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**Strangers in a Promised Land: Acculturation Trauma in Bharati Mukherjee's
*The Middleman and Other Stories***

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Abstract

This research paper explores the challenges of acculturation and assimilation encountered by immigrants in Bharati Mukherjee's short story collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*. Culture encompasses a shared system of ideals, practices, institutions, and norms through which individuals define, affirm, and locate their identities within a broader collective. Acculturation refers to the cultural transformation that occurs when individuals or groups adopt elements from another culture, often through sustained contact. This process typically involves the exchange of beliefs, customs, traditions, clothing styles, cuisine, and ways of thinking and living. Bharati Mukherjee's personal experiences of racial discrimination and marginalization in Canada, coupled with her evolving immigrant sensibility in the United States, deeply inform her literary works. Her narratives often reflect the complexities of cultural negotiation, the pain of displacement, and the eventual assimilation into American society, revealing the nuanced dimensions of identity formation within diasporic contexts.

Keywords: Acculturation, Assimilation, Identity, Belonging, Diaspora, Cultural clashes, Marginalization.

Introduction

India is a linguistically and culturally diverse nation, where traditions have long shaped the lives of its people—both within the country and across the diaspora. For any nation, culture serves as a cornerstone of identity, and this is especially true for diasporic communities, who often cling more fiercely to their heritage as a way to stay rooted. When they migrate, they carry with them their religious customs, social rituals, and age-old traditions, striving to preserve their identity in an environment that may feel foreign, indifferent, or even hostile.

Discussion

Culture represents humanity's collective way of life, encompassing tangible practices (food, clothing, language) and intangible values (beliefs, traditions). It evolves through generations, blending artistic, religious, and philosophical expressions within specific geographical contexts. Derived from the Latin *cultura* ("to cultivate"), theorists like Tylor define it as society's cumulative knowledge and customs, while Eliot frames it as life's essential meaning-maker.

Cultural identity becomes fluid during migration. First-generation immigrants undergo gradual *acculturation* (adopting new cultural

elements while retaining original traditions), progressing through stages from initial euphoria to eventual assimilation. Their children (second-generation) often experience *deculturation*, rejecting heritage to assimilate, later grappling with bicultural tension. Redfield emphasizes that sustained cultural contact transforms both migrants and host societies psychologically and socially. Ultimately, cultural wisdom lies in balancing preservation and adaptation—honoring roots while embracing new influences to forge hybrid identities. This dynamic interplay defines modern multicultural existence.

Bharati Mukherjee:

Bharati Mukherjee stands as a celebrated literary voice of the Indian diaspora, globally recognized for capturing immigrant experiences. Her works primarily explore the challenges of South Asian immigrants in North America, particularly the complex processes of acculturation and assimilation - themes drawn from her personal journey. Through her fiction, she vividly portrays multicultural tensions, conflicts, and connections.

Mukherjee's relocation from Canada (where she faced racial prejudice) to America's multicultural society in the early 1980s with her husband Clark Blaise marked a significant shift in her worldview. This transition represented moving from the detachment of an expatriate existence to the engaged vitality of immigrant life. In the U.S., she consciously embraced an American writer's identity rather than an Indian one, finding creative nourishment in New York's dynamism. Her works from this period examine immigrant consciousness with its inherent duality and fluid identity, while acknowledging alternative realities. Unlike nostalgic expatriates longing for their homeland, Mukherjee positions herself as an immigrant writer articulating shared aspirations of new settlers. She has fully embraced American culture and literary traditions while maintaining pride in her Indian heritage. As she stated in interviews, though nostalgic for India, she proudly claims America as home, having spent her entire adult life there. Mukherjee's fiction moves beyond binary cultural conflicts toward possibilities

of harmonious coexistence, advocating for productive cross-cultural exchange.

The Middleman and Other Stories:

Mukherjee's acclaimed short story collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award, embodies her immigrant experiences in America. The stories depict diverse immigrant communities - from Europe, the Caribbean, and various Asian nations - navigating cultural adaptation in the U.S. As critic Gomez observes, these narratives explore the dynamic interplay between immigrants and American society.

Mukherjee, herself is a mediator here, an interpreter between two cultures. She tells Carb in an interview:

The new, changing America is the theme of the stories in *The Middleman*. For me, immigration from Third World to this new country is a metaphor for the process of uprooting and re-rooting, or what my husband Clark Blaise in his book *Resident Alien* calls "unhousement" and "rehousement". The immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformations in America and at the same time they alter the country's appearance and psychological make-up. In some ways, they are like European immigrants of earlier eras. But they have different gods. And they come from different regions.

The Middleman chronicles the journeys of eleven immigrants who consciously choose America as their new homeland, driven by dreams of prosperity and better opportunities. While celebrating the immigrant experience, the anthology extends beyond Indian narratives to explore diverse immigrant perspectives - including Hispanic, Italian, and Sri Lankan characters. These individuals enthusiastically embrace American culture, often suppressing their native identities in the process.

Mukherjee's characters arrive filled with transformative aspirations, attempting complete assimilation into American society. However, as

critic Polly Shulman observes, true assimilation requires erasing one's past - an impossible and ultimately undesirable condition. Shulman notes: "If Mukherjee weren't still fundamentally Indian, she couldn't be the remarkable American writer she has become." This underscores the collection's key insight - while cultural blending occurs, complete cultural transplantation remains unattainable, and an immigrant's past inevitably shapes their present identity.

The Middleman;

The titular story "The Middleman" features Alfie Judah, a resourceful Jewish immigrant of Middle Eastern origin who embodies the quintessential survivor spirit. As a worldly opportunist, Alfie recounts with dark humor his global misadventures before reaching America, having navigated diverse cultures from Baghdad to Bombay. His characteristic adaptability shines when he remarks: "I've seen worse...I'll learn the ropes," demonstrating his knack for surviving unfamiliar environments.

Alfie's professional life as an arms dealer to Mayan guerrillas' casts him literally as a middleman - brokering illegal transactions between weapon suppliers and buyers. Simultaneously, he serves as an unwilling intermediary in his employer's marital affairs, trapped between R. Ransome, his wife Maria, and her lover Bud. Despite his street-smart exterior, Alfie reveals vulnerable self-awareness: "I know I'm no hero...none of this is worth dying for," acknowledging his compromised morality.

The narrative exposes the brutal realities of immigrant survival, suggesting that only the most resilient - those who can transform chaos into opportunity - endure America's challenges. Through Alfie's journey, Mukherjee illustrates the moral compromises and psychological toll of the immigrant experience, where survival often demands both mental toughness and ethical flexibility.

The other three stories "A Wife's Story," "The Tenant," and "Jasmine" offer profound explorations of Third World women reinventing themselves through the immigrant experience. Each

protagonist undergoes a complex metamorphosis, navigating the exhilarating possibilities and painful losses that accompany cultural displacement. Through their struggles, Mukherjee reveals the paradoxical nature of immigration—a process that simultaneously liberates and wounds, empowers and isolates.

Panna Bhatt: The Scholar Between Worlds

In 'A Wife's Story', Panna Bhatt embodies the intellectual migrant's journey. As an Indian woman pursuing a Ph.D. in America, she experiences unprecedented freedom, relishing opportunities denied to her mother and grandmother. Her declaration – "I've made it. I'm making something of my life" – captures the triumph of self-actualization. Yet Mukherjee complicates this narrative by showing Panna's double consciousness. She adopts western behaviours- wearing pants, engaging in extramarital relationships- yet performs traditional femininity when her husband visits, donning a sari and mangalsutra. This sartorial shifting symbolizes the immigrant's perpetual code-switching. Panna's outburst against a racist play ("First you don't exist...Then you're disgusting") reveals the psychological toll of assimilation, where even insult becomes framed as acceptance. Her story epitomizes the postcolonial dilemma: how to embrace new freedoms without erasing one's cultural dignity.

Maya Sanyal: The Eternal Outsider

'The Tenant' presents a darker portrait of diaspora life through Maya, a divorced Bengali professor. Unlike Panna's scholarly adaptation, Maya's journey is marked by sexual exploration and communal ostracization. The Bengali diaspora brands her a "loose character", demonstrating how immigrant communities often replicate the patriarchal judgements of their homelands. Maya's lament- "Indian men want Indian brides"- highlights the gendered hypocrisy of cultural preservation. Her existential suspension, likened to the mythical Trishanku, embodies Mukherjee's central thesis: complete belonging is impossible for those between cultures. Even as Maya attends diasporic gatherings in elegant saris, she remains an outsider, her

American divorce and relationships marking her as irrevocably changed.

Cultural Hybridity as Liberation and Burden

Both women exemplify Mukherjee's vision of immigration as rebirth. Panna's academic success and Maya's sexual agency represent breaks from generational cycles of oppression. Yet their stories also expose immigration's hidden injuries: the loneliness of self-reinvention, the weight of community judgment, and the haunting sense of cultural betrayal. Mukherjee masterfully contrasts their adaptability with the rigidity of their male counterparts—Panna's traditional husband, the Indian men who shun Maya—revealing how patriarchy transcends geography.

Ultimately, these narratives reject simplistic notions of assimilation. Panna and Maya neither fully embrace America nor reject India; they inhabit an uneasy third space. Mukherjee suggests this in-betweenness, while painful, fosters a unique strength. As Panna's astronaut metaphor implies, immigrant women may float untethered between worlds, but in that weightlessness, they find a perspective inaccessible to those rooted in a single culture. Their stories affirm that identity is not a fixed destination, but a continuous becoming—a lesson as relevant in our globalized era as in Mukherjee's fictional worlds.

Jasmine's Journey: Reinvention and the American Dream

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* explores the struggles and transformations of a young Trinidadian immigrant who illegally enters the United States in pursuit of a better life. The story illustrates cultural clashes, identity reinvention, and the sacrifices immigrants make to achieve their aspirations.

Jasmine, resourceful and ambitious, sees America as a land of opportunity where anonymity is preferable to her constrained life in Trinidad. She begins her journey working for the Daboos, fellow Trinidadians, but soon moves to Ann Arbor, a place she idealizes as magical. There, she becomes a nanny for the Moffits—Bill, a professor, his wife Lara, and their daughter Muffie. Jasmine adapts

quickly, observing the family's unconventional dynamics, including Lara's frequent absences and Bill's domestic role. Despite occasional nostalgia, she never regrets leaving Trinidad, especially as she grows emotionally attached to Bill and Muffie. Her relationship with Bill evolves into romance, culminating in an intimate moment where she rejects her past identity, declaring herself the "flower of Ann Arbor." This signifies her complete assimilation into her new life.

Mukherjee portrays Jasmine as a bold, adaptive woman who embraces reinvention, even at personal and moral costs. The story underscores the immigrant experience—where cultural dislocation leads to self-recreation, and the pursuit of the American dream often demands leaving the past behind. Jasmine's journey reflects both the possibilities and the sacrifices inherent in starting anew.

Resentment and Survival in *Loose Ends*:

Mukherjee's *Loose Ends* delves into the fractured psyche of Jeb Marshall, a Vietnam veteran whose life is defined by anger, displacement, and a deep-seated resentment toward immigrants in America. Working as a contract killer in Miami, Jeb is trapped in a cycle of violence and regret, haunted by his wartime past and disillusioned with the changing American landscape.

The story contrasts Jeb's past and present. As a young soldier in Germany, he was given a choice—desert the army for a chance at freedom or face the horrors of Vietnam. This moment foreshadows his later struggles, where survival becomes a recurring theme. Now, ironically, he finds himself an outsider in his own country, enraged by immigrants who have achieved success while native-born Americans like him flounder.

Doc Healy's advice—"keep consuming and moving like a locust"—highlights the transient, predatory existence Jeb leads. Mukherjee uses his character to critique the hostility some Americans feel toward immigrants, particularly those perceived as having "cheated" their way into prosperity. Yet, Jeb's personal life complicates this bitterness. His relationship with Blanquita, a Filipino woman, shows

that cultural barriers can be overcome—when she leaves and returns, he accepts her without hesitation, revealing a capacity for emotional connection despite his prejudices.

Ultimately, *Loose Ends* portrays a man caught between two worlds: a veteran who served his country but now feels abandoned by it, and an immigrant-hating figure who paradoxically mirrors the survival tactics of those he despises. Mukherjee's narrative exposes the contradictions of identity, belonging, and the American dream in a society where the lines between insider and outsider are increasingly blurred.

Cultural Clashes and Love in *Orbiting*: A Struggle for Belonging

Mukherjee's *Orbiting* explores the complexities of cultural identity, trauma, and love through the relationship between Rindy White, a third-generation Italian-American, and Ro, an Afghan refugee. The story vividly portrays the collision of two immigrant experiences—one of assimilation and privilege, the other of displacement and suffering—revealing the tensions inherent in multicultural America.

Rindy, who has fully embraced her American identity, contrasts sharply with Ro, whose past in Kabul is marked by imprisonment and torture. His perspective transforms her view of the U.S.; through his eyes, America appears not as a haven but as a place of bureaucratic cruelty and instability. Ro's description of migrant life—living out of gym bags in airport transit lounges—underscores the precarious existence of those fleeing conflict, a reality alien to Rindy's comfortable upbringing.

The cultural gap between them widens when Rindy's family meets Ro. Her father, embodying the assimilated immigrant's success, misreads Ro's reserved demeanor as weakness, even ridiculing him. The failed dinner gathering symbolizes the broader misunderstandings between established immigrants and newer arrivals. Despite these clashes, Rindy's love for Ro is fierce and idealistic. She sees him as a wounded soul she can "heal" by molding him into an American—teaching

him to walk, dress, and assert himself like her father. This ambition, however, reveals her own unconscious biases, as she equates Americanization with progress rather than respecting Ro's distinct identity.

Ultimately, *Orbiting* captures the paradox of the immigrant narrative: the desire for belonging versus the preservation of self. Rindy and Ro's relationship becomes a microcosm of America's ongoing struggle to reconcile its multicultural ideals with the realities of cultural dissonance and unhealed trauma. Mukherjee's story challenges readers to question what it truly means to "become American" and at what cost.

Conclusion

Bharati Mukherjee wrote *The Middleman and Other Stories* during a period of personal and cultural transition, articulating through fiction the complex challenges of assimilation she herself experienced in America. Through protagonists of diverse cultural, economic and national backgrounds, she illuminates the universal immigrant struggle for acceptance in American society. These characters confront formidable barriers in their new homeland - some remain trapped by these obstacles while others fight to overcome them. The collection ultimately portrays the tension of existing between two cultures, striving toward an elusive point of reconciliation.

As Mukherjee articulated in *The Hindustan Times*, the American immigrant experience transcends the simplistic "melting pot" metaphor. She proposes "fusion" as a more accurate concept, emphasizing that assimilation is not a unilateral process of immigrants conforming to white American norms. Rather, it represents a dynamic cultural exchange where both immigrants and native-born Americans mutually transform, evolving together into something new through this intercultural dialogue. The stories capture this complex, reciprocal process of cultural negotiation that defines contemporary American identity.

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