One of the recurrent themes and formal structural patterns in post-colonial writings is the essence of exile. The theme of exile is frequently concerned with place and displacement and establishing of new relationships. As Ashcroft et al rightly point out, "The theme of exile ... is one manifestation of the ubiquitous concern with place and displacement ... as well as with the complex material circumstances implicit in the transportation of language from its place of origin and its imposed and imposing relationship on and with the new environment." Bharati Mukherjee who herself suffered a literal geographical displacement and was confronted with the problem of "existential angst and zeitgeist" moves away from the theme of exile and expatriation and creates a world in her short fiction - The Middleman and Other Stories - where cultural encounter instead of simply leading to clashes and a wounded psyche changes to an acceptance of the difference, and cross culturality becomes the termination point.

It was with The Middleman and Other Stories which bagged the 1988 National Book Critics Award in America that Bharati Mukherjee won
recognition as a writer. If in Jasmine Mukherjee celebrates the immigrant condition, this collection seeks to dramatize the "immigrant experience" in America. The stories competently reflect the trials and tribulations afflicting the American society, but the immigrant experience is not shown as trauma or pain; the immigrants are not caught in the process of becoming, but are presented as finished American products. The text can be viewed as an emissary, occupying what Jonathan Crewe describes as the "middle ground" which can also be characterized as a "buffer zone," "shield," "staging post," and "negotiating table" between the old diasporic literature and the new. The immigrants overcome their colonized identity so that they can be absorbed into mainstream America.

According to Bharati Mukherjee in her interview with Alison B. Carb, "the new changing America" is the theme of the stories in The Middleman and Other Stories. She states, "For me immigration from the Third World to the USA is a metaphor for the process of uprooting and rerooting or what my husband Clark Blaise in his book Resident Alien calls "unhousement" and "rehousement." The immigrants in her stories go through extremes of transformations in America and at the same time they alter the country's appearance and psychological make-up. Talking about the immigrant experience, Bharati Mukherjee claims:

It (is) not right to describe the American experience as one of a melting pot but a more appropriate word would be 'fusion'
because immigrants in America did not melt into or were forged into something like their white counterparts but immigrants were growing into a third thing by this interchange and experience.  

What actually emerges to a large extent is the complete change in the majority of immigrant protagonists, both in style and psyche, as they have fully adapted themselves to the American culture and ethos. Consequently, the stories portray the American reality: the souring of the American Dream, fears and anxieties that the Americans are vulnerable to, and the typically American response to the emptiness and loneliness that haunt the inhabitants of this New World. 

The stories depict a rich vision of America through a variety of characters who hail from different countries of the world - China, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Iraq, Trinidad, Sri Lanka, Italy, Germany and Phillipines. Especially characters who have their origins in the Third World countries are focused upon as immigrants who dream of realizing their destinies in America - a country free from inhibitions, racial differences, religions, traditions, languages etc. America is a place, where the laws of physics are suspended, where people can defy gravity, where magic is an unremarkable part of every day life.
The characters choose to emigrate to America and undergo transformation because they have an innate desire to repudiate their past and escape to a country where they can enjoy unrestrained liberty and realize their identity. For at the heart of Mukherjee's stories is a memory of the old country, its poverty, its social strictures, its violence which the characters must erase to become Americans. Often memories of repression burden the characters' new lives, yet the possibility of Americanization exists in their imaginative sources which contain a belief in transformation. The stories have, therefore, a double aspect - while they depict the achievements of the immigrants in the New World, they also cast an embittered look at the social and cultural traditions and practices in the countries of their origin. In "Orbiting," Roashan flees from persecution at home in the trouble-torn Kabul in Afghanistan to New Jersey where he will get an opportunity to pursue higher studies at NJIT and become an electrical engineer. In "A Wife's Story," Panna leaves Ahmedabad for the States on a scholarship for two years to do her Ph.D. in Education but it is only a pretext for escaping from her mother-in-law and an indifferent husband. She is scared to think of Indian husbands who turn into wife-beaters or of households which burn young brides for not getting adequate dowry. Maya Sanyal in "The Tenant," wants to stay independently in America and become an emancipated woman. She wishes to experience absolute freedom in her free associations with men. Jasmine the titular protagonist is "a girl with ambition." She comes from Port-of-Spain in
Trinidad but compared to Ann Arbor, it is "a nothing place," only "an island stuck in the middle of nowhere." She believes that she can do much better than many other Trinidad girls in the United States. She is fascinated by Ann Arbor which has a famous university. Obviously, she too has an eye on opportunities for advancement. Her emigration to America is motivated by her higher goal which is both physical and intellectual. She dreams of becoming the "flower" of Ann Arbor rather than of Trinidad - a place which she describes as "shabby" and the people as "grasping and cheating and lying" and where "life was full of despair and drink and wanting." Her sexual adventure with her American host Bill Moffitt gives her a hope of getting rooted in the American soil. Squirming beneath the man's body, the "Flower of Ann Arbor" thinks of how she has "no visa, no papers, and no birth certificate. No nothing other than what she wanted to invent and tell." (TMOS 138) In America, only in America, she can make herself up as she goes along. In "Buried Lives," the Sri Lankan school teacher Venkatesan had some serious disappointments to face because he could not put up with the revolutionary and violent struggles of Tamil Tigers and anti-Buddhist rally of Dr.Pillai in Sri Lanka. He travels to Hamburg and may eventually move to America.

The immigrants need to surrender their inherited cultural notions and prejudices before they can be transformed into new persons and establish their identities in the new culture. The transformations undergone
by the characters are therefore necessarily accompanied by some degree of nostalgia. Panna is transformed but she cannot forget her Indian past:

I don’t forget the jewelry; the marriage necklace of mangalsutra, gold drop earrings, heavy gold bangles. I don’t wear them every day. In this borough of vice and greed, who knows when, or whom, desire will overwhelm. (TMOS 33)

In "The Tenant" the word "But" is used thrice in the text. It suggests a state of mind which is unable to completely cut itself off from the past. Maya discovers how her new life has offered her a job, equity, and three friends who are reliable. The very next line states," She is an American citizen. But." (TMOS 100) As Maya thinks about seducing Ted Suminski as an act of 'minor heroism' and waits for Dr.Chatterji to pick her up in his car, the sentence reads, "She has broken with the past. But." (TMOS 102) Maya inwardly reacts to Chatterji's fanatical outpourings on the Brahmin nephew's marriage to a Negro Muslim. "She hates him. But." (TMOS 196) Maya's references to her past - her mother, Indian cuisine, her father as a legend in the business circle in Calcutta, surface frequently in the text. She searches for some common Indian names, especially Bengalis, in the phone book and tries to guess the person's background for "Maya has slept with married men, with nameless men, with men little more than boys, but never with an Indian man. Never." (TMOS 103) After her visit to the
Chatterjis' house where the atmosphere is essentially Indian Maya goes to the periodical room which she looks upon as "an asylum for homesick aliens." The novelist observes:

Out here in the heartland of the new world, the India of serious newspapers unsettles. Maya longs again to feel what she had felt in the Chatterjis' living room: virtues made physical. It is a familiar feeling, a longing.  (TMOS 108)

On an impulse Maya answers an advertisement in the matrimonial column which seeks an emancipated Indo-American woman who is "at ease in USA" and whose "ethics are rooted in Indian tradition." (TMOS 109) Maya feels she is "at ease in both worlds" and Ashoke Mehta turns out to be a "Hindu god." (TMOS 109) Thus, the multi-cultural reality of the present leads to a variety of new exposures in the New World but does not deny past affiliations. In India, marvels Panna, Charity Chin would be a flat-chested old maid; in New York she is a rising model. An Italian-American remembers her grandmother cooking two Thanksgiving dinners every year, one of turkey and fixings, one of the grandfather's favourite pastas. Polly Shulman observes:

Assimilation implies forgetting, blotting out the past, but the past is what the present is made of. If she weren't still an Indian, Mukherjee wouldn't be the wonderful American writer she is.7

132
Successful immigrants imbibe old values even while taking advantage of the possibilies the new culture offers.

To realize their ambitions, to experience a sense of liberation from their inherited social and cultural traditions, the protagonists go through great hardships. The emigration to America is achieved at a heavy price. The intending travellers pay big chunks of foreign exchange purchased from a network of blackmarketeers to the touts and middlemen who arrange fake visas, passports, transport, jobs, and cover-ups to get over immigration hassles and to outwit border vigilance. The plight of a Sri Lankan Tamil teacher Venkatesan in "Buried Lives" gives a realistic picture of the hazards suffered by illegal immigrants:

In early September, three weeks after he had paid in full for a roundabout one-way ticket to Hamburg and for a passport impressive with fake visas, the travel agent stowed him in the damp, smelly bottom of a fisherman's dinghy and had him ferried across the Palk Strait to Tuticorin in the palm-green tip of mainland India.... The train took him to Madras; in Madras he changed trains for Delhi where he boarded an Aeroflot flight for Tashkent. From Tashkent he flew to Moscow.... In Moscow the airport officials didn't bother to look too closely at his visa stamps, and he made it to Berlin feeling cocky.  

(TMOS 165-66)
On arrival in Berlin an Algerian "truck(s) him over the border into Hamburg." (TMOS 167) He is also instructed not to look out of the window lest he should be sighted by the immigration officials. He becomes one of the many undocumented transients who are accommodated on tiered bunks in a transit motel run by a Tamil and his widowed cousin.

Jasmine too manoeuvres her emigration to Detroit by a circuitous route in a clandestine manner:

Jasmine came to Detroit from Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, by way of Canada. She crossed the border at Windsor in the back of a gray van loaded with mattresses and box springs. The plan was for her to hide in an empty mattress box if she heard the driver say, "All bad weather seems to come down from Canada, doesn't it?" to the customs man. But she didn't have to crawl into a box and hold her breath. The customs man didn't ask to look in. (TMOS 127)

Roashan in "Orbiting" manages his escape in a much more tortuous manner. He recounts how "his father, once a rich landlord, had stashed away enough to bribe a guard, sneak him out of this cell and hide him for four months in a tunnel dug under a servant's adobe hut until a forged American visa could be bought." (TMOS 73) America is the land of their heart's desire and the immigrants from the Third World countries willingly
undergo the inevitable travails and sometimes even endanger their lives to realize their dreams.

Having reached their destination the immigrants realize the necessity of shedding all their inherited racial, religious and cultural prejudices and promoting a meaningful harmony among themselves. The breaking down of age-old racial prejudices or modes of belief and living are prominently reflected in some of these stories. Settling in America can be meaningful only when one can break "into the light, the vigor, the bustle of the New World." (TMOS 110) Immigration necessarily calls for participation in the multiracial and multicultural complex. New relationships between characters of the opposite sex from different countries are forged which will help the emergence of a friendly and harmonious atmosphere. Panna in "A Wife's Story," feels emotional stability in the company of her Hungarian friend Imre and with Charity's uncle who was shot at during the Wuchang Uprising. These relationships give Panna confidence and a new knowledge, "If I hadn't left home, I'd never have heard of the Wuchang Uprising. I've broadened my horizons." (TMOS 31) The North Italian-American girl, Renata decides to teach Ro from Afghanistan "how to walk like an American, how to dress like Brent but better, how to fill up a room as Dad does instead of melting and blending but sticking out in the Afghan way."
(TMOS 74) In "The Tenant," Maya's marriage outside the Brahminic caste, the quick divorce, the chequered career of sleeping with different men - these details do not hinder Ashoke Mehta from extending a welcome to her to Hartford.
However, in most instances, what actually emerges as the characters make a bid to establish relationships is a vigorous pursuit of sex. Scanning the cultural landscape of America in the 1960s, Christopher Lasch opines, "The typical 'repressed' patient of the past was giving way to a new type of shallow, impulse-ridden character." What connects most of the characters in the story is merely sex, which proves to be an ephemeral bond. So, there is a constant movement away from each other and a breaking down of relationships. Of course, fresh contacts are made, but the pattern remains the same and so does the outcome. Alfie Judah, the narrator of the story, "The Middleman" confesses that his weakness is women. As a young boy back in old Baghdad he used to "stroll up to the diplomatic enclaves just to look at women" (TMOS 4) and visited whores. He goes to bed with Maria, wife of Clovis T. Ransome, for whom Judah works. Maria has violent sex with Andreas, the guerilla leader. When she sees Andreas, she "throws herself on him and he holds her face in his hands, and in no time they're swaying and moaning like connubial visitors at a prison farm." (TMOS 13) Andreas along with his men and Maria, visits Ransome, robs him and Maria kills him with Andreas's gun. Alfie's life is saved for the sole reason that he has had sex with Maria "three times" that night. In "A Wife's Story," Panna, a traditional Gujarati wife, has been in the States for a couple of years only, but she has begun to flirt with Imre, another immigrant. As an Indian, she gets irritated at the parody and satire - the two protections Americans use against vulnerability - heaped at the Indians.
(Gujaratis in particular) but she has become American enough to throw herself at Imre in full view of everyone on the road. It is Imre who is taken by surprise by this action of an Indian married woman:

He wants me to let go, but he doesn't really expect me to let go. He staggers, though I weigh no more than 104 pounds, and with him, I pitch forward slightly. Then he catches me, and we walk arm in arm to the bus stop. My husband would never dance or hug a woman on Broadway. Nor would my brothers.

(TMOS 28)

Her room-mate, Charity Chin, a model "had her eyes fixed eight or nine months ago and out of gratitude sleeps with her plastic surgeon every third Wednesday." (TMOS 29) It does not matter that Chin is an Oriental; she is by now fully Americanized and suffers from American problems. The narrator observes, "When I first moved in she was seeing an analyst. Now she sees a nutritionist." (TMOS 29) She is estranged from her husband but her affair with a flutist, a man with "thin hair," is in full blossom, even though she suspects that he is a creep too, like the others she has slept with. She has bought a blue Datsun so she "could spend weekends with him. She returns every sunday night, exhausted and exasperated." (TMOS 30) The narrator refers to her own complete transformation:
That part of my life is over, the way trucks have replaced lorries in my vocabulary, the way Charity Chin and her lurid love life have replaced inherited notions of marital duty.

(TMOS 32)

Panna's husband, however, remains ignorant of the change in her and remarks, "You're too innocent." The irony is incisive. Renata, the Italian protagonist in the story "Orbiting," has had a lover, Vic, before she was picked up by her "current" lover, Ro (from Afghanistan) in an uptown singles bar:

He bought me a Cinzano and touched my breast in the dark.
He was direct, and at the same time weirdly courtly. I took him home though usually I don't, at first. I learned in bed that night that the tall brown drink with the lemon twist he'd been drinking was Tab.

(TMOS 62)

This story makes two very important statements about the American cultural reality: first, it underscores the ease, rather the abruptness with which an affair is ruptured and secondly, it highlights the assiduous efforts of the girls, as it were, to get married, which somehow seems to elude them. The way Vic, Renata's first lover, broke with her is illustrative of the first statement. One day, Vic just announces to Renata:
I am leaving babe. New Jersey doesn't do it for me anymore.

I said, "Okay, so where're we going?" ... Vic said, "I didn't say we, babe." So I asked, "You mean its over? Just like that?" And he said, "Isn't that the best way? No fuss, no hang ups." Then I got a little whiny. "But Why?" I wanted to know. But he was macrobiotic in lots of things, including relationships.

(TMOS 62)

Vic just coolly walks out on her.

Yet another instance of the total change in the sensibility is provided by Maya Sanyal from Calcutta, in the story "The Tenant,"

Having come to the States, "Maya's taken some big risks, made a break with her parents' ways. She's done things a woman from Ballygunj Park Road doesn't do, even in fantasies. She's not yet shared stories with Fran apart from the divorce. She's told her nothing of men she picks up, the reputation she'd gained, before Cedar Falls, for 'indiscretions'.... She is an American citizen. (TMOS 100)

She is indeed completely Americanized since there is no difference between her and her friend, Fran, who comments on her relationship with her
erstwhile lover, "Anyway, it was a sex thing totally. We were good together. It'd be different if I'd loved him." (TMOS 98) As for Maya she now prepares to make love to a man without arms. When she meets Ashoke Mehta, who has advertised for a bride in the very first meeting, she begins to fondle him around the neck. "The immigrant courtship proceeds," (TMOS 110) but it is thoroughly American in character. From every indication, it is going to develop into torrid sex.

To a question whether the "sexy stories" in The Middleman have some vision behind them or whether it is the realism coming through Mukherjee answers, "I think for a number of the Asian women characters they are discovering for the first time their sexual power." She cites the example of Jasmine who "has had many affairs before in Trinidad but she is enjoying the sexuality, she is discovering her own power as a sexual creature and (that really) she is in control of that lovemaking situation. And if there is any villain in that ending at all its the wife, Lara, who needs the non-white cheap help in order that she can have her career." 

However, one cannot deny that there is an abundant use of the erotic, sexual element in each of the stories. In nearly all the stories, there is a fixed pattern. In the first part of each story, the focus is on narrating the situation of an immigrant who is in the process of immigration or settling down and in the second part the protagonist is invariably given to making
love with a partner of the opposite sex who is rooted in the American soil.

S.K. Tikoo observes:

There is little or no consideration that the sexual adventure of
the female protagonist with the male member of the family
may amount to adultery or cause serious protest from the
housewife. In fact, while such adulterous transactions are
carried on freely or even promiscuously, the housewives take
them as normal behaviour. It would then appear to be a
world in which neither of them is seriously restrained or
bound by obligations towards the children or to the collective
family life.¹⁰

It is ironical that in spite of such frequent, torrid affairs, the
protagonists still feel empty and alienated. There is no real communication
that contributes to a permanent, meaningful relationship. Jeb and Jonda
in "Loose Ends" have been living together for years and Jonda observes,
"Nine years, for God's sake! Nine years, and what do we have?" (TMOS 44)
Progressive deterioration in their relationship has brought them to such a
pass. Griff and the Asian, Blanquita, in "Fighting for the Rebound" are also
in the process of breaking up. Griff who is keen on saving the relationship
proposes, "Let's start this conversation over.... I'm tentative at the start of
relationships, but this time I'm not throwing it away." (TMOS 80) The
appeal is born of the memory of his previous breakup with Wendi, "We talked, we did things together," (TMOS 83) but the relationship ended on a note of disaster. Blanquita’s complaint rings strident: "You don't love me Griff." (TMOS 82) In her well-bred, Asian convent schooled voice she yells, "You're all emotional cripples. All you Americans," (TMOS 80) but then what she doesn't realize is that the immigrants are no better. There seems to be some kind of inevitability about people drifting apart, and Griff sums it up: "Love flees, but we're stuck with love's debris." (TMOS 82) Little wonder, since brief sex often passes for love.

Some of the characters stoically take their alienation and disintegrating relationship in their stride, the American pragmatism coming to their rescue. Jason, for instance, knows his marriage is on the rocks but seems resigned to the idea. His remark concerning his house can be applied to his marital state as well, "I've put twenty years into this house. The steps, the path, the house all have a right to fall apart." (TMOS 122) His wife, Sharon, on the other hand, feels low and depressed and has to be put on sedatives. Loneliness also proves a source of exploitation at times. Danny (Dinesh) a Dogra boy from Simla ropes in lonely persons to fob off the girls he brings from India, making a fortune in the process.

Desire not only for sexual fulfilment but for material advancement as well appears as yet another recurring theme in Bharati Mukherjee's
short fiction. It becomes the central motif in the South Asian immigrants' self-fashioning in the New World. The majority of the stories portray the ruthlessness of the struggle for survival which is a distinguishing characteristic of the American society right from its inception, what with Americans having to face the New England wilderness and the hostile Red Indians. The competition is cut-throat and the milieu is surcharged with violence. The Middleman, Alfie Judah, operates in the underworld and makes his "living from things that fall." (TMOS 3) Ransome, for whom the Middleman works, gets killed before being robbed. Doc Healy advises Jeb in "Loose Ends"- "If you want to stay alive... just keep consuming and moving like a locust," (TMOS 45) the evocative image suggesting the greedy predatoriness that has come to characterize the contemporary American society. Jeb kills for a living. He describes Miami, the city he lives in, bringing out its inherent ethos:

You can smell the fecund rot of the jungle in every headline.
You can park your car in the shopping mall and watch the dope change hands, the Goldilockses and Peter Pans go off with new daddies, the dish-washers and short-order cooks haggle over fake passports, the Mr.Vees in limos huddle over arms-shopping lists, all the while gull guano drops on your car with the soothing steadiness of rain. (TMOS 45)
Jeb has been committing murders for Mr. Vee for money, without any qualms of conscience. The cool, bare description of his rape of the unsuspecting, young Gujarati daughter of the owner of the motel he has gone to rent a room in constitutes a powerful comment on this aspect of American society: "I pounce on Alice before she can drop down below, and take America with her. The hardware comes in handy, especially the kris. Alice lays hot fingers on my eyes and nose, but it's no use and once she knows it, Alice submits." (TMOS 54)

Most of Mukherjee's characters are both socially marginalized and an enormous, heterogeneous range of rural groups belonging mainly to the lower rungs of society in their countries of origin - Clove Ransome, Bud Wilkins, Andreas, Alfie Judah, Maria in "The Middleman," Imre, Charity Chin, Panna, Eric, Phil, Goran in "A Wife's Story," Marshall, Jonda, the Patels in "Loose Ends," Renata, Vic, Ro in "Orbiting," Griff, Blanquita, Maura in "Fighting for the Rebound," Maya, Dr. Chatterjee, Ashoke Mehta in "The Tenant," Jasmine and the Moffitts in "Jasmine," Venkatesan, Queenie, Rammi in "Buried Lives." These characters are from the Third World countries and we see how they lose their 'subalternity' and assimilate themselves in the new country of their dreams. However, at times Mukherjee sets a pattern of conformity / nonconformity which evokes in the reader responses of pity and compassion. In "Fathering" for instance, Mukherjee represents a white Vietnam veteran, who in turn represents his
newly emigrated Vietnamese daughter. While the white Vietnam vet, Jason situated in late capitalist United States poses no problem, Eng, the Vietnamese daughter, is attributed a great strangeness; she comes from the outside, she engages in strange acts, such as inflicting injury on herself or eating when she is not hungry. Alpana Sharma Knippling sees this as a recognizable pattern and states:

...*naturally*, a Vietnamese survivor will suffer trauma of this sort. What is also "naturalized" is the fact that father and daughter will be united in their common Vietnamese experience, which is, in fact, Jason's American experience of Vietnam.¹¹

The process by which Jason assimilates his daughter into his American discourse is strikingly dramatized:

Get the hell out, you bastard! Eng yells. "*Vamos! Bang bang!*

She's pointing her arm like a semiautomatic....My Rambo...My Saigon kid and me : we're a team (TMOS 124)

Eng's translation from the Vietnamese site to "Rambo" and "my Saigon Kid" is precisely the process of translation of the wholly Other to the self-consolidating West's Other.
We have seen how Mukherjee speaks from a position of bourgeois privilege; as such how well is she equipped as a writer to represent the ethnic minorities in America? A scene from the autobiographical *Days and Nights in Calcutta* reads:

The rickshaw puller near Nizam's was suddenly not just a Muslim resident of a Calcutta slum, but he was also me, a timid, brown, naturalized citizen in a white man's country that was growing increasingly hostile to "colored" immigrants.\(^\text{12}\)

We witness in this passage the impossible unification of the underprivileged and the upper class bourgeois writer whose own privileged social and intellectual status has been suppressed. This unification, according to Mukherjee, made possible her unquestioned access to all ethnic minorities in the United States, regardless of race/class/gender stratifications. She states:

"Chameleon-skinned, I discover my material over and across the country, and up and down the social ladder."\(^\text{13}\)

Mukherjee's narrative method in *The Middleman* may be best characterized as social satire based on social realism. Her sympathies lie undoubtedly with the Indian women, while the Indian men by and large are
portrayed as unromatic, materialistic, and sometimes even slightly comic. Their rejection by their romantic, sensual, and sensitive female counterparts underlies the crumbling masculine power structure in the South Asian immigrant community in the United States. Some of the male immigrants who seek to refashion themselves materialistically and romantically are predominantly educated professionals like Ashoke Mehta and the physicist Rabindra Chatterjee in "The Tenant." The orderliness, success, and prosperity of their public lives contrast sharply with the self-division, deprivation, and turmoil of their emotional lives. On the fringes of the public "stability" of these middle-class men stand the uncontrolled passions of the graduate students Poltoo, the ghetto character Danny Sahib, and the teenage narrator of "Danny Sahib," a diasporic Indian from Uganda - a teenager whose struggling mother aspires to send him to an engineering school at Columbia University. Ghetto entrepreneurs such as Mukherjee's Danny Sahib make profit by importing mail-order brides from the old country for lonely white American males and for the immigrant males. Sociologists find that during the early seventies, female Indian immigrants outnumbered males because immigrant males began to bring in Indian brides. This instance of social realism in Mukherjee's short fiction underscores the male immigrants' desire to continue the "convenient" practices of South Asian patriarchy amid the freedoms of the New World.

The Indian traditional practice of arranging marriages is juxtaposed with the Western idea of romance culminating in matrimony. Danny is both a
marriage broker and a quasi-pimp. Women's historical enslavement in marriage thus continues as Old World methods are bought by New World men.

In a parody of South Asian matrimonial advertisements and social practices, Mehta's ad is for a free wheeling relationship without marriage. Maya Sanyal responds to the dubious matrimonial advertisement of the ear-nose-throat Indian specialist from Connecticut. Maya harbours a secret desire to sleep with an Indian man, and she has had no such opportunity. The date from the Immigrant Weekly India Abroad is a wealthy playboy of unaccountable behaviour. Mehta is the physical image of a Hindu god with ungodly lusts. The gods of Hindu mythology are polygamous and impulsive; so is Mehta.

The self-division experienced by Mukherjee's Indian men as they encounter the sexual liberation of the new country leads to acts of shame, even madness at times, as shown by the conflict raging in Chatterjee in "The Tenant." After an evening in his house with the sexy divorcee, Maya Sanyal, for whom his stout childless wife has prepared an elaborate meal, Rab Chatterjee is so aroused that he begins to masturbate in his car as he takes Maya home. He overtly laments his loneliness and lack of sexual freedom in his marriage. Chatterjee's nephew, Poltoo, a bright Indian graduate student finds his emotions getting out of control when he discards
the traditional gender segregation of young people in his original culture. Poltoo falls in love with a Negro Muslim at a Christmas party organised by the office for foreign students, a ritual in North American universities. Thus, The Middleman and Other Stories depict the unusual dilemmas that confront Mukherjee's characters when they face their hitherto repressed desires in the new country. Mukherjee's South Asian immigrants both fashion and seek new selves and a fresh "truth" as their Indian paradigms of love, desire, and romance are deconstructed by their American experiences.15

In striking contrast the adaptability of some of Mukherjee's South Asian women characters is emphasized - an adaptability which is traceable to their conditioning within the strongly patriarchal society of their origins. The women's adaptability contrasts sharply with the men's lack of assimilation and self-division as their masculine codes are undermined in the challenges Hindu and Islamic patriarchy faced in the North America of the seventies and eighties. Mukherjee's fiction reveals how these historically underprivileged South Asian women discard their traditional sexual passivity in the new country and fashion new selves that are romantic, sensitive, and sensual. The boy narrator in "Danny Sahib," for example, implies that the destitute, rickety, Nepalese beauty Rosie who is a mail-order-bride-to-be intends to break her contract with Danny Sahib and probably will assimilate into ghetto prostitution. Panna in "A Wife's Story" soliloquizes that she has been trained to adapt: "'Right!' I say, my voice
coming out a squeal. I've been trained to adapt; what else can I say?"

(TMOS 36) It has seen her "through riots, uprootings, separation, (and her)
son's death." (TMOS 27) Panna arrives in the United States as a woman
graduate student. She is "a wife" in that she is wedded to the traditional
value system of the old country as well as to a husband. She is attractive
to a variety of men - from her fellow graduate student Imre to the Lebanese
man behind the ticket counter. Panna's husband comes to New York on a
vacation. In the privacy of a New World apartment devoid of extended
family and domestics, they discover passion and romance, perhaps for the
first time. Panna contrasts her married love to the meaningless sexual
encounters of her roommate Charity Chin. Their romantic vacation ends
when Panna's husband is recalled by his employer. Panna's refusal to
return with her husband underlines her stability and intelligence. Through
her economy of passion and her acceptance of the role of the traditional
Hindu wife and her judicious choice of the American work ethic she avoids
self-division and anarchy of the self faced by many of Mukherjee's male
characters.

The singleness of Maya Sanyal in "The Tenant" brings on promiscuity
with white men. Divided between cultures, Maya, the enchantress corrupts
the ethos of both East and West. Desire was an act of liberation/rebellion
when she slept with John Hadwen at Duke University. From then onward,
and after her divorce from Hadwen, she fashions a new promiscuous but
independent identity, eventually becoming the tenant of an armless lover Fred. Mukherjee's satire indicates that Maya is comfortable only with this freak lover whose armlessness signifies his castration and powerlessness.

Perhaps the best example of adaptability and strength amongst Mukherjee's portraits is the moving tragic monologue of Shaila Bhave, the thirty-six-year old narrator of "The Management of Grief". A quietly stunning story it dramatizes the imagined consequences of a plane crash that actually occurred in 1985. An Air India jet en route from Canada exploded over the sea off the west coast of Ireland. Mukherjee is devastatingly perceptive about the effects of the disaster on the victims' families in Canada: the isolation and withdrawal of these Indian families, despite clumsy official efforts to help them, and the varying degrees to which they were able to adapt. Shaila Bhave's emotional control surprises those around her, and she becomes a resource for the inexperienced social worker whose project is "the management of grief" among the Indian immigrants. Shaila Bhave presents a counterpoint to the anarchy and confusion of other Indian immigrants and the Canadian authorities. Outwardly calm, she longs to say, "In our culture, it is a parent's duty to hope." She travels to Ireland and cannot find her family in the bodies dredged from the sea. She journeys to her parents' home in India to recover and discovers her own displacement in the old country where newly bereaved husbands rapidly take new wives. She returns to Canada to
continue her life which she now views as an endless journey begun with her
husband. Her journey includes a quest for truth and for self-realization
according to the tenets of Hindu scripture.

Along with Mukherjee's concern with the processes of effecting
transformations of the immigrants, there seems to be also a transformation
of places, though for most part in a negative sense. The past of the
American pioneers was the Florida of pappy and grammie. Recounting the
past, Marshall in "Loose Ends" remarks:

I remember them, I was a kid here, I remember the good
Florida when only pioneers came down and it was considered
too hot and wet and buggy to ever come to much. I knew your
pappy and grammie, I mowed their lawn, trimmed their
hedges, washed their cars. I toted their golf bags. Nice
people.... That's the first thing about Florida; the nice thing.
The second is this: Florida is run by locusts and behind them
are sharks and even pythons and they've pretty well chewed
up your mom and pop and all the other lawn bowlers and
blue-haired ladies.

With time Florida too has been transformed and has become notorious for
pimping, smuggling and highway robberies. The American experience itself
has become so complex: the tours in Manhattan, the stay in motels, the
pimps and the middlemen arranging everything for a commission be it in
Acapulco, Tijuana, Freeport or Miami. Mr.Vee tells Marshall in his
nostalgic moments that even Havana used to be like that, a city of touts
and pimps, "the fat young men in sunglasses parked at a corner in an idling
Buick, waiting for a payoff, a delivery, a contact. Havana has shifted its
corporate headquarters. Beirut has come west. And now, its Miami that
gives me warm memories of always-Christmas Saigon." (TMOS 50)

The style of writing in Mukherjee's short fiction is in conformity with
the themes and atmosphere in the stories. The imagery reinforces the
lonely, bleak, sombre and violent atmosphere and disintegrating
relationships. Human beings have become "locusts" to survive, the
chandelier is broken, the steps, the path, the house, are falling apart,
afternoons are "pure dynamite," Miami is a "jungle" and human beings are
compared to gutters, a "laugh leaks out" of Auguste, Marshall is "burned
out," and the rest of his manliness is whether he can "fuck" a whore;
America has gone "down the rabbit hole," it is to the "zoo" that Marshall
goes in London. The sight in the zoo is symbolic: "The twenty-eight feet long
python, squeezing out jaguars and crocodiles like dishrags"; the smell that
emanates from hot water ports like Florida, Bangkok, Manila and Bombay
is like that of the "snakeshit"; Renata's world needs to be "healed"; instead
of a baby, a cat is held on the hip; love has become a destructive force, a
tornado which leaves behind a "debris," a room in a house looks "impersonal as a room in a Holiday Inn," and flowers in New York have no fragrance.

The stories collected in The Middleman are designed and arranged to illuminate, one by one, various facets of the latter-day American melting pot, incorporating the experiences of Indian, Afghan, Filipino, Vietnamese, Trinidadian and Sri Lankan immigrants and the endless, exquisite ironies of their relationships with older Americans, that is to say, the ones who got to America earlier. Mukherjee is certainly worth listening to on the subject that seems to fascinate her above all - "the transformation of North American society by 'new' faces from Asia, and the transformation of those "new" people (who are some of the oldest in the world) by the ideas of America." In "Fathering," for instance, Eng, a Vietnamese child rescued by her American father from Saigon and carried home to Rock Springs tries to mutilate herself by pressing coins into her flesh - the same coins that in Vietnam had been used as amulets for wounds - to protest her forced exile in her father's land. Ambushed by a doctor armed with a syringe full of sedative, she turns on her father, crying, "You Yankees, please go home.... Scram, Yankee bastard!" For the young Eng, to be an immigrant is to be invaded, conquered, colonized. She is Saigon, cruelly encroached on by an alien small town in the far West, and the story ends with her father joining her in her flight from Rock springs. The great lesson that the immigrant
has to teach the born-and-raised citizen is that being on the run is a typical American condition. The Americans in *The Middleman* are constantly being awakened to their own restlessness and fluidity by the newcomers.

"I got no end of coins," the father whispers to Eng. It's not only the newcomers who have to learn new rules and ways of thinking in these stories - Americans who love them also end up changing. The father loves his daughter Eng so much that he's willing to change his own life for her, though he is also one of the Yankees who killed her grandmother and destroyed her world. Perhaps this is the meaning of change - the destroyer becomes the redeemer.

The unsophisticated Afghan is taught how to dress and walk like an American. In "Orbiting," when Brent listens to Ro's experiences in his home country Afghanistan, he is for the first time exposed to Third World passion. Ro's beloved Rindy comes to know for the first time that words like Kandhar and Pamir are not polish words but important words associated with Afghanistan. Ro acquires knowledge of the outside world after he leaves Afghanistan and travels through Colombo, Seoul, Bombay, Geneva, and Frankfurt. Immigration transforms him into a new person just as it does other immigrants as well.

In a story titled "Courtly Vision" from her earlier collection *Darkness* there is a clue to Bharati Mukherjee's writing:
"Give me total vision," commands the emperor. His voice hisses above the hoarse calls of the camels. "You, Basawan, who can paint my Begum on a grain of rice, see what you can do with the infinite vistas the size of my opened hand. Tell me how my new capital will fail, will turn to dust and these marbled terraces be home to jackals and infidels. Tell me who to fear and who to kill but tell it to me in a way that makes me smile. Transport me through dense fort walls and stone grilles and into the hearts of men."

This is what Mukherjee has done: she has penetrated below the surface and discovered the truth. The literary artist has not focussed only on the bad news. She also celebrates life, the creative possibilities contained within people, the ability to give up fixed worlds, to break out of cages, and relate to a complex, multicultural world. In giving an articulate voice to people who too often are lumped together in contemporary America as "ethnics" or "minorities," Bharati Mukherjee becomes in The Middleman and Other Stories, herself the most valuable kind of middleman, bridging disparate worlds. Her fiction, in this sense is in line with the mainstream fiction written in the post - Second World War decades in America. Robert Stone's novels, for example, portray a Vietnemed America in which aggression has triumphed so much that there is no place for tenderness. Flannery O'connor's stories underscore the violence that "so unexpectedly erupts, exploding all the values of obedience, politeness and faith." The stories in
The Middleman competently, reflect the trials and tribulations afflicting the American society, but the experience of the immigrants who are presented as finished American products is not shown as traumatic or painful.

In an interview given to India Today she calls The Middleman "a tribute to America" and this is what Mukherjee has to say about the book: It's not a book about immigrants so much as a book about the new America. Half the stories are from the White American point of view, half from immigrant point of view - such as Italian, American, Sri Lanka, Fillipino, Indian.... The idea behind the title is being in transition, between two cultures... my characters are brash and spunky ... I'm writing about a kind of new pioneer.

By virtue of her own identification with the Indian diaspora, Mukherjee probes deeply into the inner conflicts of well-educated, sensitive adults whose traditional codes of economy of passion and material desire collapse amid the American paradigms of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Mukherjee shows the diasporic Indian as living in between two cultures, constantly journeying into new meaning and fashioning new identities. The positive moral value of Mukherjee is reflected in the belief that in spite of man's capacity for evil, through hope and persistence, there is the possibility of rebirth.


4. Interview in *The Hindustan Times* (9 February 1990), p.3.

5. Bharati Mukherjee, *The Middleman and Other Stories* (India : Penguin Books, 1990), p.132. The subsequent quotations from the text are from this edition and therefore only the page numbers are given in parentheses.


17. Interview in The Hindustan Times (9 February 1990), p.3.

