
**BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S STRUGGLE AGAINST CULTURAL BALKANIZATION:
THE FORGING OF A NEW AMERICAN IMMIGRANT WRITING**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper aims at analysing Bharati Mukherjee's individual positioning as a woman writer by using the female characters caught between two different worlds, homes and cultures present in her works. After having undergone several phases in her life: as an exile from India, an Indian expatriate in Canada, a common immigrant and finally a citizen in the United States, all these diverse selves have been translated into her literary career. The writer thus envisions herself as a pioneer of new lands and literatures, initiating a process of re-forming and de-forming American culture, and redefining diaspora as a process of unhyphenated rehousement in which the cultural landscape in which one lives is no longer divided into a centre and its peripheries. Mukherjee celebrates "racial and cultural mongrelisation" but rejects cultural balkanization in its defence of the local over the national. She is neither ignorant nor insensitive to racism and oppression in the United States, yet her characters are always tenacious and feisty in their struggle to belong. Mukherjee stresses their quality as battlers, moved by the instinct to improve their lives. In her construction of America as the land of opportunity and success Mukherjee rejects homesickness and in so doing she clearly marks a difference from the Indian diaspora, though we consider that in defending this posture she goes to extremes, idealizing the "real" to create a personal and literary migrant cosmos.

KEYWORDS: Bharati Mukherjee, Indian diaspora, Identity, Dehyphenation & Rehousement

RESUMEN *La lucha de Bharati Mukherjee contra la balcanización cultural: la creación de una nueva escritura inmigrante americana*

Este artículo tiene por objeto el estudio de la posición individual de Bharati Mukherjee como escritora, a través de los personajes femeninos que aparecen en sus obras, a caballo entre dos mundos, casas y culturas variopintos. Tras pasar por fases vitales diferenciadas: como exiliada de la India, expatriada en Canadá, emigrante común y lograr, finalmente, la nacionalidad estadounidense, todas estas identidades se trasladan a su carrera literaria. Así, la autora se concibe a sí misma como una pionera en tierras y literaturas nuevas, iniciando un proceso de reformulación y deconstrucción de la cultura americana, y redefiniendo la diáspora como un proceso de rehabilitación sin líneas divisorias en el cual el paisaje cultural vivido no presenta centro ni periferias. Mukherjee festeja una "bastardización racial y cultural" y rechaza la balcanización cultural en su defensa de lo local sobre lo nacional. No es, por otra parte, ajena ni insensible al racismo y la opresión de los Estados Unidos, pero sus personajes se muestran pertinaces en luchar por su sentido de "pertenencia." Mukherjee pone el énfasis en su cualidad de batalladores, empeñados en mejorar sus vidas. En su construcción

de América como tierra de oportunidades y logros, Mukherjee evita la morriña y, al hacerlo, se aparta con claridad de la diáspora india, aunque tendemos a pensar que al defender tal postura llega al extremo e idealiza lo “real” para así crear un cosmos migratorio literario y distintivo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Bharati Mukherjee, diáspora india, identidad, rehabilitación sin líneas divisorias

“In this age of diasporas, one’s biological identity may not be one’s only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration.” (Bharati Mukherjee, “American Dreamer”)

The Indian born American writer Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940) migrated to Canada in 1968, after studying at the University of Iowa, in the United States. She became a Canadian citizen four years later, in 1972. Mukherjee has described her fourteen years in this country, in Montreal and Toronto,¹ as the hardest of her life, as she felt continuously discriminated against and treated as a member of the “visible minorities” (*Darkness* 2). Finally, and tired of this unhappy situation, the writer and her family, her husband, the American writer of Canadian descent, Clark Blaise, and her two sons, moved to the United States in 1980, where they currently live.

Bharati Mukherjee has been described as a writer who has gone through several phases in her life: as an exile from India, as an Indian expatriate² in Canada, as a common immigrant and then as a citizen in the United States. All these lives, selves and

¹ In the introduction to her collection of stories *Darkness* (1985) Mukherjee writes: “In the years I spent in Canada —1966 to 1980— I discovered that the country is hostile to its citizens who had been born in hot, moist continents like Asia; that the country proudly boasts of its opposition to the whole concept of cultural assimilation. In the Indian immigrant community I saw a family of shared grievances. The purely “Canadian” stories in this collection were difficult to write and even more painful to live through. They are uneasy stories about expatriation” (2). Logically, these kinds of statements were harshly received by the Canadians, but even before in her essay “An Invisible Woman” (1981), which won the National Magazine Award’s second prize, Mukherjee had sharply criticized Canada’s treatment of Indians. The writer states that during her stay in Canada she acquired a “double vision”. Her experience of being an Indian woman in white Canada made life, on occasions, paradoxical for her. She explains: “the oldest paradox of prejudice is that it renders its victims simultaneously invisible and overexposed” (38). And it was precisely the difficulty to “keep her twin halves together” (40) that made her take the decision to leave Canada. In Vignisson’s interview with Mukherjee, the writer states that though this essay was received in a very hostile way at the beginning, then “it apparently affected official policy in Canada” (para. 30).

² To Bharati Mukherjee there exist essential differences between being an expatriate and being an immigrant: “An expatriate is someone who is nourished by the old world, whose psychic life is still totally attached to the discarded world thousands of miles away. An immigrant is someone who in psychological, social, psychic ways, has made herself or himself over in the new world. Who’s accepting the new world as her own” (Moyers para. 28).

backgrounds have been fused and have materialized, with a rich and playful language, in a prolific career: eight novels, four short story collections, a memoir, co-authored with her husband, and several non-fiction books. Her aim has been to create a “new immigrant” literature. Mukherjee’s ease with discovering her identity as a mainstream American, becoming an award-winning writer, her constant participation in the dialogues and incidents of American society, her refusal to be marginalized, and her absolute mastery of English are not surprising when one learns that she was born in an upper-middle-class Brahmin family in Calcutta. Her education in India was at a convent school run by Irish nuns. She was also educated in England and Switzerland. She came to the United States in 1961 to attend the Writer’s Workshop at the University of Iowa, where she received an M.F.A. in Creative Writing and a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature. She currently teaches in the English Department at the University of California, Berkeley.

Mukherjee envisions herself as a pioneer of new lands and literatures: “My stories centre on a new breed and generation of North American pioneers. I am fascinated by people who have enough gumption, energy, ambition, to pull up their roots....My stories are about conquests and not about loss” (Hancock 37). The aim of this paper is to analyse Mukherjee’s female characters caught between two different worlds, homes and cultures, the social oppression they suffer and the enduring courage to survive, and how they finally attempt to or become assimilated in the host culture. In addition, this essay will also deal with the writer’s attitudes towards Canada and the US.

In her imagination, the author experiences the pioneer’s ability to perceive the new culture with complete new eyes, and in doing so, initiates a process of re-forming and de-forming that culture.³ Her aim as a writer is to prove, not only how America has transformed her, but also how migrants, like her, have also recreated America (Mukherjee, “A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman” 35). This is precisely her re-definition of diaspora as a process of unhyphenated re-housement that keeps her conception of America open to continuous expansion and literary invention. Furthermore, Mukherjee claims that “rejecting hyphenation is my refusal to categorize the cultural landscape into a centre and its

³ See Tine Chen and S. X. Goudie . “Holders of the Word: An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee,” (1996) in <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jovert/v1i1/Bharat.htm>. 07/01/2009.

peripheries; it is to demand that the American nation deliver the promises of its dream and its Constitution to all citizens equally” (“American Dreamer” para. 3).

On the contrary, she identifies the UK, and also Canada, with imperialism and colonization.⁴ This identification was formed when studying in England as a child, so she had quite a clear idea that the United States was the place where she would do her university studies:

I am the first generation of Indians who even thought of going to the United States rather than automatically to England. For me it was especially exciting to go to America because England to me connoted colonialism. It was associated with all that I had left behind. Because I had gone to school in England as a child I was aware of what it felt like to be a minority, and I knew I didn't want that. (Vignisson para.18)

There exists, then, an inversely proportional relationship between her construction of the American Dream, a New World of freedom and democracy, and her detachment from personal experiences in countries like the two previously mentioned. In fact, all her work is a literary celebration of her own emotions in which she projects her own dilemmas and plights. “Like myself,” Mukherjee points out, “my characters are always in between. They are trying to balance the two [worlds] and sometimes the scales tilt one way, sometimes another” (Moyers para. 7).⁵ America, then, presents itself as a generous nation with an equal opportunity policy for all, including the emigrants. However, it is important to mention that Mukherjee makes a distinction between The United States and “America” (written between inverted commas). The former makes reference to the nation with its official Constitution, “economic and foreign policies, its demarcated, patrolled boundaries”, while “America,” she explains, “exists as image or idea, as dream or nightmares, as

⁴ Mukherjee affirms: “Western Europe, Canada and England treat their non-European immigrants, even if they have been there for two and three generations, as though they are guest workers. They never really accept them as real citizens....Whereas America, because of its mythology, allows me to think of myself - how long have I been here, you know, since 1961 minus fourteen years in Canada -that if I want to think of myself as American I am an American and I have an American citizenship. Whereas in England I would not dare assume that I can be an Englishman unless I was born with a certain kind of name, certain kind of look, certain kind of accent” (Vignisson para. 35).

⁵ On another occasion, Mukherjee also confesses how much she is involved, not only with her characters, their passions and personalities, but also with the stories told in her novels: “I realize now that each of the novels is sort of a way station in my personal Americanization...I think that most writers, like actors, have to dig inside themselves for the passions of their characters....I feel that I am invested, metaphorically, in every single character in each of the books” (Desai and Barnstone 132).

romance or plague, constructed by discrete individual fantasies, and shaded by collective paranoias and mythologies” (Mukherjee, “Beyond Multiculturalism” 29).

Her work explores the lives of immigrants in North America, with special attention to the condition of Asian women in the “New World”. She constructs her literary universe around the concept of “transplantation and psychological metamorphosis” (Mukherjee, “Imagining Homelands” 70), and this was a result of her move to North America (Canada and mostly the United States). In fact, “the idea of transformation, of life being a process of almost constant and radical evolution” (Connell et al. 8) has become the most important theme in her work. Mukherjee has admitted that she “writes about what obsesses [her] –the re-housement of individuals and of whole peoples” (Hancock 38). Her characters belong to different ethnic backgrounds and nationalities: Afghanistan, Uganda, Bangladesh, Calcutta, Bombay, Nepal, Trinidad, etcetera, but all of them share the experience of diaspora and the same stage “for the drama of self-transformation.”⁶ For Mukherjee, the immigrant writer’s aim is “*to transform* as well as *be transformed* by the world I’m re-imagining and re-creating through words” (Chen and Goudie para. 70). In other words, she is especially concerned with foregrounding the positive side of immigration. Thus, while her characters are conscious of the injustices and brutality that surround them and are presented as victims of different kinds of social oppression, the writer also draws them as survivors. Sharmani P. Gabriel explains such a dichotomy as follows:

I would insist that the distinctiveness of [Mukherjee’s] work in the tradition of diaspora literature in general and American literature in particular lies in Mukherjee’s ability to mine the tension that holds in balance her awareness of diaspora as a condition of loss or unhousement, involving a break in that link between cultures, peoples or identities and places, on the one hand, and her acknowledgement of it as a condition of gain or re-housement, of recreation, re-imagination and regeneration in new social, political, cultural and geographical landscapes, on the other. (para. 4)

Mukherjee makes allusion to the phrase “cultural balkanization” in her essay “American Dreamer” (1997). The term “balkanization” was firstly coined in the aftermath of the First World War to mean the division of a state into smaller often hostile units, but as

⁶ For Bharati Mukherjee, America “is the stage for the drama of self-transformation” (Mukherjee, “Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties” 29).

expressed in the British Encyclopaedia,⁷ it has also contemporary resonance in the light of ethnic conflict with multiethnic states. In the interesting essay “Cultural Balkanization and Hybridization in an Era of Globalization,” Brian W. Husted adds that cultural balkanization “is a term used in the US to describe the tendency to assert local identities over national identity....a return to the ‘particular’ after a deal of interest in the ‘universal’” (6). The phenomenon of globalization is opposite to balkanization. However, both, according to Husted, transcend national boundaries and undermine national identity. For Mukherjee, the connotations of cultural balkanization are negative; she celebrates “racial and cultural mongrelisation” (“American Dreamer” para. 5), but, as has already been mentioned and will be explained later on, she rejects the hyphen: “I am American,” she states, “not an Asian-American. My rejection of hyphenation has been called race treachery, but it is really a demand that America deliver the promises of its dream to all its citizens equally” (“American Dreamer” para. 1).

The writer’s early stories, especially those written during her stay in Canada, are much more pessimistic than those set in the US. As several critics have pointed out (Gabriel, Brewster, Esterbauer, among others), Mukherjee’s work can be divided into expatriate and immigrant phases. In the expatriate phase, in which her two novels, *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975) and the four Canadian stories published in her first collection *Darkness* (1985) may be placed, moods of unhousement, pessimistic rootlessness and despair are very frequent among her characters. The second or immigrant phase coincides with her emigration to the US (1981) up to the present. And curiously enough, this trajectory from Canada to the United States coincides with the canonisation of her fiction. She stopped being a relatively anonymous writer without recognition in Canada to have award-winning success in the US, and it was with the publication of *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) that Mukherjee seems to have found her true literary identity and American self. In this respect, this paper will only deal with the writer’s immigrant and rather more positive phase.⁸

⁷ See full citation in the final bibliography.

⁸ For further information about Mukherjee’s different phases along her career, see Sharmani P. Gabriel’s article.

Bharati Mukherjee's characters migrate across land in search of a new self and definition. They are moved by an intensity of spirit and a strong desire to get on in life. In fact, Mukherjee herself defines her characters as those who "have shed old identities, taken on new ones, and learned to hide the scars" ("A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman" 35). The protagonist of Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1991) sees herself involved in an odyssey in her journey from India to America; a journey which is not only cross-cultural but also spiritual. In her innermost desire to escape from the oppressive environment of Hasnapur, the Indian village where she lives, Jasmine, throughout the novel, is going to suffer several transformations, different metamorphoses, each preceded with a new name which also provides insight into her very complex life. Jasmine's renaming takes place five times throughout the novel, all of which start with "J." The letter "J," according to the archetypal symbolism of the Tarot, represents ambition, will, force, action, vision. "J" is equivalent to number one in numerology, and to Aleph as a Cabbala symbol.⁹ Every one of the names represents the arrival at a new place but, primarily, each of them is a symbol of rebirth. All these transmutations turn Jasmine into the perfect embodiment of flow, movement and growth.¹⁰

Jasmine's first name is Jyoti, a name used while she was living in India, which means "light, brilliance and radiance," then Jazzy, once she arrives in the US, a name that Mrs. Gordon, the American woman who takes care of her after she is raped by Half-Face, gives her. Jazzy learns how to behave and walk as an American. As Rie Koike sustains, "she needs the flashy name in order to abandon her Hasnapur modesty and transform herself into a dynamic American" (para. 12). Through this same woman Jasmine meets Taylor, her final lover, who gives her the names Jase and Jassy. But before that, she lives on a farm in Iowa for a while with Bud, who names her Jane. Jane, however, is not the common name it seems to be; at least Jasmine is not "Plain Jane." In fact, during this period of her life, she

⁹ See Irene Gad's *Tarot and Individuation. Correspondences with Cabala and Alchemy*. York Beach, Maine: Nicholas-Hays, 1994.

¹⁰ Bharati Mukherjee has also used the same notion of rebirth when talking about her own transformation as an immigrant from the East into a country belonging to the West, a rebirth that first of all is preceded by a process of annihilation of her previous selves: "I have been murdered and reborn at least three times; the correct young woman I was trained to be, and was very happy being, is very different from the politicised, shrill, civil rights activist I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States. I can't stop. It's a compulsive act for me" (M. Connell, J. Gearson, and T. Grimes 19).

plays the role of a destroyer, a “tornado,” as Bud’s ex-wife calls her, because of the way in which she takes everything in her stride. Jasmine, however, is the most important of all her names, the one which gives its title to the novel, and the most significant one from an archetypal perspective.

Like the flower associated to her name, Jasmine’s climbing nature talks about her never-ending ambition to improve in life, and each step forward is marked by a moment of catastrophic resistance and extreme energy,¹¹ such as when Jyoti leaves India when her husband is assassinated or when Jasmine kills Half-Face after he rapes her. As Koike points out “her energy is used to uproot herself from place to place, and even to choose which routes she will take in ‘the tug of opposing forces’” (para. 17).

Chen and Goudin assert that Mukherjee works like a *bricoleur*, “parts are used and reused, shaped and reshaped, much like the character Jasmine’s identity” (para. 9). Jasmine is the embodiment of all potentialities of existence. As was previously stated, she goes through several transformations, and one has the impression when finishing the novel that she is still open to many more transmutations, something the protagonist seems to have learned in America:

In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn’t shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We [immigrants] arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won’t disintegrate. (*Jasmine* 181)

America is then the land of possible and multiple transmutations; the New World where anyone can fulfil his/her dreams, including emigrants, through individual struggle. As Anne Brewster argues, the writer’s discourse on migration in the US places her characters, not on the margin of contemporary American culture, but rather as belonging to the mainstream of a new vision of America.¹² In this new vision of America, Mukherjee perceives its culture as “a culture of dreamers, who believe that material shape (which is not the same as

¹¹ For further information on this idea and its relationship with Chaos Theory see Rie Koike’s article.

¹² As Brewster also states, Bharati Mukherjee’s characteristic migrant discourse and her insistence in creating an optimistic vision of America is directly related to her literary success. Moreover, it contributes to her affiliation with or defense of a particular conception of the US: “Her own literary success places her firmly within the American literary canon and this success reflects the receptivity of certain constituencies to a reinvention and revitalisation of American nationalism” (para. 1).

materialism) can be given to dreams....They believe in the reversal of omens; early failures do not spell inevitable disaster. Outsiders can triumph on merit" ("Beyond Multiculturalism" 29). With this idea in mind, Mukherjee creates *Jasmine's* title character. Jasmine crosses the ocean and transforms her world. In analysing her personality, this character undoubtedly reminds us of Pablo Picasso's famous quote: "Every act of creation is first an act of destruction,"¹³ and Jasmine destroys her past in order to create a future. The process, however, is never devoid of pain: "...if you're going to not remain an expatriate," Mukherjee points out, "then there has to be a traumatic, painful kind of break with the past. After that you might reclaim little bits and pieces of it and fit them into your change; otherwise, you're burrowing in nostalgia" (Desai and Barnstone 141). In other words, the integration of the immigrant into a new culture goes together with the constant fight against cultural memory; an idea that the author herself also seems to support as implied by her words: "We need to discourage the retention of cultural memory if the aim of that retention is cultural balkanization....In this age of diasporas, one's biological identity may not be one's only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration" ("American Dreamer" para. 20).¹⁴ Jennifer Drake clarifies an important point about Mukherjee's concept of assimilation. For her, assimilation means "cultural looting" however, this is not simply a question of celebration. "Mukherjee," Drake points out, "fabulizes America, Hinduizes assimilation, and represents the real pleasures and violence of cultural exchange" (61). As was previously explained, the writer rejects the emigrant's nostalgia.

Bharati Mukherjee is a writer who clearly swims against the tide in the Indian diaspora. *Jasmine* celebrates the journey, the departure from the home culture, rather than insisting, as is normally the case, on an intense nostalgia and a deep sense of isolation. However, Parameswaran considers that Mukherjee goes to extremes in her different attitude: "Literary texts have tended to focus more on the underside of this gargantuan experience of

¹³ <http://www.pablocicasso.org/quotes.jsp>

¹⁴ A possible explanation to the existent dichotomy in India between the emigrants' wish to move to other places, and his/her simultaneous longing to retain his/her culture when abroad may be found in Uma Parameswaran's following affirmation: "Emigration is not a new phenomenon in India. Land of paradox that India is, the Indian ethos has a tendency to stay 'rooted in one dear perpetual place,' as Yeats would say, and at the same time to promote an attitude of detachment that facilitates travel" ("Ganga in the Assiniboine" 72).

expatriation, alienation and transplantation. Perhaps the only literary work that has taken a celebratory angle, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* goes overboard in the opposite direction, validating the American dream while panning all things Indian" ("Home is Where Your Feet are," 212).

Mukherjee appropriates the idea that identity in the East, at least in Hindu traditional families, is a notion completely different from identity in the West:

The concept [of identity crisis] itself – of a person not knowing who she or he was – was unimaginable in a hierarchical, classification-obsessed society. One's identity was absolutely fixed, derived from religion, caste, patrimony, and mother tongue. A Hindu Indian's last name was designed to announce his or her forefather's caste and place of origin. A Mukherjee could only be a Brahmin from Bengal (Mukherjee, "Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties" 30).

The aforementioned has gradually become the general norm with many diaspora writers, and Mukherjee has particularly rejected the phenomenon of hyphenation as a multi-ethnic label.¹⁵ She does not want to be regarded by critics as a South Asian American writer,¹⁶ but just as an American. Neither does she want to be studied within the field of postcolonial studies. She vehemently declares:

The mission of postcolonial studies as a discipline is to level all of us to our skin color and ethnic origin whereas as a writer, my job is to open up, to discover and say "we are all

¹⁵ The writer affirms: "For me, hyphenization is a very discomforting situation for two reasons. It makes you want a way out, a net. You say, All right, so this doesn't work: I am an Indian for the whites and I am an American for the Indians – a kind of fence straddling that is almost immoral. I am trying to get white Americans and African Americans to see how deliberately and cruelly and maliciously marginalizing it is to apply the hyphen only to Asian Americans, Chicanos, and so on....It's as though they're saying there is one kind of America, and the rest of you because you're hyphenated – whether you wanted to be or not...are not really like US." So that's why, in order to emphasize the two-way transformation, I'm saying either call everyone American or make everyone hyphenated" (Desai and Barnstone 143).

¹⁶ And on another occasion she states: "If you insist...that I describe myself in terms of ethno-nationality, I'd say I'm an American writer of Bengali-Indian origin. In other words, the writer/political activist in me is more obsessed with addressing the issues of minority discourse in the U.S. and Canada, the two countries I have lived and worked over the last thirty odd years" (Chen and Goudie para. 6). Uma Parameswaran, on the other hand, sustains that in a pluralistic society, like that of the United States or Canada, diasporic writers "must go beyond the hyphen without erasing it....Hyphens have long been subject of controversy in our search for identity. Do hyphens marginalize us? Many think so....My own resolution to the problem has been that we have to wear the hyphen with pride in Canada, and that outside Canada we must see and present ourselves as Canadians, without a hyphen" ("Diaspora Consciousness. Going Beyond the Hyphen without Erasing It" 204).

individuals". In fiction we are writing about individuals; none of them is meant to be a crude spokesperson for whole groups, whether those groups are based on gender or race or class. If the story of one individual reveals something about the way in which human nature works, great, if it doesn't, then it has failed as art....The mission of postcolonial studies seems to be to deliberately equate Art and journalism, to reduce novels to specimens for the confirming of their theories. If an imaginative work doesn't fit the cultural theories they approve of, it's dismissed as defective. (Chen and Goudie para. 58)

"Indianness is now a metaphor," she affirms elsewhere, "a particular way of partially comprehending the world" (Introd. *Darkness* 3). In her construction of a new immigrant writing in America, Mukherjee confers India with the status of the "old" world, "that kind of Third World hierarchy where your opportunities are closed by caste, gender, or family" (as quoted by Anne Brewster para. 3). On the contrary, in the writer's imagination, that is, in her reinvention of an immigrant narrative, America represents fluidity and freedom. But as Drake observes, this freedom also has its price: "American freedom costs her the clarity and stability of full-Brahmin status, sacrificed when she marries a white French-Canadian American. In this respect, she exchanges racial invisibility in India for 'minority' status in North America" (65).

To become an immigrant writer, and no longer an expatriate, Mukherjee knew that she had to shed her old clothes, so to speak, only then she, in her personal mythology, could be reborn as a true American: "I was [bicultural] when I wrote *The Tiger's Daughter*, now I am no longer so and America is more real to me than India...I realised I was no longer an expatriate but an immigrant –that my life was more here...I need to belong. America matters to me. It is not that India failed me – rather America transformed me" (Introd. *Darkness* 3).

However simplistic this posture may seem, Mukherjee shows in her works that she is neither ignorant nor insensitive to racism and oppression in the United States.¹⁷ Her protagonists are always tenacious and feisty, divided between two very different worlds, the home and host countries, a "fractured" process of belonging, as the author herself states,

¹⁷ The writer argues: "I am aware of the dark side of America as well as the romanticism that America offers people like me, and I think that both the dark side and the hope comes through....And because this country is centred around a constitution that promises democracy, promises equal rights, when things don't work out right I want to be able to work to make it right" (Vignisson para. 48). This statement confirms Mukerjee's construction of a personal mythology in her work.

that results in a “whole odyssey of moving, pulling up your roots from your original country and re-rooting yourself in an adopted country...” (Moyers para. 33).

In *Darkness*, her first short story collection (1985), the protagonists are often women who are married or divorced. For instance, in “Hindus,” a story with clear reminiscences of Mukherjee’s own life, Leela Lahiri, the main character, reveals a fluid identity. On the one hand, she proudly declares “I am an American citizen,” but she also feels very proud of her Bengali Brahmin part. She has tried to leave her past behind by marrying a white man. However, when she is referred to as Maharajah Patwat Singh’s “niece,” Leela feels offended, since she is too conscious of her caste-superiority in India. She is neither a typical Indian nor a true American. Another interesting story in the collection is “Visitors.” Vinita, a beautiful Indian girl who accepts an arranged marriage in India, travels to America just a few days after the wedding. Encouraged by the promises of “the New World” and the inner necessity to change, and now that she is in a new country and far from her relatives, she rebels against a golden rule in Indian society: an Indian wife would never allow any stranger in her house when her husband is away. Against this cultural dictum she allows an Indian born American graduate student to come in and take liberty with her. Although she is very traditionally “Indian” in some aspects - and she is described as “discreet, dutiful, comfortable with her upper-class status, trained by her mother to stay flexible” (163-164) - her duality is clear from the way she enjoys the freedom of America. Vinita is eager for change, “the slightest possibility of disruption,” as we read in another moment of the story, “pleases her” (164).

In the collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), every story ends on a new beginning, a new point of departure. The protagonists, men and women immigrants from different countries, have become sort of “chronic travellers” when moving to the “New World.” This collection tells the experience of eleven people from different backgrounds who are forced to leave behind their individual cultures as they struggle to absorb the American milieu. “Being on the run,” as Jonathan Raban asserts, seems to be “an American condition. The Americans in *The Middleman* are constantly being awakened to their own restlessness and fluidity by the newcomers” (Raban para.12). Moreover, all the characters are, in one way or another, acting “as barrier and gateway between competing cultural

value systems” (Raphael Koster para. 1). They are hybrids who show that these barriers can indeed be crossed, and that they only exist because the members of each culture want to mark the difference between cultures. In three stories, each with a female protagonist, “A Wife’s Story,” “The Tenant,” and “Jasmine” we find a different woman at a different stage in the complex and often traumatic process of becoming a new person, one who wants to feel at home in the sometimes “terrifying freedom” of the new American culture (Sant-Wade and Radell 12). In each story, the exhilarating world of possibilities clashes with the debilitating world of loss, yet the ever present determination of these three women denies the power of pity and disillusion. In “A Wife’s Story,” for instance, the protagonist, Mrs. Panna Bhatt, goes to America to take a Ph.D. degree without her husband, who remains in India. To survive she adapts to the social demands of America, breaking taboos and abandoning the confines of a traditional Indian wife’s life. An Indian wife can never think of making a man her friend, because just to have a feeling of affection for someone is a sign of disloyalty. However, Panna is heavily weighed down by the burdens of the two cultures and she tries to balance parts of her old life with the best of the new. The same thing happens to the protagonist of “The Tenant,” Maya Sanyal. Maya is a brave adventuress; she has been marked as a “loose” woman and as a divorcee, and therefore knows she cannot ever hope to remarry respectably in the Indian community. Neither is she interested. She drinks alcohol and is very promiscuous, she “has slept with married men, with nameless men, with men little more than boys, but never with an Indian man. Never” (103). There is a moment in the story in which Maya tells how in the mid seventies, when many women in America were fighting for their liberation, she had problems with some women for being too “feminine.” Although she tries her best to “belong,” to “adapt” herself to the new culture, going to extremes on some occasions, there always remains a “but,” the indelible burden of tradition and education:

Her grandmother had been married off at the age of five in a village now in Bangladesh. Her great-aunt had been burned to death over a dowry problem. She herself had been trained to speak softly, arrange flowers, sing, be pliant....She has broken with the past. But. (Mukherjee, *The Middleman and Other Stories* 102)

Thus, although she attempts to break with her Indian past, Maya understands that there exists no such thing as a complete break with her roots. Finally, “Jasmine” is the story of a Trinidadian woman who has been smuggled illegally into the United States. As Koster

argues, her story is that of the person who “attempts to cross the cultural barrier but fails to grasp the true nature of the discourse....She lacks sufficient knowledge of the culture to understand what is happening to her in any objective sense” (para. 9). And so when Bill Moffitt seduces her, clearly with the only intention of having sex with her, she interprets his proximity and flattery as true love.

In the short story “The Management of Grief,” the closing story of Mukherjee’s collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*, the writer uses a tone quite different from the majority of stories in the collection. It is sombre and melancholy. The story is based on a real event. On June 23, 1985, an Air India plane left Toronto for London Heathrow, the first stop on its journey to Bombay. As the airplane prepared to descend into London, it was blown up, sending the craft into the Irish Sea. All 329 passengers, ninety percent of whom were Canadians of Indian ancestry, lost their lives in this bomb attack.

“Management of Grief” starts in the aftermath of that horrible incident. Apart from Mukherjee’s brave criticism of the Canadian government’s attitude at the time – which considered the crash as an “Indian” event carried out by Sikh extremists, when in fact, as was previously stated, ninety per cent of the passengers were Canadian – the story is very interesting from an archetypal perspective. It predominantly focuses on the widows’ reconciliation to absence and mourning. Mukherjee, to support her defence of America’s melting-pot against Canada’s mosaic, cunningly creates two opposite characters: Kusum, who succumbs to her culture’s expectations, dedicating the rest of her life to her dead husband, and Shaila, the main protagonist, who struggles with oppressive cultural demands, finally rejecting them. In India, three months after the crash, Shaila tries to adapt again to her home culture. She returns to the role of the only child in a wealthy family. Shaila feels, at this moment, completely divided between her Indian roots and her newer Canadian life, “I am trapped,” she says, “between two modes of 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” (189).

Shaila’s main roles before the crash are that of mother and wife. As is proper of an upper-class Indian woman, she has never called her husband by his first name or told him that she loved him. When her husband dies Shaila calls into question her blind obedience to

Hindu female decorum, and there is a moment in which, instead of throwing some roses in water to honour death, as is traditionally prescribed in Hindu culture, she prefers to “let fall into the calm, glassy waters” (187) a poem she wrote for her husband, finally expressing her feelings for him. At one point in the story, Kusum and Shaila go into the water, hoping for a miracle, to search for survivors who might be trapped under a rock. According to J. E. Cirlot, in India, water is generally regarded as “the preserver of life...limitless and immortal, the waters are the beginning and the end of all things on earth” (364). However, though Shaila in a moment of total desperation confesses she “could settle in the water” (185), they return back to earth knowing that this “immersion” has really meant a sense of death and annihilation, on the one hand, provoked by discouragement and despair but, on the other, of regeneration as they, each of them, will individually have to start a new life: “when we leave the water,” Cirlot asserts, “the new man suddenly appears” (365).

The tragedy of the crash makes the confrontation between the two cultures especially palpable, “an unseen but ubiquitous veil of female oppression, challenging the affected women to break free.”¹⁸ An Indian wife and mother, Shaila is expected to follow mourning traditions. The Hindu widow cannot remarry, is prohibited from wearing certain hair decorations and jewellery, and is restricted in her choice of dress. In short, she is meant to spend the rest of her life despairing over the loss of her husband, denying her social and sexual needs, and even doing penance as if somehow responsible for her husband's death. Shaila's grandmother has always been an example of such self-sacrifice: she shaves her head, thereby obliterating any trace of vanity or sexual appeal, and lives in self-imposed seclusion. She is so devoted to mourning that she forsakes her infant daughter, passing her upbringing to an “indifferent uncle”(3).¹⁹

Fortunately, Shaila's mother has learned to be progressive and taught Shaila to behave in a rational and liberal way. Three months after the mourning rituals, Shaila feels the necessity to return to Canada to “finish” what she and her husband started. In so doing, she rebels against irrevocable ideas about both gender and culture. She is no longer an “Indian” woman, but an Indian Canadian. Kusum, on the other hand, returns to India, becoming even

¹⁸ In “The Management of Grief (Themes).” *Notes on Short Stories*. Answers Corporation, 2006. Answers.com. Web. 20 April 2009. < <http://www.answers.com/topic/the-management-of-grief-story-3>>.

¹⁹ “The Management of Grief (Themes).” *Notes on Short Stories*. Answers Corporation, 2006. Answers.com. Web. 20 April 2009. < <http://www.answers.com/topic/the-management-of-grief-story-3>>.

more Indian than before. Like Shaila's grandmother, Kusum also abandons her living daughter to "withdraw from the world" and live like a Hindu widow. Unlike Kusum, Shaila escapes the boundaries of patriarchal Hindu society. The process, however, as in other Mukherjee's characters' lives, is a complex struggle. Her memories and longing for the past pursue her for a long time. Actually, there is not much difference between Kusum's "mindless mortification" (189) and hers. Only at the end of the story does her final liberation have effect. She listens to her family's voices and symbolically discards the package to finally start a life of her own. Curiously enough, the tragedy is the causal agency of her final transmutation, which leads her to re-examine her previous patriarchal life. At this point we might remember William Carlos Williams' famous statement that "destruction and creation are simultaneous" (*Spring and All* 213). At the end of the story, it can be observed that Shaila is spiritually reborn as a new woman, as is symbolized by her dropping of a package on a bench:

The voices and the shapes and the nights filled with visions ended up abruptly several weeks ago. I take it as a sign....Then as I stood in the path looking north to Queen's Park and west to the university, I heard voices of my family one last time. *Your time has come*, they said. *Go, be brave*. I do not know where this vogue I have begun will end. I do not know which direction I will take. I dropped the package on a park bench and started walking. (196-197)

Also, in "The Management of Grief," as was previously stated, Mukherjee illustrates her defence of assimilation. While frequently this concept holds negative connotations, the writer is here only concerned with the positive aspects of assimilation.²⁰ In other words, Mukherjee praises the immigrant's urge for adaptation and resilience in the host culture

²⁰ A significant nuance to Mukherjee's defence of cultural assimilation in the US is the one that Sharmani P. Gabriel offers in the following lines: "...it is not so much the US as precise geo-political territory that Mukherjee valorises as the site of cultural change and identity transformation in her narratives of diaspora. Rather, it is the *dynamics of fluidity* and contingency inherent in the melting pot that are able to offer Mukherjee what she herself calls the metaphors and symbolic location necessary for reinscribing cultural citizenship and national belonging in her fiction (para. 9). Moreover, in 1984, Uma Parameswaran had already affirmed that the process of assimilation was the natural phenomenon that was taking place in Canada, specifically in Manitoba, and predominantly, among the younger generations of Indian immigrants: "The situation is fraught with paradox. On the one hand, the mosaic requires separate ethnocultural identities. On the other hand, there is an overwhelming urge, especially in the younger generation, to be accepted, and one of the easiest ways is to assimilate" ("The Why of Manitoba's Mosaic" 68).

rather than stagnating in the cultural, psychological and political ties of the home culture, discarding, in so doing, the Canadian “mosaic”²¹ for America’s “melting pot.”

However, an important detail to be taken into account is the prevailing inconsistency between Mukherjee’s personal history and her building of fictional characters. Most of them are working class, that is, they are not blessed with Mukherjee’s social privileges and yet they frequently succeed sooner or later in the host country. As Brewster states, it seems that “class, racial, and ethnic differences are elided in Mukherjee’s equation of her own experience with that of immigrants generally” (18). This trend is especially visible in her immigrant phrase, and it seems it does not even matter where these characters come from. As was previously mentioned, in this second period of her career, the protagonists of her work not only come from India, but also from different places of the world, western as well as eastern: Italy, Afghanistan, Philippines, Iraq, Vietnam, even Africa. In other words, it seems that Mukherjee generalizes the immigrant’s experience to such a degree that all of them seem to be equal, and especially similar to herself. The writer then stereotypes the immigrant experience, reducing it very often to an exotic or romantic adventure: the individual’s struggle towards the forging of a new cultural self. Having the personality of a “greedy battler” appears to be the only prerequisite her characters must possess to become “new pioneers,”²² without taking into consideration, at least in a wholly coherent way, issues like class, race or ethnicity.²³

To conclude, it can be stated that some of Mukherjee’s female characters, especially those belonging to her later works, migrate across land in search of a new self and

²¹ Mukherjee’s discord with the Canadian multicultural mosaic is founded on her belief that it does not confer the same rights to all of Canada’s citizens. Sharmani P. Gabriel explains: “Mukherjee’s repudiation of the cultural narrative of the Canadian nation is based on her argument that the terms of liberal multiculturalism, where cultural difference is acknowledged and accommodated within the mosaic of national culture, are simply another way of entrenching separateness and marginalizing those not recognized as belonging to the dominant culture.” In addition to this, Mukherjee suggests that the conception of Canadian multiculturalism “denies the presence of ambivalence or hybridity through its assertion of superficial pluralism and its belief in the existence of clear boundaries between cultures. In such a multicultural nation, differences are organized into neat, virtual grids of distinct ethnic communities, each with its own culture” (qtd. in Gabriel para. 27).

²² As Mukherjee likes to call her main characters throughout the construction of her personal mythology. Other names she uses are “conqueror” or “minor hero” (Vignisson para.16).

²³ That’s the reason why we do not totally agree with Mukherjee’s following declaration: “I’m nosy, as a writer. If I have decided to write about a person from a particular region or class then I will make sure I have every detail of speech, mannerisms, clothing, of trivia, sociology at my finger tips in order that just the right detail comes out at the right time” (Vignisson para. 67).

definition. Mukherjee stresses their quality as battlers; they are moved by their instinct to improve their lives. America (understood as the United States) is thus presented as the land of opportunity and success, where immigrants can gradually abandon their hybrid condition. Mukherjee redefines the notion of diaspora as a beneficial process for the immigrant. Instead of giving rise to displacement and dispossession, her immigrant characters are frequently eager to “cross and recross multiple borders of language, history, race, time and culture” (Gabriel para. 5). Their transformation becomes “genetic” rather than hyphenated (*Jasmine* 222), that is, the emergent American identity resulting from multiculturalism in Mukherjee’s fiction is genetically distinct, new and unrecognizable (Gabriel para. 10). Their transformation is, in the main, a transformation of the mind, a construction of new mindscapes, an invention of new lands, as Mukherjee herself formulates in the following quotation:

I do want my characters to be seen as inventing their own Americas and Canadas. The breaking away from rigidly predictable lives frees them to invent more satisfying pasts, and gives them a chance to make their futures in ways that they could not have in the Old World. We’re talking, then, about re-location as a positive act. In immigrating, my characters become creators. By creating they become more real to themselves, instead of unreal. (Hancock 44)

India is now a distant homeland to which they are sentimentally attached, but there is no real desire for permanent return (Intro. to *Darkness* 4). More than a geographical entity, “it becomes,” as Uma Parameswaran sustains, “a metaphysical reality” (“Diaspora Consciousness” 205). However, something to be taken into consideration is the fact that Mukherjee’s vision of America is, as Brewster suggests, “hyperreal,” her “neo-nationalism is nostalgic and fills the absence of the real in the current demise and crisis of America’s global power” (para. 5). In other words, she idealizes the “real” to construct her personal and literary immigrant cosmos; a “personal mythology of immigration and assimilation” (Brewster para. 4), created out of her numerous autobiographical or pseudo-biographical writings.

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