Chapter-3

Short Stories of Bharati Mukherjee

Bharati Mukherjee as a novelist and a short story writer deals with the problems of transition which brings the state of displacement, separation, rootlessness, cultural conflict or biculturalism and it cultivates the ocean of diasporic ethos in her works. If we look at her characters in novels and short stories, we can find them as a harbinger of diasporic consciousness in shape of sufferings, pains, predicaments, loneliness, homelessness and rootlessness. The present chapter will delve deep in highlighting such diasporic ethos of cultural conflict of Indian as well as American cultures in her short stories. Bharati Mukherjee has published the collection of short stories *Darkness* and *The Middleman and Other Stories* which will be discussed in this chapter.

*Darkness* is a collection of twelve short stories which reveals the miseries and sufferings of Indian people in Canada where violence, rape and fear are rampant everywhere.

The first story of this collection “The World According to Hsu” is a much less shocking, more ironic, and, nonetheless, despairing story. In it Ratna, a Eurasian woman of Indian descent, and her husband Graeme Clayton, a Canadian Professor of Psychology at McGill University, Montreal, are on a holiday trip at an island off the Coast of Africa. The title of the story has been derived from an article by Kenneth J. Hsu in *The Scientific American* which Graeme is reading at his holiday resort. Graeme
has gone there to see the Southern Cross and to persuade Ratna to move from French-dominant Montreal to English-dominant Toronto where the University has offered him a chair in Personality Development. Ratna goes “to take stock of a life that had until recently seemed to her manageably capricious.”

Both of them are there to enjoy the old fashioned vacation on the shores of the vast new Ocean. They have planned to pick shells and feed lemurs on the balcony of a hotel managed by a paunchy Indian; visit one colonial museum or two. However, they face another kind of adventure which is totally unwarranted and uncalled for. The beautiful island is entrapped by agitators. They face violent demonstrations and Mr. and Mrs. Clayton are compelled to remain confined in their hotel. Clayton’s casual reference of having accepted the Toronto assignment unnerves Ratna who feels terrified to live in such environment of racial hatred. She thinks:

In Toronto, she was not Canadian, not even Indian. She was something called, after the imported idiom of London, a Paki. And for Pakis, Toronto was hell. (p.41)

Ratna develops the peculiar experience of living as lost souls like other expatriates who always fights for her real identity. The truth is that she lives in the unknown obscure island where she cannot escape and have to face the consequences of being half- ‘the dominant half’ as Indian of mixed origin.

While the Clayton couple is caught in the curfew of the island and is forced to remain within the confines of Hotel Papillon, Ratna is not afraid of the violence outside. She is, rather, happy that the curfew outside delays her departure to Toronto. She recalls the harrowing tales of Pakis being
discriminated against in Toronto. Graeme Clayton is hardly aware of her emotional upheaval. She cannot forget how

A week before their fight, a Bengali woman was beaten and nearly blinded on the street. And week before that an eight-year-old Punjabi boy was struck by a car announcing on its bumper: KEEP CANADA GREEN. PAINT A PAKI. (p.47)

Graeme tries to cheer her up saying “It won’t happen to you.” And again, “Look—violence is everywhere. Toronto’s the safest city on the continent” (p.47). At this she promptly retorts: “Sure”, she said, “for you” (p.47).

Nothing can keep her fears out and another event flashes in her mind. She recalls how “An Indian Professor’s wife was jumped at red light, right in her car. They threw her groceries on the street. They said Pakis shouldn’t drive big car.” (p.47) Ratna’s fears correspond to the experiences of the author herself which finally resulted in her departure from Canada. For Ratna her foreignness is better than going to Toronto. Here at this island, at least, she is not the “other”, a dark-skinned Euracian. She can enjoy her dinner and have her time with other tourists without any apprehension.

At the end of the story motley tourists, confined to the seedy hotel room due to curfew, dine while sharing with one another their reactions to the happening outside. In the meantime, when her husband defies the curfew and stumbles out to search for the Southern Cross,

She saw that label on the bottle read: ‘Cote de Cassandre’. A superior red table wine that no one had ever heard of: perhaps the lone competent industry on the island .... She poured herself another glass, feeling for the moment at home in that collection of Indians and Europeans babbling in English and remembered
dialects. No matter where she lived, she would never feel so at home again. (pp.55-56)

While the critic Christine Gomez considers that the world view of Hsu here becomes a ‘metaphor’, he also thinks that “Hsu’s one-world weltansschuug” becomes an “unattainable ideal”. His idea is that “There is perhaps a longing for the world according to Hsu, a one world free from cultural collisions, dilemmas and separation.”  

But unfortunately that proves a mere hollow dream. Here we have a world that is based on sharp racial distinctions. There is a feeling of “otherness” for those ‘Pakis’ who have come to Canada covering almost half of the world.

The end of the story raises problematic questions regarding the vision and judgment of the novelist. C.L. Chua comments:

If being “at home” means feeling at ease, secure and free from conflict, then she is deluding herself. The inescapable fact remains that Ratna is shunned as a ‘white rat’ in India (p.44) and scorned as a ‘Paki’ in Canada; furthermore, she is clearly an alien on that island, surrounded by tourists (derogatorily described as “that collection”) who are without homes there, babbling at each other without a common unifying language, in a country without political stability. Therefore, although the final sentence of the story appears to be too easily optimistic- it could alternatively be read as an ironic and despairing assessment by Mukherjee that Ratna will never really be ‘at home’ anywhere.

The story deserves to be called a fine expatriate study with all the apprehensions and duality that shroud an individual in an alien atmosphere.

The other story “Isolated Incidents” marks a departure in that the expatriate experience is viewed from the point of view of a native Canadian.
Ann Vane, whose job is to file complaints from immigrants against problems concerning Human Rights. Two specific cases of racial discrimination in Toronto are brought to her notice- that of Dr. (Miss) Supariwala and John Mohan Persawd.

Doctor (Miss) Supariwala is “a stern, stocky woman of forty three with doctorates from Western Ontario and Bombay” who claims “to have been passed over at job interviews in favour of lesser candidates. She is a Canadian citizen, has published numerous articles and honoured with a few research grants as well. Her promptness, discipline and preparedness are beyond question, but she is denied the job on flimsy grounds. The interviewers think “students would not relate easily to her, some might complain of her accent, her methodological stiffness, her lack of humor”(p.79). Miss Supariwala thinks that she is a victim of racial discrimination and probably right so. She represents her claim like other Canadians, which irritates Ann who thinks it strange that even after facing so much of problems these expatriates still find reasons for staying on in Canada.

The other case is that of Persawd, John Mohan and relates to a subway assault- “Queen Street Station this time: chipped teeth, cut lips, broken nose, blackened eyes. Cuts abrasions”(p.82). His frustration explodes in these words:

“Canadians are mean as hell”, says John Mohan Persawd.
“Life is hopeless man, no justice, no redness.”

To this Ann replies:
“I don’t know about that …. If this had happened in New York you’d have been left for dead.”

Persawd’s relative lawyer interrupts:

“Correction, Miss Vane …. If this had happened in New York, he’d have been mugged for his money, not racially assaulted.” (p.84)

Violence in America, Mukherjee implies, is ubiquitous and terrible, but at least it has no tinge of partiality on ethnic grounds. Ann’s defensive posture does not mean that she is at all blind to these atrocities. In the beginning “she had tried earnestly to correct the nation’s wrong. Now she saw problems only as a bureaucrat. Deal only with the sure things. Pass the other off. Get documentation. Promise nothing” (p.81). Ann Vane’s detached view caused partly by her job-constraints, is tinged with irony. She knows the futility of her work in documenting such cases. Nothing would ultimately come out of it at all:

Torontonains were proud of their subway, their politeness, proud of their moral spotlessness. This, after all, was not New York. Assault on John Mohan Persawd and dozens like him would always be considered isolated incidents and not racial. (pp.82-83)

Thus, Mukherjee stresses in this story that in Canada the fate of immigrants is sealed and they can never ‘feel at home’ there. They are destined to suffer and live a hellish life and cases of discrimination or hostility towards the visible minority will not be related to racism but will always be ignored as “Isolated Incidents”, not worthy of serious import.
In “Hindus”, written in Canada but set in the U.S.A. Mukherjee juxtaposes an expatriate against an immigrant to draw out the contrast. Leela Lahiri, the narrator of the first person narrative, reveals an immigrant’s ‘fluid identity’. She proudly declares, “I am an American Citizen” (p.133) but she is also proud of her Bengali Brahmin past. H.R.H. Maharajah Patwant Singh of Gotlah is an obvious expatriate who nurses his grievances against India. When Maharajah and Leela meet after two years, the Maharajah is writing his memories to record his pains and grievances. Leela, on the other hand, celebrates rebirth in a new world but a cautious reader finds traces of Indian sensibility in her. For her, being a newborn immigrant, does not mean totally denying her Hindu past. Leela frankly acknowledges her duality – her basic Hindu imagination and her immigrant American sensibility.

She cannot tolerate being called a ‘niece’ of Maharajah Patwant Singh because she is not blind to her ‘caste-superiority’ in India: “I was a Bengali Brahmin; Maharajas ….. were frankly beneath me, by at least one caste” (p.133). She is a rebel who has married to Derek, a whiteman, and has ‘broken cast etiquette.’ She disclaims ‘any recent connection with India’ but still for her ‘home’ is India, as she adds “I have not been home in ages” (p.133). She is aware of her origin from Vishnu’s knee. We see her as a well-settled immigrant who can marry a whiteman and can separate at will (as she does with Derek) though a typical Indian Hindu wife can never think of separation from her husband. In two years, she has “tried to treat the city (New York City) not as an island of dark immigrants but as a vast sea in which new Americans like myself (herself) could disappear and resurface at
will” (p.136). She neither complains against India nor finds Indianness as a barrier in her adjustment.

Patwant Singh’s ‘negative nostalgia’ manifested in his character offers a foil to her thinking. He is a typical expatriate and the ghost of past haunts his ways wherever he goes. He is not at ease with the ‘dhoti’ wallas of his country:

The country has changed totally …. Crude rustic types have taken over. The ‘dhoti-wallas’ …. They would wrap themselves in loincloths of it got them more votes. No integrity, no finesse. The Country’s gone to dogs. (p.135)

He cannot forget those insults that were heaped upon him in his country. When he thinks of his days in India, his sense of loss and deprivation surfaces to the floor:

The country has no respect anymore. The country has nothing. It has driven us abroad with whatever assets we could salvage. (p.135)

And again,

“I have nothing”, he spat. “They’ve stripped me of everything. At night I hear the jackals singing in the courtyard of my palace.” (pp.135-36)

He finds solace only in writing – “writing is what keeps me from going through death’s gate. There are nights…. ” (p.138) though he leaves it only unfinished. Patwant Singh’s past is an impediment in the process of his cultural absorption. Leela’s Indian convictions are too tough to be shaken:

As Indian woman is brought up to please. No matter how passionately we like bodies with our new countries, we never escape the only days. (p.139)
This fact refers to the Indianness of Bharati Mukherjee also. She has always tried to negate her Indianness in her statements and interviews but her subtle sense of Indian values is always implicitly in the background of her writings. She is a divided self between her expatriation and immigration as well as between Indian and American.

Bharati Mukherjee uses language as a metaphor in this story for an imposed sense of “otherness”. One of the characters Lisa comments on Leela’s language as ‘Hindu’- this irritates Leela and she thinks of refuting her. However she realizes:

No matter what language I speak it will come out slightly foreign, no matter how perfectly I mouth it. There is a whole world of us now, speaking Hindu. (p.140)

The above statement shows that Leela with all her attempts at assimilation remains the “other” for native Canadians.

Except for “Courtly Vision”, the remaining stories in this collection were written after Mukherjee’s migration to the U.S.A. and their protagonists are mainly immigrants. If the expatriate sensibility is probed in these stories, it is to its disadvantage.

In “Angela”, the protagonist is an orphan girl from Dhakka subjected to war-time atrocities in the past and now adopted by the Brandons in the U.S.A. Angela is a well-settled immigrant with no nostalgic longing for her native country, Bangladesh and no hatred for it either. She continually draws contrasts between Bangladesh and America with a cool detachment and total objectivity:
I am Angela the Angel. Angela was sister Stella’s name for me. The name I was born with is lost to me, the past is lost to me. I must have seen a lot of wickedness when I was six, but I can’t remember any of it. The rapes, the dogs chewing on dead bodies, the soldiers. Nothing.(p.18)

One of her sisters (Daughter of her New Parents) Delia is in coma and is being attended by Doctor from Goa, India, Vinny Menezies. Vinny loves Angela. “Only a doctor could love this body, she thinks, aware of her scars”(p.19). In America, ‘for less than two years’(p.9), Angela has been ‘forced to assimilate’(p.17): A high-school cheer leader, she speaks of her newly acquired Iowan ‘sisters’ and her ‘Dad’ she knows how to soothe grief with Diet Coke(p.9) and she has learned to enjoy a Sunday pork roast because ‘pigs aren’t filthy creatures as they are back home’(p.14).

Vinny Menezies is the most sympathetic of Mukherjee’s Indian physicians; he is both innocuous and ridiculous. He is depicted through the point of view of Angela, the teenaged orphan high school student. This immigrant physician from Bombay is old fashioned but cultured. He routinely appreciated Angela’s Sunday afternoon piano playing with exclamations of “bravo”(p.17). In manner of the old country, Menezies seeks a bride in a marriage of convenience. He seeks to combine this search with altruism. Therefore, the object of his affections becomes the Old World Orphan Angela. As Mitali R. Pati comments:

Mukherjee’s art of characterization depends heavily upon contrasting the public and private selves of her principal character.….⁴
It is remarkable to note how Dr. Menezies is different from Menezies, the lover:

   In the hospital he seems a man of circumspect feelings, but on Sunday afternoon when we drive (as Angela discloses) around and around in his Scirocco, his manner changes. He seems raw, aimless, lost.(p.13)

Again, we see that the well-settled American narrator (Angela) is different from the one who is cherishing the nightmares of 1971 war of Bangladesh. Salvaging the childhood memories, she recalls:

   Delinquents and destitutes rush me. Legless kids try to squirm out of ditches. Packs of Pariah dogs who have learned to gorge on dying infant flesh, soldiers, with silvery bayonets, they keep coming at me, plunging their knives through my arms and shoulders. I dig my face into the muddy walls of a trough too steep to climb. Leeches, I can feel leeches gorging on the blood of my breasts.(pp.19-20)

But still she is always hopeful of her better future. She is always aware that she has been “saved for a purpose”(p.19).

   In her narrative; Angela feels no passion for Menezies, but being an orphan from the East, she realizes that her middle-aged suitor offers financial security and the secret desire of his raw and wild heart. As she contemplates accepting Menezies, she is aware of her own body mutilated in childhood by soldiers. The South Asian immigrant woman in Angela betrays no passion for Menezies, nor any desire for a more erotic relationship for herself. The cutting off of her nipples at the age of six has left her unable to feel positively about her own sexuality. Between the war atrocity which she has left behind and the powerful call of the traditional male in Menezies,
Angela remains enmeshed in the net of Old World patriarchy. Her belief in her own assimilation into the American ‘melting pot’ is therefore ironic.

In Mukherjee’s *Darkness* many women immigrants are wives who accompany their husbands overseas and have no voice in whatever happens. Two such women are the characters in the stories “The Lady from Lucknow” and “Visitors”. Nafeesa Hafeez the narrator and heroine of the story “The Lady from Lucknow” is a daughter of an army doctor. After partition the family of Nafeesa moves to Rawalpindi in Pakistan from Lucknow. At 17, she marries a “good man” (p.24) Iqbal, who works for IBM and she has followed him from Pakistan to Lebanon, Brazil, Zambia, France and eventually to Atlanta, Georgia. She has two children. Iqbal feels very insecure in America and refers to himself as “not quiet” (p.25). On one occasion while making fun of the American preoccupation with sex, “he lungs for …(her) breasts in mock passion” (p.24).

As far as Nafeesa is concerned, though hers was an arranged marriage at seventeen, she has always yearned for passionate pleasures defying all taboos like the girl next door in Lucknow. Thus her “first- person native indirectly contrasts the puritanical upbringing of Islamic women with her own craving for romantic and sexual fulfillment.” In America Nafeesa tries for a life of passion by loving a 65- year old white man. Committing adultery in the absence of their husbands is a common affair among these immigrant women. These ‘discretions are deliberate’ and only those women are “caught in mid-shame’ who want to get out.” (p.25) Nafeesa thinks herself very lucky in winning the love of a white man, James Beamish, her white lover, is an ardent flatterer. He makes Nafeesa feel “beautiful, exotic, responsive.” (p.25)
Her liaison with Beamish is not only an attempt to express her independence and individuality, but it also gives her an illusion that by carrying on an illicit affair she is somehow identifying herself with America. She is mildly disillusioned, however, when after she has gone to the trouble of acquiring a front closing bra and silky new underwear for her first assignation, her lover wears “an old T-shirt and lemon-pale boxer shorts” (p.30). This is not the drama she had anticipated. Mukherjee’s South Asian Madame Bovary’s romance crumbles as she is discovered in bed unexpectedly by Beamish’s wife who is too used to her husband’s infidelities to care. This confrontation, however, far from being explosive or dramatic turns out to be a ridiculous affair. Kate, Beamish’s wife, sees her as an exotic capable of provoking only a passing interest in her husband. Here we see that Nafeesa changes nothing by her passion and has no desire to die either. One recalls that women’s adultery can be severely punished by the Old Islamic law of the Lucknows lady’s origins. In Atlanta, there is no anger, no violence, no vengeance as there might be in Lucknow where the beaten romantic teenage girl died of a broken heart in Nafeesa’s opening flashback.

Suddenly Nafeesa sees herself caught in a different patriarchal paradigm that of the white man’s coloured mistress in a new version of the colonial era. Her realization of her own exploitation as a sexual object is ironic because she has only exchanged the polygamous code of Islamic tradition for white male patriarchy in America. Mitali R. Pati comments:

The conflict in the social and cultural codes of the East and the West, the old and the new shows the hopelessly binary nature of all human desire. For the diasporic Indian, love symbolizes the anarchy of the self.6
This explains the situation of both Nafeesa and Vinita, the heroine of the story “Visitors”. Both try to break the taboos of their traditional cultures and ultimately end up in a mess.

In “Visitors”, Vinita, a beautiful Indian girl, accepts an arranged marriage, and six days after wedding, she takes “an Air India flight to Citizenship in the New World” (p.162). Her husband Sailen Kumar, “a well-mannered and amiable-looking man, a St. Stephen’s graduate who had gone on to London University and Harvard and who now worked for a respectable investment house in Manhattan” (p.162). He lives in a two-bedroom condominium with access to gym, pool and sauna across the river, is ambitious and intends to become a millionaire in New York City. He and his friends are concerned, however, about becoming “too American” (p.165), no doubt because their nostalgic bond with India gives them a kind of security, and because they realize that their racial and cultural difference makes it impossible for them to be completely assimilated in the New World. Consequently, while the men go out to work in Manhattan, the women are expected to remain at home and create a form of India in their expensive condominiums.

Now and then Vinita refers to her experience in this New World. She is bewildered at the fast pace of life in America:

In America, at least in New Jersey, everyone Vinita meets seems to acknowledge a connection between merit and reward. Everyone looks busy, distraught from over work. Even the building’s doorman, she worried about Castro, the doorman such faith in causality can only lead to betrayal. (p.163)
Vinita had expected that married life in a new country with no relatives around, should change her. She had thought “overnight she would become mature, complex, fascinating: a wife instead of a daughter” (p.164). She notices a change but this change, far from being positive, is something anarchic:

It’s nothing specific. She considers fear of newness a self-indulgence, quite unworthy of someone who has wanted all along to exchange her native world for an alien one. The slightest possibility of disruption pleases her.(p.164)

The world of America, which she knows mainly from the soap operas she watches on television while her husband is at work, seems to offer adventure and make up one’s own rules. It also offers the kind of passion she does not know with her husband, and she often imagines herself “on the television screen, in the roles of afternoon wives taken in passion” (p.171). She is content at first to experience this excitement vicariously, until she receives a visit, in her husband’s absence from a young Indian student who comes wearing sneakers and a baseball cup and advises her to forget certain traditional ways of doing things in favour of “American shortcuts.” (p.169)

She realizes that rules in America are different from those of back home. An Indian wife would never allow any stranger in her house when her husband is away. She lets Rajiv Khanna come in and to take liberty (to some extent only) with her. She does not feel like calling her husband. She has heard Mrs. Thapar saying that very afternoon:

We may have minted a bit of money in this country, but that doesn’t mean we’ve ourselves become Americans. You can see
we’ve remained one hundred percent simple and “deshi” in our customs.(p.168)

She also wants to remain ‘deshi’ but her duality is clear from the way she enjoys the freedom of America. Her ‘deshi’ attitude will not let her loose to enjoy the company of that good looking young man. She knows that “letting him in might lead to disproportionate disaster” (p.168). Still in her heart of hearts she wishes to enjoy the licentiousness of American society.

After her visitor departs, Vinita puts on a purple silk sari, cooks for her husband and the friends he brings home without warning her a six course dinner and ecstatically “serves the men and manipulates them with her youth and beauty and her unmaskable charm. She has no idea that she is on the verge of hysteria” (p.176). While her husband treats her like the queen of his heart, she is never really involved in his life, and his relationship with her is based on the erotic rather than the passionate love. She is his goddess, but he controls her completely, especially when she exerts her erotic power over him. In India, Vinita might have had to fulfill simultaneously the roles of goddess and whore to her husband; she might never have experienced passion in her marriage because such emotions were irrelevant to her status as wife, but she would not have been taunted, as she was in America, by the possibility of passion and self-expression. Mukherjee emphasizes Vinita’s repression in America by imprisoning her in the phony schizophrenic American/Indian condominium, while allowing her visitors to come from and go out into exterior world.
“A Father” is another fine story in the collection dealing with the problem of reconciliation between the Indian and the American values. Mitali R. Pati comments:

The self-division experienced by Mukherjee’s Indian men as they encounter the sexual liberation of the new country leads to acts of shame, madness, even violence.…

The above statement is aptly suitable, in the context of Mr. Bhowmick, the hero of the story. We see how a “patriarch” is brought to shame, violence, even madness in America when he contends with his bright, unmarried engineer daughter’s artificially inseminated pregnancy. Bhowmick, formerly a provincial from Ranchi, is a henpecked husband who begins by living in awe of his clever professional daughter Babli. Dominated by his wife, whose dowry was Bhowmick’s education at Carnegie Tech., he emigrated to the United States because of his wife’s nagging. Despite his lack of power Bhowmick worships Kali, the goddess of wrath and vengeance. In “A Father”, Mr. Bhowmick wonders how he could “tell these bright mocking women”, the sceptical wife and daughter,

…that in the 5.43 a.m. darkness, he sensed invisible presence: gods and snakes frolicked in the master bedroom, little white sparks of cosmic static crackled up the legs of his pajamas. Something was out there in the dark, something that could invent accidents and coincidences to remind mortals that even in Detroit they were no more than mortal.(p.61)

How, indeed, can he speak of quintessential Hindu darkness when his wife shouts in idiomatic American English, “Hurry it up with the prayers” (p.60) and his engineer daughter Babli- graduate of Georgia Tech – tells him: “Face
it, Dad …You have an effect deficit?” (p.61) In the pre-dawn darkness he prays to the image of Kali, ‘the patron goddess of his family’ in Ranchi (p.60). Babli is not tolerant of superstitions as Mr. Bhowmick hears her muttering: “This Hindu myth stuff is like a series of supergraphics” (p.65). Thus while Mr. Bhowmick is predominantly an expatriate and his wife and daughter are well-adjusted immigrants. He is nostalgic about the feminine and tender women of his youth. He is disappointed that his daughter Babli, an electrical engineer, is not feminine enough for him. No doubt that Mr. Bhowmick is “a modern man, an intelligent man”(p.64) but still he is prudent enough “to know that some abiding truth lies bunkered within each wanton Hindu superstition” (p.64). He is always caught in the mess of his native culture but still trying hard to cope with the new one. A dozen times a day he repeats the words “compromise” and “adaptability”, and always tries to find a common thread of synthesis between “new-world reasonableness and old-world beliefs” (p.64). When he discovers his daughter’s pregnancy, though traditional thoughts of the family honour upset him he is happy that someone found her feminine and lovable. His shock turns to violence when he hears that she has gone in for artificial insemination out of hatred for men:

Who needs a man? The father of my baby is a bottle and a syringe. Men louse up your lives. I just want a baby. (p.72)

He starts attacking his pregnant daughter with a rolling pin. The eruption of violence in him is due to his inability to reconcile the wistful expatriate in himself with the immigrant in his militantly feminist daughter. Thus the inadequacy of the expatriate and his inability to cope with immigrant life has been fully brought out in this story.
Some of Mukherjee’s best stories show how immigrants who should support actually exploit each other. In ‘Nostalgia’ for example, the protagonist is Dr. Manny Patel, a psychiatric resident at a state hospital in Queens, New York. He has chosen to settle in the U.S.A. and has married a white lady, Camille. He resents being called a Paki scum even by a schizophrenic like Mr. Horowitz. Quite ironically the author comments:

He was not one nostalgia; he was not an expatriate but a patriot. (p.98)

While all through the story we encounter a man who searches every solution to his problems in Indian context. He enjoys his American house, his car, loves his family and his acquisitiveness entwined with love. America has been very good for him but still:

He lived with the fear that his father would die before he could free himself from the crazies of New York and go home. He missed his parents, especially his father, but he could not explain this loss to Camille. (p.99)

He is the only child of his parents born out of the blessings of Goddess Parvati in their old age. So he thinks that he should go to India to look after his parents, if not out of love for his parents at least but with a sense of duty to the goddess. Now and then he reflects that “money, luxuries: he could have both in India, too” (p.100). One day in such a mood, he drives to Manhattan. Amid the chaos of New York’s “Little India” on that busy afternoon he is smitten by a youthful sales girl in an Indian grocery store. Nostalgia for the sub continental romantic fantasies of his youth grips Patel. His romantic desires have been long suppressed in his stable marriage with the nurse Camille (who has done most of the pursuing during their
courtship). Seeking an escape from his expensive and highly organized life in the suburbs, Patel experiences a sharp desire to sleep with the Indian beauty Padma.

Manny Patel’s adultery is the literal rendering of a series of South Asian cultural clichés. Padma is named after the tropical flower, ‘lotus’. She has a curvacious body like a Bombay film star. The omniscient third-person narrator stresses that Patel is a loving husband and father, dominated by acquisitiveness with nostalgia for the style of life in the old country where he continues to own a home. He is divided in his desire to be within both cultures, Eastern and Western, simultaneously.

After a stereotypical spicy dinner in an expensive Indian restaurant, Patel’s inevitable sexual encounter with Padma takes place. However, this encounter is destined to be a painful experience for Dr. Patel, because Padma is nothing else but a prostitute. Right in the beginning a doubt creeps in the mind of Dr. Patel when Padma agrees for a dinner with him but Dr. Patel could not resist this temptation of sleeping with an Indian empress:

The Indian food, an Indian woman in bed, made him nostalgic … He wished he had married an Indian woman. One that his father had selected. He wished he had any life but the one he had chosen.(p.111)

However, Dr. Patel’s erotic daydream disintegrates, in the typical style of Bombay films, with the entry of the card board villain- the waiter who is a pimp of Padma. Dr. Patel is blackmailed by the waiter for raping the so-called “underage”(p.111) Padma. After writing a cheque for $ 700 and promising a medical note for immigration officers, Patel defecates in the sink
of the hotel bathroom and write “WHORE” (p.113) on the mirror and floor with his own faces. Thus we see that expatriate element of nostalgia is exposed as a weakness, a chink in Dr. Patel’s immigrant armour in this story.

The Middleman and Other Stories deals with theme of diasporic feelings which is reflected through the dream of America as a land of fortune, freedom and happiness of characters in the stories. The writer considers herself as a middleman or an interpreter between two cultures where immigrants of “Third World” are in a process of ‘uprooting’ and ‘re-rooting’ that Clark Blaise, her novelist husband, in his book Resident Indian, calls as “unhousement” and “rehousement” (p.648). In the stories, her characters have to pay a heavy price of being ‘American’ and they belong to different countries of world like India, China, Italy, Hungary, Iraq, Trinidad, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Germany, Philippines, Vietnam and Afghanistan. Protagonists are generally women characters who are crazy and inclined to have a sexual relationship which finally results in the sexual misadventure. In these stories sex becomes a bond of love which allures them to come to America for seeking happiness and fortune. It is a tragic situation of characters which provides them the sufficient stock of diasporic experience of exile and alienation.

The title story “The Middleman” narrates the experiences of Alfie Judoh, a hustler of Middle Eastern Jewish descent. It is a first person narrative. He quite humorously talks about his adventures before coming to America. He is a widely traveled person who has come across several misadventures. As he himself confides:
I’ve seen worse. I’ve seen Baghdad, Bombay, Queens—and now this moldering spread deep in Mayan country. Aztecs, Toltecs, mestizos, even some bashful whites with German accents. All that and a lot of Texans, I’ll learn the ropes.8

Presently he works as a middleman and earns his living “from things that fall” (p.3). He supplies guns to guerrillas in Mayan country.

Bharati Mukherjee tells Sibyl Steinberg about the origin of this little story. It came about because “I happened to be in Costa Rica at time when American and Central American history was being made.”9 In another interview she explains the inspiration behind the book:

It 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. While I was working on that novel a character with a minor role a Jow has relocated from Baghdad to Bombay to Brooklyn, took control and wrote his own story. He attracted me because he was a cynical person and a hustler, as many immigrant survivors have to be. So Alfie 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 Guerrilla war.10

Alfie Judah is an interesting person. He does not hide anything from us and confesses even his greatest weaknesses: “I must confess my weakness. It’s women” (p.4). His history is that of an uprooted person. He has been forced to do works which are illegal and dangerous. His present citizenship is also always in jeopardy and his “dealings can’t stand too much investigation” (p.5). Though he regrets “There are aspects of American life I came too late for and will never understand” (p.5) still he is a fighter to the
core who does everything for his survival. He is a middleman in two senses - in his profession and in his life also. He has connection with underworld and supplies them arms and ammunition, thus working as a middleman between the manufacturers and buyers of the war material. At the same time, he is used by his master T. Ransome as a middleman between his wife Maria and her lover Bud. Because “Clovis (Ransome) wanted a cut of Bud’s action. But Bud refused and that got Clovis mad. Clovis even offered money, but Bud said no way. Clovis pushed me on him, so he took but he still didn’t budge.” (p.16)

As a result, Maria starts loving Alfie who is not very enthusiastic in his response because the ghost of past always haunts him. He cannot forget his Iraqi experience where he had seen “A young woman, possibly adulterous but certainly bold and brave and beautiful enough to excite rumors of promiscuity, was stoned to death” (p.7). Thus he is among those very few Americans who know the sound of rocks cutting through flesh and striking bone. One of the few counts the costs of adultery. At the end of the story, Alfie’s client Clovis is killed by one of the guerrillas, a friend of his wife and Alfie is spared because once the girl had loved him. Most probably he wishes to sell the information about guerrillas to the concerned authorities. Thus he is a real middleman, cunning, opportunistic and adaptive. Thus the story reveals the hazards of survival for an immigrant in America with its inherent message that only those can survive who have determination and toughness of mind who can snatch opportunities out of turmoil.

The other three stories - “A Wife’s Story”, “The Tenant” and “Jasmine” - each with a female protagonist from the Third World, illustrate
the author’s technique and her success in conveying the theme of rebirth or refashioning of the self by immigrant experience. In each of them we encounter a different woman at a different stage in the subtle, complex, and traumatic process of becoming a new woman, one who is at home in the sometimes terrifying freedom of the new American culture. In each story, the exhilarating sense of possibility clashes with the debilitating sense of loss, yet the exuberant determination of the women attracts us to them and denies the power of pity. “A Wife’s Story” is a very powerful manifestation of the survival instinct of an Indian woman. The protagonist here is an Indian Patel, Mrs. Panna Bhatt, who goes to America for taking a Ph.D. degree without her husband who works in India. She is a survivor and adopter who can find the true meaning of her life by ‘refashioning’ herself according to demands of America. She knows that to survive in America she should have to break taboos and to walk out of the confines of a traditional role model Indian wife.

An Indian wife can never think of making someone her friend who is married to somebody else because she knows that even memory of others is a sign of disloyalty. But here is a woman who has be-friended Imre, a Hungarian fellow who has left his wife and two sons back home. Again Mukherjee has used the technique of first person narrative. Panna has adapted herself so well to the social and cultural milieu of America that she feels ‘light’ almost free. She is conscious of her achievement which is in striking contrast to her mother’s and grandmother. She knows that she has made something meaningful of her passive Indian wife’s existence. She has
endeavoured the American experience which has made her more confident, more self-reliant and more meaningful. As she expresses:

Memories of Indian destitutes mix with the hordes of New York steel people, and they float free like astronauts, inside my head. I’ve made it. I’m making something of my life.(p.29)

In a delightfully conversational tone she brings out the obvious contrast between her situation and that of her mother and grandmother.

My mother was beaten by her mother-in-law, my grandmother, when she’d registered for French lessons at the Alliance Franchise. My grandmother, the eldest daughter of a rich Zamindar, was illiterate.(p.29)

Panna is the one who boldly expedited the experience of being an American. But her Indian sense of pride cannot tolerate the vulgar comment of players of a David Mamet play (Glengarry Glen Ross) about Indian women: “There women …. They took like they’ve just been fucked by a dead cat”(p.26). This comment is enough to upset her nerves “Tears come: I want to stand, scream, make an awful sense. I long for ugly, nasty range”(p.26). Actually her range is not against Mamet’s play, she raises a voice of protest against the tyranny of American dream. As she says:

I don’t hate Mamet. It’s the tyranny of the American dream that scares me. First you don’t exist. Then you’re invisible. Then you’re funny. Then you’re disgusting. Insult, my American friends will tell me, is a kind of acceptance. No instant dignity here. A play like this, back home, would cause riots, communal, racists, and antisocial.(p.26)

Panna is a product of post-colonial situation. Had she been born in the Colonial India, she would not have resented. She should have calmly
accepted this as her fate. But post-coloniality has given her a “green card”, now she is free to exercise her mind, her power of reasoning, her sense of pride and dignity anywhere in the world. As she claims: “Post-colonialism has made me their referee. It’s hate I long for, simple, brutish, partisan hate” (p.27). For survival in America, the immigrants have to go though all kinds of trials and tribulations. They have to seal their hearts. They have to forgo all sense of morality, decency and decorum. This is case of Charity Chin, an “Oriental” model and Panna’s roommate. “She had her eyes fixed eight or nine months ago and out of gratitude sleeps with her plastic surgeon every third Wednesday” (p.29). Panna is aware of the fact that to get something one must pay. She promptly claims: “If I hadn’t left home, I’d never have heard the Wuchang uprising. I’ve broadened my horizons” (p.31). But this bold experimenter and an astronaut flying in the American space, has not left her life as an Indian wife altogether. As soon as she receives the message of her husband’s arrival, she adopts the form of an Indian wife:

I change out of cotton pants and shirt I’ve been wearing all day and put on a sari to meet my husband at JFK. I don’t forget the jewellery; the marriage necklace of ‘mangalsutra’ gold drop earrings, heavy gold bangles. I don’t wear them everyday. (p.33)

The above statement of Panna is ironical because we know that underneath the familiar costume, she is not the same woman. She is not sure whether she is unhappy about it. Her adaptability is contrasted with her husband’s mental conduct when he visits America. The husband is put off by the
friendly attitudes of Lebanese towards his wife at the counter. The utter informality of the guide (who even sings a song) is disgusting for him.

Panna is heavily weighed down by the burdens of biculturalism and she has to bear the hardships of trying to balance parts of her old life with best of the new. She mutters: “Tonight I should make up to him for my years away; the gutted trucks, the degree I’ll never use in India. I want to pretend with him (the husband) that nothing has changed.” (p.40) The end of the story encapsulates both the strength of her spirited struggle to refashion herself and the difficulty of achieving wholeness when one is stretched between two cultures.

Maya Sanyal, the female protagonist of the story “The Tenant”, is shocked when her landlord lover refers to the two of them as “two wounded people,” (p.112) and thinks about herself that “she knows she is strange, and lonely, but being Indian is not the same. She would have thought, as being a freak.” (p.112) Maya Sanyal, the central figure of the story, recognizes her strangeness in America and her appalling loneliness, but she resists being recognized as a “freak”. No doubt, this term occurs to her when her current lover, Fred, a man without arms, refers to them both as ‘wounded’. She does not see herself as being as freakish as Fred, as bereft as Fred though certainly the story makes clear that she has been wounded emotionally and spiritually by the struggle to come to terms with her new life in America. In one sense, Fred’s assessment is accurate, for as the author indicates in all the stories in this collection, it is impossible to adapt to life in the New World without inflicting some kind of injury to one’s spirit.
It is apparently a deeper wound for the women of the Third World, who are engaged in the struggle to achieve a new identity for themselves in an alien culture. Perhaps this struggle results from their sudden freedom from the bonds of superstition and chauvinism that held them fast in their old familiar cultures, freedom that seems to leave them floating, unbalanced, in the complex, sometimes treacherous air of this new and unfamiliar culture. The irony is that this refashioning of the self is both painful and exhilarating. In an interview, Mukherjee asserts:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries which are plagued by civil and religious conflicts. We have experienced rapid changes in the history of nations in which we lived. When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable often heroic.11

Mukherjee illustrates this heroic quality through her characters who are filled with a hustlerish kind of energy, and more importantly:

...they take risks they wouldn’t have taken in their old, comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are reborn.12

In the story “The Tenant”, we first meet the protagonist Maya, sitting over a glass of bourbon (the first one of her life) with a new colleague from the new job in the English Department at the University of Northern Iowa. The American colleague, Fran, is on the Hiring, Tenure, and Reappointment Committee and is partly responsible for bringing Maya to the School. While Fran chats about her own life and gossips a little about Maya’s landlord,
Maya contemplates the immensity of her isolation and loneliness. Although she longs to confide in someone, Fran even, she realizes that he is unable to receive these confidences because Fran cannot see that Maya is a woman caught in the mingled web of two very different cultures. To Fran, “a utopian and feminist” (p.100), Maya is a bold adventurer who has made a clean break with her Indian past but Maya understands, that there is no such things as a “clean” break.

When Maya is invited to a Sunday afternoon tea by another Bengali, Dr. Rabindra Chatterjee, a Professor of Physics in her new University, she accepts the proposal with somewhat mix feelings but dresses carefully in one of her best and loveliest saris. Once inside Chatterjee’s house, in a raw suburban development that seems full of other “Third World” nationalities, Maya allows the familiar sights and smells to Indian high tea to take her back to that ‘other world’ of “Brahminness”. Maya’s hostess begins to ask questions about her illustrious family in Calcutta, and Maya thinks herself that “nothing in Calcutta is ever lost.” (p.104) Apparently the story of her “indiscretions” with various men, her marriage and her divorce to an American is known to the entire Bengali community in North America. She has been marked as a “loose” woman and as a divorcee, and, therefore, cannot ever hope to remarry respectably in the Indian community. Dr. Chatterjee is easily infatuated by her personality. He feels so excited that he starts masturbating in his car when he goes to see her off. His pain of suppressed desire comes out when he says:
Divorced women can date, they can go to bars and discos. They can see many men. But inside marriage there is so much loneliness. (p.108)

She is aware:

Indian men want Indian brides. Married Indian men want Indian mistresses. All over America, “handsome, tall, fair” engineers, doctors, data processors – the new pioneers – cry their eerie love calls. (p.109)

Maya is a typical immigrant who has been wandering through many places: Calcutta, North Carolina, New Jersey and finally Iowa, has indulged in sexual encounters with many persons she “has slept with married men, with nameless men, with men little more than boys.” (p.103) She has never slept with an Indian man and now she madly wants to do so and responds promptly to a dubious personal ad in the immigrant India Weekly. She locates her male counterpart in Ashok Mehta, a sexually liberated professional who is divided between romantic love and sexual promiscuity. At the end of the story, after their courtship has entered its final phase, and she has decided to go to Connecticut to be with him, she finally repudiates her own accusations that her life is grim and perverse, that “she has changed her citizenship, but she hasn’t broken through into the light, the vigour, the bustle of the New World” (p.110). At the end, she does bustle off to meet the man who will make her whole again in this new life. Thus Maya is always on the move and makes an anarchy of her life to find the real sense of belonging, the real sense of “wholeness” and “fulfillment” in her life. Divided between two cultures, Maya the eternal enchantress, corrupts the ethos of both East and West. She remains neither an American nor an Indian.
She is hanging in the air like the mythical ‘Trishanku’, and typifies the real condition of a person caught in the net of two cultures. She is a true diasporic creature of ‘divided self’ or ‘a split-personality’.

The next story, “Jasmine”, also explores some of the more appalling and grotesque aspects of the cultural collisions. In this story, the protagonist is young Trinidadian woman named Jasmine who has been smuggled illegally into United States, all paid for by her father. She knew “she’d outsmarted the guy at the border” now it was upto her to use her wits to do something with her life. As her Daddy kept saying “Girl, is opportunity come only once?”(p.128) She realizes that her “resourcefulness of inventiveness” are indispensable tools for survival and success. Jasmine is proud of her family in Port-of-Spain but she is an ardent explorer who has come to America by choice and so for her being nobody in America is better than being somebody in Trinidad. Here, she is free to trace her new identity because “who would know in Detroit that she was Dr. Vassanji’s daughter?”

First of all, Jasmine starts working for her fellow Trinidadians the Daboos. She is an intelligent girl who has come to America for making something of her life. She is ardent and laborious and on Sunday mornings she helps unload packing crates of Caribbean spices in a shop on the next block. “This was a new life, and she wanted to learn everything.”(p.129) One of the first things that she learned was that “Ann Arbor was a magic world…. Ann Arbor was the place to be”(p.129). She manages to move to Ann Arbor and “that evening she had a job with the Moffits. Bill Moffit taught molecular Biology and Lara Hatch Moffit, his wife, was a performance artist….“(p.131) Thus, it is the beginning of a new life as an
au-pair for Jasmine and she is all ecstatic about it. “Jasmine knew she was lucky to have found a small, clean, friendly family like the Moffits to build her new life around.” (p.134) Jasmine is intelligent enough to notice the differences between her world and that of Americans. As we see her muttering “This wasn’t the time to say anything about Ram, the family servant. Americans like the Moffits wouldn’t understand about keeping servants.” (p.131) She is afraid that Bill may ask her about her visa or green card number and social security but to her satisfaction “all Bill did was smile and smile at her” (p.132) and nothing else. Instead of Bill

Lara asked about Port-of-Sprain. There was nothing to tell about her hometown that wouldn’t shame her in front of nice white American folk like the Moffit. The place was shabby, the people were grasping and cheating and lying and life was full of despair and drink and wanting. (p.132)

Jasmine soon realizes that things are ‘topsy-turvy’ in Moffits household because “Lara went on two and three days road trips and Bill stayed home” (p.133). Jasmine is surprised to see Bill cooking, a professor this without “getting paid to do it”. It also surprises her “The Moffit didn’t go to Church, though they seemed to be good Christian. They just didn’t talk church talk” (p.133). At times Jasmine suffers feats of nostalgia but even then there is no looking back for her. She has herself chosen to be where she is. Lara often visits for all places for her performances and she is left alone in the house with Bill and Muffin the daughter. “Bill, Muffin and she were a family almost” (p.136). She starts loving Bill. He comes “barging into her dream in funny, loose-jointed, clumsy way” (p.136). Bill has also fallen in love with her. “You feel so good,” he said, “You smell so good. You’re really
something flower of Trinidad.” This makes it amply clear that she has 
developed a sense of belonging. This story culminates with her seduction by 
her master on the same Turkish Carpet which she used to clean every day. 
The whole description shows that she has no moral scruples as such: 

    She felt so good she was dizzy. She’d never felt this good on the 
    island where men did this all the time, and girls went along with 
    it always for favours. You couldn’t feel really good in a nothing 
    place. She was thinking this as they made love on the Turkish 
    carpet in front of fire: she was a bright, pretty girl with no visa, 
    no papers, and no birth certificate. No nothing other than what 
    she wanted to invent and tell. She was a girl rushing wildly into 
    the future.(p.138)

Thus we see that Jasmine is an adventurer, ready to pay the price for 
realizing her American dream. Such was the charm of this character that 
later Mukherjee made her the heroine of the next novel, *Jasmine*(1989). The 
story runs on the same line in the novel with slight differences. Jasmine in 
the novel comes from India not from Trinidad and shows the same zeal for 
absorption in the mainstream American culture.

    In the story titled “Loose Ends”, a Vietnam Vet, who is working in 
    Miami as a hired killer describes the details of his job with off hand boredom, 
    while his attention is fully engaged by the sight of blind Swami levitating on 
    a prayer mat above the roof of a discount clothing store in the suburban 
    shopping mall. Air born for two or three minutes, the flying Swami is 
    eventually caught by the police in a safety net and hauled off to jail. The 
    whole incident is over and done within seven short sentences but its haunts 
    the book.
The protagonist feels a certain kind of loneliness within them in Mukherjee’s stories. Inspite of love, there is no fulfillment, 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. Jeb confesses:

I get in bed with her. Usually afternoons are pure dynamite, when I can get them. I lie down with her for a while, but nothing happens.(p.44)

Jonda’s anguish is also noteworthy:

Nine years, for God’s sake! Nine years, and what do we have? There is no real relationship. “What we have sounds like the Constitution of the United States. We have freedom and so strings attached. We have no doubts. We come and go as we like.”(p.45)

Jeb has not forgotten his misadventures of twenty years ago. His past haunts in his present like a ghost:

Twenty years ago I missed the meaning of things around me. I was seventeen years old, in Heidelberg, Germany about to be shipped out to Vietnam. We had guys on the base selling passages to Sweden. And I had a week end pass and a free flight to London. Held them in my hand: Sweden forever, or a week end pass. Wise up. Kid, choose life, whispered the cook, a twenty year lifer with a quarter million stashed in Arizona. Seventeen years old and guys are offering me life or death.(pp.48-49)

Next he went to London ‘a kid checking out the snakes and gators of my childhood in zoo. “That is what happened to us in the paddy fields. We drowned in our shit. An inscrutable humanoid python sleeping on a bed of turds: that’s what I never want to be.”(p.49) But the irony of fate is that “This
is what I’ve become. I want to squeeze this state dry and swallow it whole” (p.54). Jeb is an immigrant and like other immigrants he also has a survival instinct. Doc Healy’s caution words “If you want to stay alive just keep consuming and moving like a locust. Do that, Jeb’ boy, and you’ll survive to die a natural death” (p.45) fills him with confidence in this new world.

“Loose Ends” tests the responses of white Americans to immigrants. Marshall, an American, is hurt when his Filipino girl friend, Blanquita, leaves him but he quickly takes another woman to assuage his loneliness. When Blanquita has a change of heart, Marshall is prepared to take her back. Thus Marshall’s acceptance of Blanquita’s foreignness and his feelings surmount the cultural conflict which is a state of biculturalism.

The next story “Orbiting” is really in the orbit of the book. It is one of the most successful stories in the anthology. It records an awkward, subversively joyous thanksgiving dinner that is used by an Italian-American girl as an occasion for introducing her Afghan lover to her family. Here we see the cultural conflict resulting from the encounter or immigrants from two different continents. It is a first person narrative in which Renata, an Italian American girl, narrates the whole affair half-wittingly and half-seriously. She belongs to the third generation of immigrants and for her Italianness is now a metaphor. Renata is her Italian name, now she is Rindy. She had formerly been in love with Vic but he left her saying:

I’m leaving babe. New Jersey doesn’t do it for me anymore. (p.62)
Her present lover is ‘Ro’- Roashan from Kabul, he fled from there “to take classes of NJIT and become an electrical engineer”(p.64). He is exotic for Rindy as she claims: “He’s totally unlike any man I have ever known …. He comes from a macho culture”(p.65). ‘Ro’ has changed her entire perception about America:

When I’m with Ro I feel I am looking at America through the wrong end of telescope. He makes it sound like a police State, with sudden raids, papers, detention centres, deportation, and torture and death waiting in wings.(p.66)

Because this is the fate of the newly migrated people in America. ‘Ro’ comes from a ‘culture of pain’,

The skin on his back is speckled and lumpy from burns, but when I ask he laughs. He’s ashamed that comes from a culture of pain. ‘Ro’ reveals he was tortured in jail…. Electrodes, canes, freezing tanks. He leaves nothing out.(p.73)

He lays bare the condition of such people who migrate to USA or such countries because of civil strife in their country. “Colombo, Seoul, Bombay, Geneva, Frankfurt, I know too well the transit lounges of many airports. We travel the world with our gum bags and prayer rugs, unrolling them in the transit lounges.”(p.73) The well-settled Italian-American father of Rindy can never take a man like ‘Ro’ to be a fit guy for Rindy. He is gravely mistaken by him when he enters the house unknocked. Rindy’s father takes him for one of the refugees in the famine camp and assures him “You won’t starve this afternoon”(p.68). He is different. His manners are mistaken for timidity. For Rindy’s Dad and Brent “Even his head-sake is foreign”(p.71), but Rindy has no problem. She knows “Each culture establishes its own manly posture, different ways of appreciating her as she sincerely confesses:
I realize all in a rush how much I love this man with his blemished, tortured body ... Ro’s my chance to heal the world. (p.74)

And now she vows:

I shall teach him how to walk like an American, how to dress like Brent but better, how to fill up room as Dad does instead of melting and blending but sticking out in the Afghan way. (pp.74-75)

Thus here we see how the native Americans have made a space for the new settlers. Rindy is American and by adopting ‘Ro’ as her lover she embraces an exotic immigrant and thinks it her duty to Americanize him so that he can survive there.

“Fighting For the Rebond” is yet another story dealing with the problem of immigration. It is a first person narrative and we come to see the story of a young aristocrat immigrant from Asia, from the point of view of a native American. Blanquita, the protagonist is from Philippines. She ‘speaks six languages, her best being Tagalog, Spanish and Americans.... Back in Manila, she took a crash course in making nice to Americans’ (p.79). She struggles to succeed in the American society but at the same time she is conscious of the trauma involved. “I should never have left Manila. Pappy was right. The East is East and the West is West and never the twain shall meet.” (p.80) She is aware of the difference of culture. She had made a brave attempt to adapt herself and liked to believe as though real life began for her at JFK when she got past the customs and immigration on the seventeenth of October, 1980.
Her relationship keeps no breaking continuously because the institution of marriage finds no water in American. Young couples prefer the ‘live-in’ style where sex is the ephemeral bond. Real happiness eludes American society because human relations are based less on mutual love and trust. Hence, there is constant breaking away from each other which puts American social fabric under stress. Young immigrants like Blanquita are caught in the web of sexual freedom in the name of liberation in desperate attempts to succeed in the United States.

Griff and Blanquita too, go through the process of breaking up. Griff, the narrator, is keen to save his relationship with Blanquita and proposes to her truce. But her complain rings strident, “You don’t love me Griff” (p.82). He is reminded of his previous relationship breaking with Wendi, ‘we walked, we did things together’, but it all ended’. The story appears to be repeating with Blanquita also. Pathetically Griff sums it up “Love frees, but we are stuck with love’s debris” (p.82) and Blanquita shouts at him:

No just you Griff .... You’re all emotional cripples. All you Americans. You just worry about your own meshy little relationships. You don’t care how much you hurt the world. (p.85)

This is the typical response of a woman from the Eastern World to the ‘emotionless’, ‘soulless’ practicality of the American culture. It is enough to upset the nerves of Blanquita. “I can’t stand it anymore, Griff. It’s got to stop” (p.85), she cries. Thus, here one notices that an immigrant’s story is not always one of success and it is full of pain and anguish as it happens with Blanquita.
In “Fathering”, Eng, a Vietnamese child, rescued by her American father from Saigon, is brought home. The father Jason is narrating the whole thing:

Vietnam didn’t happen, and I’d put it behind me in marriage and fatherhood and teaching high school…. Until Eng popped up in my life, I really believed it didn’t happen. (p.118)

Jas, the Vietnam Vet, is the middleman caught between his American girl friend Sharon and his Vietnamese daughter Eng, between the pills and tranquilizers of western medicine and the curse little Eng believes in. He notices a change in the behaviour of his girl friend who does not feel easy with the Saigon kid Eng:

Once upon a time Sharon used to be cheerful, accommodating woman. It is not as if Eng was dumped on us out of the blue. She knew I was tracking my kid. Coming to terms with the past was Sharon’s idea. I don’t know what happened to that Sharon. (p.118)

The child is laid with high fever and comes in their bedroom door saying: “I’m hungry, Dad…. Let’s go down to kitchen. Just you and me” (p.118). Noticing Sharon moving her body in the bed, she quickly adds, “Nor her, Dad. We don’t want her with us in the kitchen’ (p.119). Jase tries to explain the situation to Sharon, “Love not spite - make Eng so territorial; that’s what I want to explain to Sharon. She’s sick, frightened, foreign kid for Chrissake” (p.119). But this is not enough to appease her. She retorts immediately: “You know what’s wrong with you Jase? You can’t admit you’re to be manipulated. You can’t cut through the frightened-foreign-kid Shit” (p.119). She accuses Eng of spoiling her happy world:
Everything was fine until she got here. Send her back Jase. If you love send her back.(p.123)

Sharon is looking helpless and pathetic and Jase is filled with ‘guilt not love’ for her. The torn lover tries to comfort his girl friend but it all turns out to be futile. Thus the dilemma of Jase is the dilemma of all the immigrants who are caught between the promises of the New World and the bruises of the old one. Jase’s failure at bringing about any kind of reconciliation between his American girl friend and Vietnamese daughter confirms the fact that reconciliation between two cultures is not possible. In no way an oppressor and an oppressed can be friends. ‘Blood is thicker’ and so at last we see Jase moving with his daughter:

    My Saigon kid and me: we’re a team. In five minutes we’ll be safely away in the cold chariot of our van.(p.124)

As a contrast to the educated, upper middle class Indian immigrants, Mukherjee creates the Wily Danny Sahib, in her story “Danny’s Girls”, who procures Indian mail order brides in a New York ghetto. The narrator here is a teenager of Indian origin who has never visited India. He discloses the real identity of Danny “Aunt Lini still called him Dinesh, the name he’d landed with. He was about twenty, a Dogra boy from Simla…. He wasn’t an enforcer, he was a charmer. No one was afraid of him, he was a merchant of opportunity.”(p.141) He works for Danny Sahib. Danny Sahib was a marriage-market racket:

    The real money wasn’t in rupees and brining saps over. It was in selling docile Indian girls to hard up Americans, for real bucks. And old world wife who knew her place and would breed like crazy was at least twenty thousand dollars…. My job was to put
up posters in Laundromats and pass out flyers on the subways. (p.143)

Here Bharati Mukherjee contrasts between the job he is doing to his dreams, that he wouldn’t disclose to his beloved, the most beautiful girl in Aunt Lini’s pet-shop. But the dreams remain simple dreams. His attempt to find a true identity in a foreign culture through entering Columbia University remains a distant dream. Now the only dream he cherishes is to free himself and Roise from the clutches of Danny. Danny bullies him by saying a ‘hijra’ and his manliness comes to the fore. “How dare he call me a ‘hijra’ eunuch?” (p.148) He can overcome this insult only by getting his Rosie by his side. ‘The first I felt my life was going to be A-Okay’ (p.149) with his realization of the narrator the story ends. Thus Mukherjee focuses here on the paradoxes of the life of immigrants- what they want to be and what they become- they have no will of their own. It is a process of natural change in the life of immigrants.

“Buried Lives” (significantly named after a Matthew Arnold poem of the same name) tells us in a comic mode the quest for identity of a Tamil School teacher from Sri Lanka, Mr. N.K.S. Venkateshan. The protagonist leads a buried life, ‘living and partly living’, explicating Arnold’s “The Buried Life” inside a St. Joseph’s Collegiate classroom. Bharati Mukherjee explains why Mr. Venkateshan, to whom nothing seems to happen and who is not a political man, suddenly finds himself caught in the vortex of political activity released by Tamil Liberation Tigers:

Mr. Venkatesan … had a large family to look after: he had parents, one set of grandparents, an aunt who hadn’t been quite
right in the head since four or five boy had signed up with the Tigers, and three much younger sisters. They lived with him in a three-room flat .... It was to protect his younger sister that he was marching that afternoon with two hundred baby-faced protesters.(p.154)

He accidentally injures (though he thinks he kills) a Home Guard Officer with an axe and life is not the same after that:

Months later, in a boarding house, in Hamburg, Mr. Venkatesan couldn’t help thinking about the flock of young monks pressed together behind a police barricade for powerful afternoon.(p.156)

He owes his freedom to the monks who compelled him to leave Sri Lanka. Like the Gloucester sub-plot in King Lear, Mukherjee sets up her two parallel quests; the forty-nine year old school teacher’s thirst for freedom is counter-pointed against that of his sisters. From a pliant plain girl she had changed into a fanatic revolutionary, ferociously in love with a Tiger, “Something horse and womanly seemed to be happening inside her.”(p.155) It is a kind of metamorphosis, creation of a new identity, Mr. Venkateshan thinks of emigrating. “But every country he could see himself being happy and fulfilled and turned him down”(p.160). But the force that drives him once again comes from his sister’s example:

She’d meant to leave home, with or without his permission. She’d freed herself of family duties and bonds.(p.163)

In other words she had found her true identity and acts as a catalyst for the protagonist’s severing all bonds, finding his true identity. All his life he has
dutifully lived for others and now he wants to live his own life. And so on to Hamburg, a launching pad for Canada.

Mr. Venkatesan with other immigrants make a brave attempt to reach USA via India, Russia and Europe. In the way, he happens to meet Queenie, a widow and falls in love with her. In the way, he was made to adjust in a “smallish attic room with unventilated smoke, fitted with two sets of three tier bunks.” He had four other young men - Asia and Africa were their continents sharing his small room, with whom he had nothing in common ‘except waiting’. An immigrant, ‘without papers accepts last minute humiliations.’ Mr. Venkatesan knows this. Everything is right till Queenie’s daughter steals travel documents of the inmates and Lubee calls the police to hand over the illegal. Mr. Venkatesh regrets, “he had started out as a teacher and solid citizen and end up a lusty criminal” (p.175). But at this juncture Queenie, the deliverer of radiant dreams, burst through the door of the kitchen. “Leave him alone!” She yelled to the man from Lubee. “You’re harassing my fiancé! He’s a future German citizen. He will become my husband.” (p.176)

What is significant to note here is Bharati Mukherjee’s message that in spite of having made momentous filial sacrifices, spending hard earned money, endangering one’s life all along the passage to reach the United States, one doesn’t always make it. He falls short of its end, if not its goal, and the dream remains unfulfilled.

The concluding piece of the collection “The Management of Grief” is a quietly stunning story dramatizing the imagined consequences of a plane crash that actually occurred a couple of years ago from the content of her The
Sorrow and Terror : The Haunting Legacy of Air India Tragedy. An Air India jet en route Canada exploded over the sea off the West Coast of Ireland; sabotage was suspected. Mukherjee is remarkably perceptive about the effects of the disaster on the victims’ relatives 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.

This story is not one of celebrations but bereavement. Mrs. Bhave makes a brave effort to cope with the loss of her husband and two sons killed in an air crash. It was suspected that it was an act of terrorism by Sikh militants. People have been muttering ‘Sikh bomb Sikh bomb’. The men, not using the word, bow their head in agreement’(pp.179-80). There is no hysteria but ‘calm’, just a deadening quiet. A lot of immigrants, mainly Indians, have lost their family members in this tragedy. Rather than the narrator, it is the people she encounters, the Irish authorities and the policemen who cannot control their feelings:

The Irish are not shy, they rush to me and give me hugs and some are crying. I cannot imagine reactions like that on the streets of Toronto. Just strangers, and I am touched. Some carry flowers with them and give them to any Indian they see.(p.187)

The writer does not focus on the sensationalism, ethics and the politics of the disaster, rather draws out the story to reflect on the ensuing years, to bring out the dead weight of a lone survivor’s wife. Mrs. Bhave goes to her parents in India after the tragedy where the mother pleads to her to “stay longer, Canada is a cold place. Why would you want to be all yourself”(p.189). She decides to stay on. During a visit to a Sadhu she had a
vision of her deceased husband, whom she asked, “Shall I say…. He only
smiles, you must finish alone what we started together” (p.190). Hence, she
returns. She looks calm and quiet in her reactions. She does not scream. She
herself confesses:

I was always controlled, but never repressed. Sound can reach
me, but my body is tense, ready to scream. I hear their voices all
around me. I hear my boys and Vikram cry, “Mummy. Shaila!”
and their screams insulate me, like headphones. (p.180)

She repents her reluctance:

I never once told him (her husband) that I loved him…. I was so
well brought up I never felt comfortable calling my husband by
his first name. (p.181)

Hudith Templeton, the social worker, comes to her support in rescue
operation because she is ‘a pillar’. She has taken the tragedy ‘more calmly’.
Judith fails to see beneath the skin. Shaila cannot tell her though she wants
to say: “I want to say her; I wish I could scream, starve, walk into Lake
Ontario, jump from a bridge. I am a freak. No one who has ever known me
would think of me reacting in this way. This terrible calm will not go
away” (p.183). The thing is that she is caught between two worlds. “I am
trapped between two modes to knowledge. At thirty-six I am too old to start
over and too young to give up. Like my husband’s spirit, I flutter between
worlds.” (p.189) But the fact is that “we must all grieve in our own
way” (p.183). Kusum, another widow, has withdrawn from her surviving
daughter and the world he finds solace in an Ashram at Hardwar. Another
aggrieved Dr. Ranganathan from Montreal … has lost a huge family;
something indescribable.’ Now for him “The house is a temple, he says, the
king-sized bed in the master bedroom is a shrine. He sleeps on folding cot. A devotee”(p.191). The clumsy attempts of Judith, the Canadian social worker, whose mechanical and bookish knowledge has taken place of sincere sympathy and understanding.

This is Sikh contrasted with the suffering of bereaved family which cannot communicate in English. The old man who has lost his two sons in the crash requests Mrs. Bhave to tell the social worker ‘God will provide, not Government’(p.194).

Such situations pinpoint the cultural differences. The Canadians think that with money they can compensate for the losses of a father, a mother, a wife, a son, a daughter. They fail to understand the sentiments of ageing Sikh parents, as the social worker sarcastically comments:

They think singing a paper is singing their son’s death warrants, don’t they?(p.195)

Mrs. Bhave wants to say ‘In our culture, it is a parent’s duty to hope, but she can’t say that because she knows they cannot understand her sentiments.

The story ends with Mrs. Bhave’s statement:

“I do not know where this voyage I have begun will end.
I do not know which direction I will take.”(p.197)

This uncertainty is the fate of these immigrants and tragedy is a common phenomenon in their life immensely accentuated by the bicultural tensions.

Thus we see that The Middleman and Other Stories reveals a new world in our midst, a world created by the transformation of the United States by new from all over the world, from ‘nothing places’ as Bharati Mukherjee puts it. They portray the immigrants in all their richness and variety
reflected in American eyes, equally varied with fear, low suspicion or pure astonishment. The collection is about the straddling of two cultures, straining hard to reach a point of convergence. Bharati Mukherjee refers to this phenomenon in more explicit terms:

It was not right to describe the American experience as one of the melting pot but a more appropriate word would be ‘fusion’ because immigrants in America did. White counterpart but immigration was a two-way process and both the whites and immigrants were growing into a third thing by this interchange and experience.¹³
References


5. Ibid., p.206.

6. Ibid., p.198.

7. Ibid., p.203.


11. Ibid., pp.653-54.

12. Ibid., p.654.