CHAPTER - VI

THE SELECT WORKS OF BHALATI MUKHERJEE
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An author of novels and non-fiction, she has produced a string of popular and well-received works over the last thirty years. The power of her writing is due in no small measure to the sense of lived experience, of events grounded in autobiography that pervades her fictional world.

Mukherjee was born on July 17, 1940, into a Bengali Brahmin family, the elite caste of Hindu society, and was brought up in a large extended household of over fifty family members. Mukherjee’s parents and their three daughters moved to London in 1948 to escape the civil unrest brought on by India’s independence and partition. There the girls attended school and became fluent in English. In 1951 the family returned to India and Mukherjee grew up immersed in History and Culture. She received her B.A. in English from the University of Calcutta and an M.A. in English and Ancient Indian Culture in keeping with her family tradition from the University of Baroda.

In 1961 Mukherjee received a scholarship to study writing at the University of Iowa’s Writers’ Workshop, where she first earned a Masters of Fine Art and a Ph.D. in 1969 from the Department of Comparative Literature. Mukherjee recollects that while at Iowa she “did not understand a word of heartland American-English for the entire first semester.” Here she met the Canadian
writer Clark Blaise, whom she married in 1963 against the wishes of her Bengali family, who had arranged for her to be married to an Indian nuclear physicist. Mukherjee acknowledges:

'Until my lunch-break wedding, I had seen myself as an Indian foreign student who intended to return to India to live. The five minute ceremony in the Lawyers office suddenly changed me into a transient with conflicting loyalties to two very different cultures.'

Shortly after her marriage, she and her husband moved to Canada, where Mukherjee became one of the youngest tenured women faculty members ever at McGill University, in Montreal. Three years later they moved to Toronto with their two small children where Mukherjee, now a Canadian citizen began work on her first novel The Tiger’s Daughter. It is a loosely autobiographical story of an East Indian immigrant who is unable to adjust to North American culture, but who is painfully aware that she will never again belong in the culture she has left behind.

In 1972, a year after the publication of The Tiger’s Daughter, Mukherjee and Blaise went to live for a year in Canada, where they kept independent journals that were later published under the title Days and Night in Calcutta. Mukherjee’s entries reveal her to be like the protagonist in The Tiger’s Daughter, ambivalent about her return home after living in the West for ten years: the innocence of her childhood is shattered, and she decries the lack of
opportunity offered to women in her native land, The return to Canada was not much better. She found herself discriminated against and ill treated, as a member of the visible minority. The personal hostility and racial prejudice Mukherjee experienced became the material for the novel Wife. Her next publication was a collection of short stories Darkness which reflects her mood of cultural separation while living in Canada.³

In her second volume of short fiction, The Middleman and Other Stories, Mukherjee expands her narrative voice to explore not only the lives of immigrants but also the European Americans who have been brought into contact with cultures about which they have little knowledge. She expanded Jasmine, one of the stories of The Middleman, into the novel of the same name, Jasmine in 1989. Mukherjee wrote two more novels about the perilous collision of cultures. Puritanical America meets Mughal Indian ways of life in The Holder of World. The novel involves time travel via virtual reality, locating itself in 20th century Boston, 17th century Colonial America, 17th century India during the British East India Company period. In Leave It To Me written in 1997 the Greek myth of Electra coexists the Indian myth of Devi. Mukherjee is also known for her novels Desirable Daughters (2002); The Tree Bride (2004); and Miss New India (2011). Her latest short story collection includes A Father. Desirable Daughters is a brilliantly woven story of three Calcutta India – born Brahmin upper class sisters and follows their
lives as they leave their conservative culture and tradition. The Tree Bride presents a Brahmin girl from Bengal, who resists the British Raj while seeking to establish herself as an American citizen. The heroine of Miss New India is a young woman, who escapes from the small town namely Bihar, for the promise of Bangalore, one of India’s and World’s fastest growing cities. She encounters her share of hardships, but ultimately succeeds in reinventing herself. Mukherjee has also written non-fiction works such as The Sorrow and The Terror: The haunting legacy of the Air India tragedy, Political Culture and Leadership in India and Regionalism in Indian Perspective.

Bharati Mukherjee was the winner of the 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award for The Middleman and Other Stories. She was the first Naturalized American Citizen to receive a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, a Guggenheim fellowship and a number of other awards. She is currently a professor in the Department of English at the University of California, Berkeley.

Mukherjee’s life as an Indian woman in an intolerant environment has produced a very different social positioning to that of her upbringing, exposing her to sexism and racial prejudice, and to the uprootedness that is the common lot of the migrant. Mukherjee speaks bitterly about her experience of racism in Canada, where she felt humiliated when she was
thrown out of hotel lobbies when not accompanied by her white husband, or
told to move to the back of the bus.

In the Introduction to Darkness, a collection of short stories, she bitterly
records her Canadian experience. She revealed that she was no longer
interested in exile. Tired of “the aloofness of expatriation, she was ready for
exuberance.” A elevator load of leering, elbowing women and three high
school boys asked her why she did not go back to Africa. A customs officer
insisted that even a book of matches had to be declared. Such episodes added
up to a society convinced of its ‘white superiority, insensitive and indifferent
to the collective anguish of the third world immigrant.’ said Mukherjee.

In 1980, Mukherjee took a bold decision to quit her professional appointment
at McGill University in Montreal and move to America. She reflects about
Canada, ‘It has chosen to be a mosaic. But by preserving differences, it also
preserves biases... I knew if I wanted to write, I had to leave. Had I stayed, I
would have become a political activist’. She later moved to the United States where she claims to have found a much
greater acceptance as a South Asian. She found America a more liberating
agent in immigrant lives. Through a review of her own several transitions,
Bharati Mukherjee has evolved a credo for the new immigrant voices, which
she calls ‘Maximalism.’ The immigration offices provide the stage for the
new drama. She sees the immigrants who are confident, sophisticated, poised
who will not melt into the American mainstream but visibly expand the margins of what one may call ‘the American Experience’. These new Americans are neither nostalgic for their personal past nor afraid of the unfamiliar present. Their main strategy is adaptation without surrender. Bharati Mukherjee thus formulates the ‘Maximalist’ Credo:

*I can imagine a poster over the United States Court House: Welcome Maximalists. Hello Expansionists. The New America I know and have been living in for the last seven years is a world, by definition, of doubles ... They have all shed their past lives and languages, and have travelled half the world in every direction to come here and begin again. They are bursting with stories, too many to begin telling. They have lived through centuries of history in a single lifetime-village born, colonized, traditionally raised, educated. What they have assimilated in 30 years has taken the West 10 minutes that number of years to create. Time travel is a reality. I have seen it in my own life. Bionic Men and Bionic Women are living among us.*

Her struggle with identity first as an exile from India, then an Indian expatriate in Canada and finally as an immigrant in the United States has finally led to the contentment of being ‘an immigrant in a country of immigrants’. She has since then shifted into a celebratory mode as a United States citizen and writer, blending her several lives and backgrounds together with the intention of creating a ‘New immigrant’ literature.
Mukherjee has honed the multiple (dis) locations of her personal biography, which itself has been described as “a text is a kind of perennial immigration”\textsuperscript{12} into a literary and cultural poetics that she hopes would constitute “a revisionist theory for contemporary residency and citizenship”\textsuperscript{13} in the United States. She asserts “I see in the process of immigration, the stage, and the battleground, for the most exciting dramas of our time”.\textsuperscript{14} with her aim “to redefine the nature of American and what makes an American”\textsuperscript{15} through her cultural narration as a nation, Mukherjee calls herself “not an Indian Writer, not an exile, not an expatriate”, but an “immigrant…[whose]…investment is in the American reality, not the Indian”.\textsuperscript{16}

In elucidating her immigrant poetics, Mukherjee describes her narratives as stories of broken identities and discarded languages that nevertheless, represent her characters as fired by the “will to bond” to a new community.\textsuperscript{17} It is this will to bond to a narrative of identity that distinguishes Mukherjee’s \textit{immigrant from her expatriate, whom she says is involved in “an act of sustained self removal from [his or her] native culture, balanced by a conscious resistance to total inclusion to the host society.”}\textsuperscript{18}

Critics have pointed out that, Mukherjee’s life and her work can be divided into “expatriate” and “immigrant” phases.\textsuperscript{19} She attributes her representations of South Asian migrants in Canada to the workings of an expatriate
sensibility, and views the narratives written while she has been to the United States as the product of an immigrant imagination.20 Both the expatriate and the immigrant characters face the fear of failure, as they struggle with the trauma of displacement in the New World. While the expatriate does not wish to alter what he or she perceives to be the “absolute” state of being he or she “reverts” to avoid cultural contact and interaction.21 On the other hand, the immigrant is willing to be changed into something new, into a new set of possibilities.22 Mukherjee articulates her immigrant aesthetics in terms of the dynamics of “unhousement” and “rehousement”:

\[ I \text{ write about what obsesses me the re-housement of individuals and of whole peoples... Unhousement is the breaking away from the culture into which one was born, and in which one's place in society was assured. Re-housement is the re-rooting of oneself in a new culture. This requires transformations of the self.}^{23} \]

Mukherjee describes migrancy as the process of being un-housed from one narrative of culture and identity and being re-housed in another. The semantics of “house” ends itself more readily to highlighting the constructed, or processual, nature of cultural identities. For rather than being thought of as fixed, static or “rooted” entities, cultural identities can be re-routed, re-sited-re-housed.24

Mukherjee defines her creative project in terms of an “immigrant poetics”, her work is, nevertheless, as said by critics reveal a complex orientation
"simultaneously shaped by her ethnicity, post-coloniality, gender and migrancy."²⁵

The portrayal of racial hatred and violence in Canada combined with Mukherjee’s introductory comment that Canadian xenophobia had caused her to immigrate to the United States received fire from the Canadian commentators, who declared that her optimistic portrayal of the United States was due more to her own personal sense of assimilation than any facts about the racial climates in the two countries.²⁶

Writing about the acculturation process, Bharati Mukherjee writes: “I have learned that in this era of massive diasporic movements, honorable survival requires resilience, curiosity, and compassion, a letting go of rigid ideals about the purity of inherited culture.”²⁷

The Middleman and Other Stories which won the 1988 National Book Critics Award for best fiction, cemented Mukherjee’s position as an important literary figure in the United States. Many of the stories are narrated by European Americans who are forced for the first time to adjust their own lives and traditions because of relationships they form with foreigners. Critics were also enthusiastic about the sense of hope presented in these stories that they are called a literary bridge of understanding between North Americans and its newest Asian immigrants.
The people in this collection of short stories are brave, ambitious and sometimes reckless. They dream big and in the process of realizing their dreams, abandon centuries of tradition, morality and inhibition. Coming from what is called the nothing places they have made America their New Home.28

In an interview with Alison B. Carb,29 Mukherjee points out:

The immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformation in America and at the same time they alter the country’s appearance and psychological make-up. In some ways they are like the European immigrants of earlier eras. But they have different Gods. And they come for different reasons.

Following her self-proclaimed American identity stated in her first volume of short stories Darkness, she explores the American experience through various personae. The result is a curious mix of voices and experiences that go to make up the celebration of being American as opposed to being Canadian.30

The eleven stories in this swift moving collection are about immigrants filling the American cities and campuses. They are from India, Iraq, Afghanistan, Trinidad, Uganda, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, and they are all busy creating new ties and scrambling for a living, often in the shady niches of the economy. Mukherjee reveals that the idea for the book:

...grew out of an incomplete novel about a man who served in the army in Vietnam, and who after the war, becomes a professional soldier and hires himself out in Afghanistan and Central America... He attracted me because he was a cynical person and a hustler, as many
immigrant survivors have to be. So Alfe Judah, the protagonist in the Middleman travels around the world, providing people with what they need, guns, narcotics, automobiles. The story takes place in an unnamed country in Central America where he becomes involved in a Guerilla war.\textsuperscript{31}

The story suggests that Mukherjee is eager to show the underworld of the smugglers, the middleman and other agencies who deal in undercover operations and generally escape law, indulging in legal offences and crimes against nations.

The story depicts the internal politics which occurs in Latin America and how political power uses the immigrants as source to destroy the opposite party. Alfie Judah is an Arabian who comes to Mayan and stays as an illegal immigrant at the house of Clovis T. Ransome. His one day experience with Clovis and his wife Maria enables him to understand the political tension of that place. Unknowingly he works as the middleman to supply arms to the guerillas (Indians), who take revenge upon the Americans. Through his travelling with Maria to her place, he understands the discrimination faced by the Indians and the poor life they lead. The transformation in his understanding of the conditions of the Indians allowed him not to reveal the secret plot of the guerillas of killing Clovis.
In A Wife’s Story Bharati Mukherjee deals with the visit of an Indian husband to America where his wife, Panna has drifted away from her Indianness and out of his life, and is unaffected by his unabashed, unassimilated reactions. Mrs. Bhatt has come to New York to take a two year course in “Special Ed” at Teachers College.

Freed from the strict rules of Indian society, she has even become friends with a Hungarian man with whom she goes to the theatre. When her husband comes for a short visit, he seems an unlikely stranger. She still puts on a sari, gets tickets for a depressing package tour of the city, and obligingly takes him shopping at the discount stores.\textsuperscript{32} She suppresses the Americanization of her identity, and assumes the old Indian front and plays the pliant wife. “I want to pretend with him that nothing has changed.”\textsuperscript{33}

Panna who has come to get her Ph.D., often compares her life in the United States with her past life in India. Unlike her mother and grandmother who are illiterate, she has moved away from her home country to another for educational purpose. Mukherjee highlights that at times immigrations and transformations reflect a sense of revolt against the traditional systems. If it hinders a better prospectus the immigrants are ready to break the system and move forward.
In the story Loose Ends a Vietnam Vet, who is working in Miami, as hired killer, describes the details of his job with offhand boredom, while his attention is fully engaged by the sight of a blond swami, levitating on a prayer mat above the roof of a discount clothing store.

The protagonists feel a certain emptiness within them in Mukherjee’s stories. Inspite of love there is no fulfillment and the lovers feel alienated. There is no real communication between them. Jeb and Jonda have been living together, yet the bond between them has not been established. Jonda says as much: “Nine years, for God’s sake. Nine years and what do we have?”34 Their relationship has deteriorated. “There’s no point in us talking. We don’t communicate anymore.”35 The hollowness of human relationships in American society is brought to focus yet the spirit of survival is greatest among the immigrants.

Loose Ends also test the responses of white Americans to immigrants. Marshal is hurt when his Filipino girlfriend, Blanquita, leaves him, but quickly takes another girl to assuage his loneliness. When Blanquita has a change of heart, Marshal is prepared to take her back. Marshal’s acceptance of Blanquita’s foreignness and his feelings surmount the cultural gap between them.
Immigrants from different countries try to forge harmonious relationship with members of the opposite sex in an attempt to adapt themselves to the demand of society. Here Mukherjee brings the pain of the frivolity of the man–woman relationship in American society.

In Orbiting which opens on a Thanksgiving Day the central character is Renata, an Italian-American. The story centres on two incidents: one indicating the transformation in the character of Renata, and the other presenting the hypocritical behaviour of Americans towards the Third World people.

The family gathering for a Thanksgiving Dinner offers Renata an opportunity to introduce to her parents her new lover Ro, born Roashan, an Afghan, who fled three months before from a war devastated Kabul. The Marco family are uncomfortable with Ro’s culturally specific masculinity, his potential passion and his inability to abide by the common stereotypes of American manhood. The picture he presents of America is that of a “policestate, with sudden raids, papers, detention centers, deportations and torture and death waiting in the wings.”36 But at the end of the story Renata elides Ro as a Clint Eastwood, hero and survivor.

Renata realizes that Roshan, her current lover is different from her father and Brent. With the attitude of a colonizer, she feels that she can redeem him from
his poor condition. She decides to marry him if he asks her to do so and this will give him American citizenship. "I shall teach him how to walk like an American, how to dress - better, how to fill up a room as dad does instead of melting and blending but sticking out in the Afghan way." 37 Ro's body and self like any other immigrant is made to be re-moulded and re-transformed. Paul Smith is of the view that the male body subject to a process of eroticization, destruction and finally regeneration is synonymous to the Asian immigrant who transforms himself to survive in the New World. 38

An immigrant's story may not be a successful one always. It may be full of pain and anguish as that of Blanquita in Fighting for the Rebound, Blanquita is a young beautiful aristocrat immigrant from Asia where "back in Manila she took a crash course in 'making nice' to Americans before her father sent her over". 39 While she struggles to succeed in the American society she hates the idea of having left Manila. She feels "The East is East and The West is West and never the twain shall meet". 40 Yet she soon assimilates the American way. Her relationship continuously breaks up because the institution of marriage is giving way in America. Blanquita and Griff go through the process of breaking up because Blanquita feels that Griff does not love her. Griff had received the same kind of complaint from Wendi with whom he was friendly earlier. Pathetically Griff sums it up, "Love flees, but we are struck with love's debris," and Blanquita shouts at him, "All you
Americans. ‘You are all emotional cripples. You just worry about your own measly little relationships. You don’t care how much you hurt the world.’

In The Tenant Maya Sanyal of Calcutta is in Cedar Falls, Iowa, where she has come to teach Comparative Literature. Afraid of her bachelor landlord Fred, Maya answers the “India Abroad” personals from Indian men, and puts on her best sari to go to tea at the home of another Indian Professor on campus, a Dr. Chatterji. There everything remains traditional, the old “virtues made physical.” What is common between both the characters is an experience of loneliness and anomie as erotic craving.

Maya recognizes her strangeness in America and her appalling loneliness, but she resists being recognized as a “freak” or being referred as “wounded” by Fred, a man without arms. Maya Sanyal has been wounded emotionally and spiritually by the struggle to come to terms with her new life in America which she tries to suppress, for it is impossible to adapt to life in a New World without sustaining some kind of wound to one’s spirit.

Although Mukherjee's characters only participate in public life to advance their narrow private interests, in total they are the great social; transformation affecting North America. Her characters are full of energy and determination to succeed that they take risks they would not have taken in their old comfortable homes.
A large number of stories are also told by native-born Americans and how their lives are affected by newly arrived immigrants or first generation Americans. Mukherjee presents the rapid changes in the history of the nations in which they lived.

As an immigrant herself she says that:

_When we uproot ourselves from these 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._

Fathering relates the indeterminacy of the biological relation between Jason and Eng. The father's ethical and moral responsibilities are well traced out. Mukherjee's awareness of the effects of the transnational contacts between America and its diasporic, bring home the Vietnam war by telling us a story about the impossibility of possessing oneself, one's family and the nation together at the same time.

Jason has been uprooted from his conventional American life as a family man and a teacher by his war experience, after holding on to a sense of normalcy for few years his family finally collapses and his wife and children relocate to an alternative community in the American Midwest. Encouraged by his new partner, Sharon he decides on coming to terms with the past and manages to bring his unknown daughter to America. The re-rooting and re-housing
demanded unconditional love and Jason’s caring attempts give him his sense of masculinity and to reestablish a role for himself in American society. When Eng becomes possessive of Jason, Sharon asks Jason to send Eng away from them. Jason ultimately decides to take the side of Eng by leaving Sharon.

Eng is here visualized as an outsider and the transformation of the insider can be viewed from Sharon and Jason’s point of view. According to Polly Shulman, perhaps this is the meaning of change. As traditions break down, one must try to make lives out of the pieces:

New Cosmopolitan, suspicious, but brave, they run off into ‘alien America-night, prepared for shame, disaster and glorious riches; they get them too, ... The melting pot... Assimilation implies forgetting, blotting out the past, but the past is what the present is made of.45

Jasmine, in the story by her name, is a Trinidadian who has come over to Detroit from Canada hidden in the back of the truck. Without a Green Card, she finds a job at the Plantation Motel, run by the family of Trinidad Indians. She knew that she had outsmarted the guys at the border, “now it was up to her to use her wits to do something of her life. As her daddy kept saying, girl, is opportunity come only once.”46

She was happy that she found a small clean family to live with and what made her happier was that they never asked her if she was an illegal immigrant.
She had no papers, no family, and no roots to be proud of. The journey of such immigrants into the so called land of plenty and freedom has turned them into chronic travelers, who live as travelers do, from minute to minute, dangerously free of both past and future.

Here Bharati Mukherjee explains the eagerness and enthusiasm with which the new immigrants chase the American dream. "...they are involved in the process of conquest over themselves."^47

The narrator of "Danny’s Girls", a Ugandan living in Flushing, says of his neighbour and idol, Danny, a northern Indian: "He wasn’t an enforcer, he was a charmer. He wasn’t into the big money stuff like drugs. He was a hustler and nothing more".48

He started out with bets and scalping tickets for Lata Mangeshkar or Mithun Chakarvorty concerts at Madison Square Garden. Later he fixed beauty contests and then discovered the marriage racket:

Danny took out ads in papers in India, promising guaranteed Permanent resident status in the U.S to grooms willing to proxy-marry Americans girls of Indian origin”. He arranged quite a few. The brides and grooms didn’t have to live with each other, or even meet or see each other. Sometimes the “brides” were smooth-skinned boys from neighborhood.49
Another character is the narrator's aunt, who helped his uncle's investor service for cautious Gujarati men into a full scale loan -sharking operation that financed half the Indian owned taxi medallions in Queens, flourish. "Her rates were simple: double the prime, no questions asked. Triple the prime if she smelled a risk, which she usually did... She could turn a thousand dollars while frying up a Bhaji."

The characters discussed are pragmatic, not seriously concerned with ethics, find no difficulty in adaptation for they make the best use of opportunity to make the system work for them.

Buried Lives focuses on the travails of a Sri Lankan school teacher, Mr. Venkatesan a forty-nine year old school teacher who works in Sri Lanka. He has undergone turmoil because he belongs to the Tamil community which moved from India two generations earlier. After seeing his sister being harassed by Buddhist monks and her decision to marry a guerilla triggers his anger. He reacts ferociously and using fake documents moves to East Germany via India and Moscow. His intended final destination was Canada but the German police arrest him for a crime he has not committed. In East Germany he is forced to stay in a refugee camp. Mr. Ramani a stranger helps him out and provides accommodation at his cousin Queenie's place at cheap rent. Venkatesan is attracted towards Queenie. A shot gun marriage to a naturalized German madam does not seem very promising. Her daughter a
kleptomaniac, steals the documents of a German officer and the crime is put on Venkatesan and he ends in prison. Venkatesan's future stems from a past dominated by the notion that "West is Best" and he seems ready to act any way that will ensure him a place in the West. He realized his folly when he is handed over to the police, as an illegal immigrant. Mr. Venkatesan, looking back, regretted: "... he had started out as a teacher and a solid citizen and end up a lusty criminal." His dream to achieve big in a new land remains an unfulfilled wish.

The Management of Grief is based on a real incident that happened in 1985. The terrorist bombing of an Air India Jet 182 which was going from Toronto to Bombay crashed midway when it blew up. All the 329 passengers were killed and ninety percent of them were Indians. Bharati Mukherjee and her husband met the terrorists in their cells and interviewed them. Based on that experience she wrote this story. It brings out the strength of various characters after having lost their loved ones in an act of terrorism. A lot of immigrants, mainly Indians have lost their family members in an air crash. The focus is not on the politics of disaster but on the survival attitude of Mrs. Bhave and several others. Mrs. Bhave visits her parents in India after the tragedy but returns to Canada and sets up a trust in the name of Vikram, her husband and the story ends with her saying, "I do not know how where this voyage I have begun, will end. I do not know which direction I will take." Mrs. Bhave is
admired by the Whites as a mature and self-controlled lady but she knows that
"she is a freak and a anomaly to the other Indian immigrants in Canada
because of her terrible calm."\textsuperscript{54}

The setting of these stories is in the nineteen eighties in the United States, and
the theme is the mutual metamorphoses of the characters, tearing off masks
and opening old wounds in new ways.

Mukherjee is commenting on how Indians and Sri Lankans are influenced by
the colonial past. She does not offer any resolutions or make any attempt to
change the status quo, instead she highlights the problems.\textsuperscript{55} Bharati
Mukherjee has presented the third world immigrants as ‘conquerers’ who
boldly stake their claim to their adopted and adoptive land.\textsuperscript{56} These characters
from different backgrounds are forced to make their individual cultures take a
back seat as they are busy absorbing the American milieu. Every now and
then the native flavour peeps through the special American cover. Besides
adjustment syndrome, the baser sides of American life, its license of violence,
takes a strong grip of these immigrants, leaving them in a mess. The basic
theme of all these stories, therefore becomes the struggle that the unfortunate
immigrants have to encounter and the anguish they have to undergo in the
process of adjusting to and earning a livelihood. Her characters seem to be in
a state of continuous flux, drifting from one situation to another. There is a
hollow momentariness in their lives.\textsuperscript{57}
Every story ends with a new point of departure. People are seen walking out through the open door, planning an escape, or suspended on the verge of sexual transport. The futures toward which they propel themselves and the premises of chance and rebirth are not guaranteed to be successful but a personal, material and spiritual fulfillment is achieved. There is also a deep sense of displacement and instability the main stream characters go through, in the encounter with their immigrant counterparts, and their struggle to keep their selves, and their histories comprehensible.

Mukherjee explains, that her stories are discomfiting because they challenge accepted codes of behaviour and show the change taking place in trying to assimilate. In an interview Mukherjee has clearly stated her aim in her writing, "My aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in their country." Thus the novel Jasmine created waves in the literary circles, since she claims to have illustrated her “Credo of Maximalism” of expanding the American experience which ignored the major changes America was passing through.

The novel Jasmine looks at American life from an immigrant’s point of view leaving aside the American experience of the immigrants, their legal and illegal entry into their country and its consequence as Mukherjee seems to
consider marriage to a white person as perhaps the one way of assimilation to American life. 60

Mukherjee shapes her heroine as a “fighter and adapter” who is perpetually in the process of remaking herself and her destiny. Set in the seventies and eighties when the violent separatist demands of the militant Sikhs forced many Hindus to migrate from Punjab. Jasmine centers around the experiences of Jyothi, a teenage girl Hindu widow, who travels all the way from Hasnapur, India, her feudalistic village, to America. Jasmine’s decision to leave her homeland coincides with her desire to escape the confines of her cultural identity. The little girl’s refusal to accept the astrologer’s prophecy translates into the adult narrator’s unwillingness to imprison herself within traditional, predetermined codes of feminity. 61

Focusing on Jasmine's links with her men will illustrate Mukherjee’s point of view on compulsive Indianness. With the initial placement of Jyoti Vijn in her Punjab village, we see her surrendering all individuality to her husband, Prakash. He is her giver and the determining force for her future. Prakash recreates the village girl in his preferred image of a ‘city woman.’ Jyoti becomes 'Jasmine' because he sees these attributes in her. The 'world,' as he imagines it to be, is graspable only through entry to an American college. The docile wife, 'eager and obedient,' participates uncritically in his vision. So Prakash puts all his savings into procuring admission to an obscure institute in

119
Florida and the two dreams of future conquests. Sadly, the young couple is caught in a terrorist bomb blast in Punjab. Prakash dies, Jasmine determines to live out her husband's dreams.

Jasmine puts Prakash's blue suit and admission papers into a suitcase, adds a white, widow's sari to the collection and sets off for America on a forged passport. She will either succeed in Prakash's terms, or kill herself as a belated sati. The immigration of the inner consciousness begins with the decision to re-locate in a desired but alien environment: the actual move is a physical detail. The immigrant is willing to make whatever compromises become necessary to strike roots in the new world, however much the 'new' values may collide with previously held sanctities.

Jasmine's first encounter with an American results in a son of regeneration through violence, told in the comic-gothic mode again. A caricature villain, called Half-face because of his monstrous deformities, takes Jasmine to a remote motel. She is his nameless victim. Half-face rips off her travel-worn Indian clothes and rapes her despite her many protests about being a chaste Hindu widow. He mocks at her husband's clothes, certificates, photographs and college admission papers. Half-face falls asleep promising more excitement later in the night. Jasmine cleans herself under a hot shower and pukes in the wash basin and adopts the vengeful image of Kali. She bites her tongue to draw blood, then stabs and stamps upon her molester till his
villainous blood splatters the walls and he huddles lifeless at her feet. As Kali revitalized upon American shores, Jasmine is ready for other adventures, fortunately none as violent as this. It is quite obvious that Mukherjee is using a crude symbolism for India overcoming the 'evil' forces in America. In some form or another, this configuration is visible through much of Mukherjee's writing.

One of the best periods of Jasmine's life is as 'caregiver' to the Hayes family. The charming, witty, Professor Taylor Hayes abbreviates her name to 'Jase' and helps her understand the intricacies of an American family. Her stay begins with the thought that she is in a privileged household. The novel ends with Jasmine running away with 'Professorji,' but not until several episodes have intervened. 'Professorji' helps with cooking, cleaning and putting the child to bed and Jasmine is aghast at such unmanly occupations while career-mom Wylie Hayes churns out journalistic tales for a society newspaper. The absent mom pays for a substitute at home without gauging how far the substitution (Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase) might fall in love with Taylor. Jasmine's Indianness will insist upon a reverential, platonic love for 'Professerji' even when the altered emotions become obvious. Soon Jasmine leaves the Hayes for an unknown destination. Meanwhile, she thinks she has been spotted by a terrorist informer from Punjab, and she justifies her flight by rekindling her dead husband's mission of spectacular success.
Jasmine next surfaces in the Mid-west as Jane, the live-in companion of a crippled bank officer, Bud Ripplemayer. When Jasmine first met Bud, he was 'a tall, fit, fifty year old banker, husband of Karin, father of Buddy and Vem.' Six months later, Bud is seen crippled in a shoot-out. Jane-Jasmine makes a son of patchwork family for Bud when they adopt a Vietnamese refugee boy who had survived the prison camps of Saigon by eating worms and killing off a few inmates.

Bharati Mukherjee is schematically moving her immigrant heroine through more and more unconventional definitions of 'family' in order to push the idea of American individualism. Clearly, Jasmine is to learn the value of personal choice and sense the excitement of new beginnings made possible by the immigrant status. In the Ripplemayer household, Du, the war time survivor, quickly takes to American pop music and hamburgers. He is young and unburdened by memories of a home. Jasmine thinks she has shed the past - she now speaks reasonably good English, wears American ready-mades - but her notions of 'caringgiving' are markedly those of Indian womanhood. She is self sacrificial to the ultimate: sponges Bud's sores, massages his flagging body, cooks for him, cleans his house, plays mom to Du. All mention of India is avoided, Jasmine obliterates her personal needs altogether to play whatever role Bud demands of her. She insists upon sexual intimacy so that the maimed lover, Bud, may feel assured of his manhood. While Jasmine-Jane attends to
the well-being of Bud.-Riplemayer, she harbours dreams of 'Professorji' finding her in the wild west.

Magically, 'Professorji' appears in the driveway. Jasmine tumbles joyfully into Taylor's arms. She abandons her crippled lover, her life of sacrifice and compromises. She sees her choice of Taylor in terms of India and America: and feels that she is caught between the promise of America and old world dutifulness. Adventure, risk, and transformation are desired only to reposition the stars. Jasmine's final words in the novel seem to cohere with the author's intention to celebrate the risk taking energy of immigrants.

The novel chronicles Jasmine's metamorphosis; the different identities she assumes - Jyothi, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane signify the various stages in her rapid transformation. She is determined to conquer America and make it hers. In that sense Jasmine is similar to the countless American conversion narratives, stories that document the incremental Americanization of the new immigrant. Mukherjee's chameleon like protagonist uproots herself from India and despite, initial setbacks; successfully re roots herself in the United States. Given a world where violence and bloodshed, exploitation and persecution are constants, Jasmines plurality of selves is her only strategy for survival. Knowing only too well that there are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself.
Jasmine views her multiple selves with detachment that has been forged in pain. But beneath this carefully maintained distance is the terrible agony of a woman who cannot free herself from the collective memory of her haunting past. Having lived through “hideous times” Jasmine, in her arduous journey of survival, has accomplished the rare mission of transcending the boundaries of a unitary self and identifying with all the nameless victims of gender, culture, class, and imperialism. The narrative ends on a note of optimism where Jasmine, “cocooning a cosmos” in her pregnant belly, and about to “re-position her stars” again, is ready to plunge into another life and another of transformation.  

Shakuntala Bharvani states: “But like the proverbial phoenix, Jasmine rises from her ashes, as it were”. Jasmine has acculturated and can adjust to any situation though she had to face many cultural conflicts.

Mukherjee seems to favour the assimilationist posture hinted in “The Middleman and Other Stories” and in “Jasmine”. She is sensitive to the complexities implicit in the potential catharsis of exile through assimilation, or what she calls “the fluid identity and the will to bond oneself to a new community.” Here is the experience of a Bengali woman intellectual in one of the short stories:

Maya’s taken some big risks, made a break in her parents ways. She’s done things a woman from Ballygunga Park Road doesn’t do, even in
fantasies...She has a job, equity and three friends she can count on her emergencies. She is an American citizen. But.  

The "but" resonates. It seems to suggest that assimilation may be the best solution in theory, but that life, regrettfully is not theoretical. Diasporic experience is quintessentially multicultural, multi-ethnic, multivalent-a kind of cultural post-modernism that cannot be comprehended in terms of clear cut alternatives. Most of Mukherjee's protagonists are women and gender is her preferred site for the exploration of the transformations of the migrant consciousness. Her trenchant criticism of oppressive patriarchal practices in the old country, India, as well as her celebration of the "redemptive" liberationist postures subsequently adopted by those women when they emigrate to the United States have frequently been noted. In the telling of these stories, codes and myths from the old and new environments are collapsed into each other. "Sati" the now illegal practice of immolation of widows on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands, becomes a metaphor for the immolation of the old self and the passage into a new dimension of selfhood. Jasmine burns the "dishonoured old clothes" after murdering Half-Face, the man who raped her – significantly this marks her illegal entry into the United States. 

We also find women killing in order to release themselves from the bondage of men in order to move forward towards self realization. Another implied
comparison is to the Goddess Kali, (the image of semi-naked Kali with her
 Garland of skulls, as worshipped particularly in Mukherjee’s state of West
 Bengal, scimitar up, raised and gory tongue out stretched as she steps on the
 prostrate body of Shiva) one of the symbols in Hindu mythology of cosmic
 female power. The use of these cultural motifs militates against the notion of
 a clean break between the old and the new. They point instead to the fluidity
 of the transition and the essential identity of the two worlds—Kali is the
 emblem of the ‘liberated “woman and the liberated woman is the aspect of
 Kali.

 Bharati Mukherjee writes about a race of first generation immigrants and the
diasporic experience of such people is usually dystopic. Mukherjee’s narrative
strategy is to elide the crisis inherent in dysfunction by subsuming all tensions
under the epistemic umbrella of Hindu inclusiveness. But her rhetoric of
 acculturation, based as it is on the opposition of sets of stereotypes, in effect
fragments the grounds of praxis. It is reflexive, perhaps of the immigrant’s
 urgent need to forge likenesses between his past and his present lives, to
appropriate the new icons and thereby to belong but it is not reflective of the
experience itself. The migrants are thus presented as often faltering,
struggling, sometimes refusing and at other times painfully adjusting, while
all the while endeavoring to come to terms with their history.

Wong observes:
Mukherjee is perhaps the first Asian American writer to exhibit a full awareness of the global context of contemporary Asian immigration: she... looks beyond the push-pull between two nations to acknowledge the reality of the world economic system, and sets her tales against a background of intertwined, transnational, economic activities and mass uprooting caused by proxy wars in the Third World.67

Bharati Mukherjee is an investigative pioneer of innovative terrains, practices and literatures – co-existent with her wide-ranging mission to discover new worlds. Her foremost concern, as a writer has been the life of the South Asian expatriates and the dilemma of “acculturation and assimilation”.

Mukherjee’s characters are often autobiographical portraits of her interpretation and reaction of her experience as an expatriate in Canada which was a “cultural and psychological ‘mongrelization’”68 and her mounting identification of the self as “an immigrant nobody” 69 in America.

A sociological theory, proposed by Glazer and Moynihan arose in the sixties. They proposed “a melting pot paradigm”70 which argue that migrants are more prone to assimilate to a common (American) model but at the same time increasingly retain their ethnicity more than ever.

Mukherjee’s works builds up the proposal of the amalgamation, combination and absorption of the East in the West. It is not the uncertainties of the new continent that challenge her characters but the uncertainties of life in an
unknown land. Their journey to the new world very often is a sort of "regeneration through violence"71 and the ultimate realization in America "that it won’t disintegrate."72

All the immigrants seem to be displaced, but the displacement manifests itself in varying ways and degrees. Some are accustomed to lapsing into nostalgia and regret. Others are continuously haunted by the past and are unable to strike a balance between the two cultures, but apparently continue to live according to normal social expectancy. A few whom life has not treated well become, delirious, demented, paranoid and insomniac:

Their breaking point often presented as a denouement is sometimes violent, sometimes weird. They are all individuals acutely conscious of their identities engaged in a quest for self-discovery in an alien land. Caught between two cultures, they are curious mixtures—-. Their primary urge or rather necessity, to belong remains unfulfilled. They have left but not arrived, and reminds an Indian reader of the predictment of a character, from Indian mythology, named Trishanku who like them was stuck in dead space.73

References

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40. Ibid. p.80.
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