affirms: "I saw my life on a broad spectrum, with Calcutta not at the center, but just another station on the dial" (TB, p. 20). According to Tara Chatterjee herself, her family's identitary history in Calcutta is recent, spanning just two generations, as already mentioned in the description of this character´s trajectory. As a central argument in this study, I have showed that the notion of mobility can be identified in the protagonist's displacements portrayed in Mukherjee´s fiction, as Tara Chatterjee moves across countries, continents, seeking a promising future by revisiting the images, the places and the memories of her past in a quest for her roots.

Bharati Mukherjee declares that she sees her books as stations in her own development as a writer, in an attitude that clearly opposes that of a typical Calcutta resident who believes to be at the center of *Bharata* (India). Being aware of the current 'Indy-frenzy' noticed in the United States, she recognizes that readers' interests in an 'idealized', or even 'romanticized', depiction of India are stronger than in the portrayal of immigrants. Thus, in a sense, she makes use of the exoticization of India, which works as "a reminder of the long history of romanticizing and commodifying difference within cultures of tourism and travel" (GREWAL, 2005, p. 82). Nevertheless, I observe that Mukherjee´s fictions go beyond such

"romanticizing and commodifying" to the extent that they propose a reconfiguration in the relation of history, myth and identity which problematizes the issue of difference and has gender implications.

In the three previous chapters, I discussed Bharati Mukherjee´s portrayal of social mobilities which characterize contemporary displacements and mass movements in the East/West dynamics by looking mainly at the protagonist Tara Chatterjee´s quest in two of her most recent novels, *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*, as well as some other characters like Tara´s sisters and her ancestor, Tara Lata Gangooly, whose ´presence' and impact on the main character pervade both narratives. Chapter one focused on immigration and diaspora and particular attention was given to the processes of identity composition, metaphorized by the protagonist's geographical dislocations and the cultural and subjective implications of such processes. I showed that both novels offer a privileged *locus* for observing the imaging of the newly reconfigured Indian-U.S. subjects in the late twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. In so doing, the fictions enable a better understanding of diasporic subjectivities. In regard to presence of a utopian/dystopian dimension in the fictions analyzed, I pointed out that both novels feature elements that can be associated with a utopian literary tradition, but in a more critical, fluid view of utopia as an ongoing process which retains a strong transformative tendency without the programmatic quality of the traditional utopian discourse. By offering reflections on the novels in relation to the feminist practice of revisionist mythmaking, the second chapter highlighted the richness and the cultural importance of Hindu mythology, discussed the portrayal of the deities from that mythology which are utilized by Mukherjee in the composition of her novels and offered an analysis of the author´s revision of the central myth of the Tree Bride. I argued that such appropriation of mythical discourse can be aligned with feminist literary strategies of revisionist mythmaking insofar as it promotes a gender-marked subversion and (re)creation of cultural narratives. And finally, in the third chapter, a dialogue was established between the representation of the major women characters in the novels and the processes of empowerment as a transformative strategy for combating social, cultural and economic kinds of oppression.

It was argued that the protagonist's privileged social condition enables her to undertake geographical displacements, that is, to slip across borders easily, a factor which marks an important distinction in the novels studied when they are compared to Mukherjee´s

earlier works. Avtar Brah reminds us that the experience of diaspora relates to the notion of borders. She conceptualizes it this way:

> Borders: arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others, forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where fear of the Other is the fear of the self; places where claims to ownership – claims to "mine", "yours" and "theirs" – are staked out, contested, defended, and fought over. (BRAH, 1996, p. 198)

From a perspective which is not informed by feminist politics in their specificities, but also showing a concern with the issues of borders, crossings and mobilities, Marc Augé affirms: "mark [the] borders to explore them or overcome them" (2010, p. 26)[42]. Tara Chatterjee chooses to slip through them. She manages to undertake transnational displacements facilitated by her *status* as an upper-class Indian immigrant, as shown in the chapters above, a situation that implies no menace to anyone's territory and that, consequently, leads to the granting of her U.S. citizenship. She does not need claim ownership or her rights to move across, once the borders offer no impediment to her crossings. I also stressed the fact that nor does she need to face the hardships and violence experienced by the protagonists of Mukherjee´s earlier narratives, who follow difficult paths as illegal immigrants. Indeed, the U.S. borders portrayed in *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* do not represent "territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others". As I showed in the analysis, apart from some key passages outlined in the narratives (like the government reaction to Tara Lata´s revolutionary practices or the bombing of Tara Chatterjee´s home), the merging of Indian and U.S. identity traces in the characterization of the major women in these novels is rather celebratory than critical, as it minimizes some of the prohibitions and contestations emphasized by Brah in the fragment above. In the chapters above I also commented that such picture has been sharply critiqued by some of the critics of her work. After crossing the demarcated borders of "geographical and/or psychic territories", to use Brah´s phrase, a movement that was very easily carried out by the protagonist in the case of the fictions looked at – despite undoubtedly having some complex implications both in the major character´s psyche and in terms of her interactions with the surroundings and newly-acquired environment –, the major character´s perception of herself and of the Other is altered as Tara Chatterjee undergoes an identitary reconfiguration by assimilating U.S. culture. Hence, she does not represent an alien subject who tries to 'invade a

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[42] My translation of a Portuguese version of Augé´s work, originally written in French.

property'; but rather becomes part of such a new territory and culture and, later on, is compelled to reassess her own cultural roots and sense of self.

Taking the contemporary social movements into consideration, I defend that the social mobilities undertaken by the Chatterjees in the USA is helped by privileged economic conditions, as exposed above. Tara Chatterjee's family is inserted in the dynamics of North American society and the protagonist submits herself to a very conventional and phallocratic order. Indeed, such alignment with the U.S. culture can be illuminated by Grewal´s remark that "national affiliations remained relevant to provide identities based on ethnicity, gender, and class in a world in which borders seemed more porous than ever before" (2005, p. 83). "Porous" is undoubtedly an adjective that appropriately describes the borders as they are drawn in Mukherjee´s two novels, which also (re)signify the categories of ethnicity, gender and class in fluid and dynamic ways. This is so, I argue, to the extent that Bharati Mukherjee portrays a new reconfigured image of the U.S. and locates an Asian American woman in an intermediary place. In such portrayal one observes that the tension between a nostalgic, idealized vision of a home country and the idea of a "self-determining place of social and political life", as a privileged space for observing a process of assimilation that "brings all races and ethnicities into balance, and a sense of instability, and unpredictability brought about by the complexities of the increased imbrications of the local within the global" (PALUMBO-LIU, 1999, p. 219), is diminished.

In this sense, the examination of Mukherjee's contemporary fictions are characterized by a positive view of transnational displacements, which may be justified by the author's "ideological reinscriptions of diaspora" (GABRIEL, 2005, p. 1). I perceive a tone of 'celebration' in her narratives which may be associated to the fact that she considers herself a 'successful' example of assimilation.

With regard to gender issues, Mukherjee´s novels suggest a more critical stand. By investigating her cultural roots by means of revisiting her ancestor's path, Tara Chatterjee makes a connection which goes beyond the coincidence of the name between them. She is inspired by and identifies with the gender subversion accomplished by the Tree Bride. Her ancestor defies the phallocratic order by challenging the authoritative regime imposed by the British raj. Her acts and their implications and effects on Tara Chatterjee´s own actions provoked this gendered-informed reading, which reflected on the subversive potential of the narratives. In gender terms, my analysis of the novels proposed that they play an important

role in the breakdown of binary systems and hierarchies which still act to maintain social gender inequalities. Hence, I defend that the narratives propose a cultural revision of the standards imposed by patriarchal societies.

Finally, as concerns a formal aspect, I emphasize that Mukherjee's writing is composed as a saga, and view this as a significant narrative strategy that enables her to develop her stories spanning generations. This allows the stories to cover a long period of time, encompass geographical spaces (transnational and diasporic displacements), and be constantly revising historical, social, and cultural references from different points of view. Thus, I believe that the author finds a successful balance between evoking a timeless aspect (by resorting to mythical narrative and to recurring human experience of diaspora) and the revisiting and reviewing of culture. Indeed, Mukherjee's works offer readers a privileged *locus* of representation for one of the major trends in contemporary fictions: the presentation of contemporary characters who undergo India/U.S. transnational movements; while they also provide us with renewed renditions of some of the Indian primordial narratives. This is, in my view, one of the author´s greatest achievements.

I conclude my study by highlighting the role of transnational movements which epitomize the articulation of diaspora and the construction of multicultural identities in the novels studied. By presenting open endings, Bharati Mukherjee's narratives suggest that identitary processes may be triggered continually. This writing mode, in turn, may be seen in relation to the Hindu pantheon, which features gods and goddesses in their multitude of incarnations. I defend that the central outcome of the protagonist's trajectory is the possibility of her reinvention as an autonomous individual – a subject who is undaunted by the patriarchal structures in which she is inserted, and decides to move across continents in order to search for her cultural roots. Bringing the voice of one of Mukherjee's protagonists – Jasmine –, who says that "the world is divided between those who stay and those who leave" (*JASMINE*, 1989, p. 228), I argue that Tara Chatterjee belongs to those who decide to leave, going in search of new identitary reconfigurations.

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**Glossary of Terms**

- **Acculturation** refers to the way newcomers adjust to the dominant culture following the immigration movement. For Park and Burguess (1921), it is a progressive and irreversible process with a three-stage model: contact, accommodation, and assimilation. According to these theorists, the contact between different peoples from different cultures leads them to pursue ways and develop strategies to accommodate to the new dominant culture in order to reduce conflicts.

- **Agency**, according to Butler (2008), is considered as an account of women's capacity for individualized choice and action.

- **Assimilation** appears as a result of a process of absorption of new cultural elements from another group, generally, the dominant group. Still according to Park and Burguess (1921), it is a "process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons or groups, by sharing experience and history are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" (p. 735).

- **Diaspora** is originally described as people's dispersion and related to a forced displacement, victimization, a feeling of alienation and loss. All of this may be associated to the Jewish experience and connected to the idea of the return to their homeland. My use of the term draws upon Stuart Hall's (1990) theorization: "The recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (p. 235). From a feminist perspective, I adopt Spivak's (1996) discussion on the reconfiguration of the concept, understood as "[t]he only significant difference [from the old diaspora] is the use, abuse, participation, and role of women" (p. 250).

- **Displacement** has become a familiar term in the context of the studies regarding diaspora. Angelika Bammer (2005) offers a concise definition of it, referring to "the separation of people from their native culture, through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, exiles, or expatriates) or the colonizing imposition of a foreign culture" (p. 10). In contemporary times, displacements have been delineated by different types of communities in global/transnational movements.

- **Dystopia** derives from the Greek prefix "dys", meaning opposition, and is often used interchangeably with 'anti-utopia' or 'negative utopia', in contrast to utopia or

'eutopia' (good place), to describe a fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand; or a satire of utopian aspirations which attempts to show up their fallacies (CLAEYS, 2010).

- **Empowerment** is used as an appropriation and rethinking of the notion of power in "phallocratic cultures", particularly in the sense such a concept is developed by Irigaray (1985), which is viewed as a possible transformative strategy for fighting against the oppression of women in history.

- **Historiographic metafiction** refers to Linda Hutcheon´s (1988) notion that history is always narrated: "because history writing is always narrated, organized, and constructed, it is not markedly different from fiction writing" (p. 128). Therefore, there is a "splodge" between the so-called "history writing" and "fiction writing" (p. 128).

- **Home** may be associated to the idea of a residence, a shelter or a refuge, among other meanings. For this study, the notion of 'home' is based principally on Doreen Massey's (1994) theorization regarding "[t]he construction of 'home' as a woman's place [that] has […] carried through into those views of place itself as a source of stability, reliability and authenticity" (p. 180).

- **Hybridity** may be understood as a mixture of cultural traces or elements. Used in this sense, the use of the term can be associated with the emergence of postcolonial discourses and their critique of cultural imperialism. In Literary and Cultural Studies, the focus lies on the effects of mixture upon identity and culture. Canclini (2005) centers his attention on how the studies of hybridization "have altered the manner of speaking about identity, culture, difference, inequality, multiculturalism, and about conceptual pairings used to organize conflict in the social sciences: tradition/modernity, north/south, local/global" (p. *xxiii*). His understanding of hybridization is synthesized as "socio-cultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices" (p. *xxv*).

- **Immigration** may be associated to human displacements throughout history. In contemporary times, it has been reconfigured into diasporic movements. However, in this thesis, the terms diaspora and immigration are not being used interchangeably. I must emphasize that immigration is more generic, whereas diaspora has a more political approach; hence the latter is more appropriate to my analysis. According to

Roger Daniels (2002), there is a slight distinction between migration and immigration, that is to say, "migration simply means moving, and immigration means moving across national frontier. […] Thus an immigrant is simply a migrant whose move has involved crossing at least one international frontier" (p. 3).

- **Migration** is perceived as an unfolding phenomenon to the one of transnational movements. Victoria A. Lawson (2000) defines it as "the movement of human groups across territory, whether for cultural, seasonal (as in the case of nomadic groups), or political reasons" (p. 173).

- **Performativity** is understood in terms of identity politics and follows Butler's (2008) conceptualization of such an identitary practice in the subversion and denaturalization of cultural patterns, especially regarding gendered subjectivities. It describes how the transgression of power structures emerges from within a relation between restriction and agency by means of the performance of identity.

- **Scattering** relates to the meaning of the word diaspora in Greek, which means dispersion or scattering. It is associated to the history of the Jewish people, who experienced dispersal throughout the world. In Cultural Studies, the term has been used to refer to human movements of dispersion throughout the globe.

- **Transculturation** is described by Mary Louise Pratt (1998) as "the process of inter-cultural negotiation and selection", that is a constant flow of cultural exchange where subjects "meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (pp. 68-9). For Pratt, this experience happens in "the contact zones", that is, "the social spaces" where such negotiations take place.

- **Transnationalism** is often described as (national) border crossings, and has its origin from political economic studies of migration. According to Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (2005), it "describes the practice among immigrants of establishing and maintaining kinship, economic, cultural, and political networks across national boundaries, and the creation of multiple sites of 'home'" (p. 9). Spivak characterizes the new and different role of women in the "new diaspora" as being "in demand by the transnational agencies of globalization for employment and collaboration" (p. 251).

- **Utopia** is an idea frequently associated to Plato's *Republic* (*c.* 370 BC) and Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), considered the precursor works on the exploration of the theme and form and having acquired canonical *status*. However, the definition of utopia should not be limited to a focus on a literary genre, which is, to a view centered

on a given literary form which features imaginary communities. Discussions regarding this concept have also approached it from functional and thematic perspectives, in addition to looking at literary forms (LEVITAS, 1990). Informed by Levita´s approach, for my purpose, the concept is understood as a desire for a better space-time alternative to history (or better than history), a trace that can be perceived in literary works that are not utopian according to the traditional, genre-oriented (formal) views.