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CLASH OF AMERICAN SENSIBILITY AND INDIAN SENSIBILITY IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S "THE MIDDLEMAN & OTHER STORIES"

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ABSTRACT

The Indian born writer Bharathi Mukherjee is one of the most widely known immigrant writers of America. When she got married with Clark Blaise a Creative Writer in Canada in 1960. There onwards she became a Canadian citizen. Her seven years stay in Canada made feel like an 'alienated outsider' and an unwanted 'visible minority'. The racial discrimination meted out to the expatriates in Canada which made her to leave that country. So she came to the U.S.A in 1980 to become a permanent citizen. She lived in San Francisco. She started writing short stories. Though she has a few novels to her credit like *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife and Jasmine*, recognition came to her with the 1988 National Book Critics award for *The Middleman and Other Stories*. It portrays the immigrant experience of the third world people. The dream of immigrating to the United States and settling down there holds a strange and irresistible fascination for them. The stories in this collection depict the struggle, experiences and trails of the immigrants in their attempt at assimilation. They look forward to presenting the experiences of the immigrants before and after their immigration. They underline the cultural contrast between American and Non-American, particularly Third World traditions, experiences and sensibilities.

This present paper is an attempt to explore the immigrant sensibility/American Dream as depicted in Bharathi Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories* to see how well she had adapted the short story form to capture the energy of a country (America), its people and its language by discovering a style of writing native to America that has pace, vigour and urgency.

Keywords: Alienated, assimilation, immigrant sensibility, cross-cultural, diasporic and immigrant's quest.

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Thematic Analysis of Bharathi Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories*

To explore the diasporic experiences depicted in Bharathi Mukherjee's collection short stories, it is appropriate to analyse each story with

regard to the experience of immigration and assimilation.

INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940 in a traditional Bengali family to affluent

parents, Sudhir Lal and Bina Mukherjee in Calcutta, India. She learned how to elucidate and comprise by the period of three (Vignisson). In 1947, she advanced to Britain alongside her relations at the period of eight and lived in Europe for concerning three and a half years. By the period of ten, Mukherjee understood that she wanted to come to be a author, and had composed countless short stories.

After becoming her B.A from the University of Calcutta in 1959 and her M.A. in English and Antique Indian Sophistication from the University of Baroda in 1961, she came to the United States of America. Possessing been awarded a scholarship from the University of Iowa, received her M.F.A. in Creative Including in 1963 and her Ph.D. in English and Comparative Works in 1969. As studying at the University of Iowa, she encountered and wedded a Canadian student from Harvard, Clark Blaise, on September 19, 1963. The two authors encountered and, afterward a brief courtship, wedded inside two weeks. Together, the two authors have produced two books alongside their supplementary autonomous works. Mukherjee's occupation a lecturer and her matrimony to Blaise Clark have given her opportunities to teach all above the United States and Canada. Currently she is a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley.

1. *The Middleman*: In the title story, Alfie Judah, the narrator of the story is the Middleman. He travels around providing people with guns, narcotics and automobiles. The story takes place in an unnamed country in Central America where Alfie becomes involved in guerrilla warfare. Alfie confesses that his weakness is woman. As a young boy back in old Baghdad, he used to stroll up to the diplomatic enclaves just to look at women and visited whores. Now he works for Clovis. T. Ransome and has a sexual affair with Ransome's wife Maria. Maria, the dark, sensuous, liberated Latin woman is yet another character in the story who deserves attention. She has a number of affairs with men. She is also involved in guerrilla warfare. When Maria was at the age of fourteen, she was about to be married to the guerrilla insurgency leader, Andreas, she was taken away by Gutierrez, the minister of education, when visited her school. Now

she expects Alfie to take her away from Clovis. When Maria sees Andreas, she throws herself on him and he holds her face in his hands and in no time they are swaying and moaning like Konnerbial visitors at a prison farm. Andreas and Maria visit Ransome, rob him of his money and Maria kills him with Andrea's gun. No true love exists between husband and wife. Here is a classic example of a wife murdering her husband for survival. The relationship that exists between husband and wife is purely sexual. There is no love and affection for each other. Poor Alfie saves his life because Maria was mad love to him three times. But later, Alfie could also have been killed by her.

In a flashback, the situation in a sexually free society like America and an orthodox society like Iraq are juxtaposed. Here Alfie remembers that when he was a child in Iraq, he had been taken to witness a young, beautiful woman being stoned to death in public for adultery.

The story involves the readers in a new experience, where he is able to capture human relationship which establishes levels of meaning and waves them into intricate patterns leading to a significant insight into the human condition.

Bharathi Mukherjee's main concern is with the underground activities of the guerrillas. It suggests that she is eager to show the underworld of the smuggler-the middleman and other agencies who deal in undercover operations and generally escape law, indulging in legal offences and crimes against nations.

2. *A Wife's Story*: It narrates the story about an Indian girl, Panna, hailing from a traditional Gujarathi family and married Mamet who is a mill owner in Ahmedabad. Panna's husband is a male chauvinist. He is a typical Indian husband who is very traditional. Panna leaves India to get her Ph.D., in special education at Manhattan. Soon she adopts herself to American culture. As Panna admits that she has been trained to adapt to the American way of life. Wearing pants, leaning to deal with men who make unwanted advances became a part of her personality. Her husband visits her at New York and they go on a tour. He is a true Indian male who would never dance or hug a woman in public. But Panna has a boyfriend by name Imre, an Asian

settled in America. On the way she sees Imre and she hugs him in public. Even Imre is surprised at her unexpected behaviour. Hugging a friend of the opposite sex is a normal social gesture in America but it is considered silly by an Indian. Panna takes pride in the fact that her horizons have broadened and she realizes that this would not have been possible had she not left her home.

Panna, her husband and Imre decided to watch a film and the man enquires if it is musical. It makes Imre feel pathetic about him for his ignorance about Art. After watching the film, Panna's husband treats it as a waste of money. He becomes jealous whenever other man talks to his wife. Every action of Panna during the tour irritates him very much. He wants her to go back to India with him ignoring the fact that she has not completed her study. When she refuses to do so, he throws the food into the garbage proving his male chauvinistic behaviour. He demands her to be obedient. He remains as a traditional husband, but she has changed much. The new culture has changed her. In fact, she views herself different from her husband as well as the culture and the country he represents.

In the end of the story, Panna confronts herself naked in the mirror which symbolizes that she has undergone metamorphosis and her old life is readily gone. It is a transformation both miraculous like a butterfly, and strange and disturbing, as she watches herself as someone, a stranger to herself. So her husband is unable to tolerate her transformation. He goes back to India leaving Panna to the new atmosphere which is most alien to him. "Her room-mate, Charity Chin, a model, is an 'oriental', who had her eyes fixed eight or nine months ago and out of gratitude sleeps with her plastic surgeon every third Wednesday", (p.112, S.T.) Panna informs. Yet she is fully Americanized.

Though Panna is completely transformed she displays a superficial attachment to Indian tradition. She wears a saree when she goes to JFK airport to meet her husband, and she does not forget to wear her marriage necklace, the Mangalasutra. The story ends on a note of felt freedom for the Hindu wife in New York.

"A Wife's Story" touches the hearts of the readers and they can really empathy with Panna and understand how she feels in her relationship with her husband. Hers is a marriage through match-making. She chooses her life partner. But wife and husband drift away from each other. Their affection and love fades.

Thus it is quite clear that this story is Bharathi Mukherjee's own experience in her own life. The story is told in the first person and the present tense by the wife herself.

3. *The Tenant*: Mukherjee's next story, *The Tenant* is more successful and artistically finished than the earlier stories of her. It tells us the story of fully liberated Indian woman hailing from Calcutta, Maya Sanyal, now settled in USA. She is an American citizen. She has made a break with her parents' ways in India. She, a Ph.D., scholar in Comparative Literature, teaches World Literature at the University of Northern Iowa. When we meet Maya for the first time, we see her sitting at the kitchen table drinking bourbon. She had been married to an American, John, who divorces her. Now she stays with Fran, she has not told him about her past except that she is a divorce. She takes pride in the fact she has slept with married men, with nameless men, but never with an Indian man. Now she responds to the marriage advertisement by Ashok Mehata, an Indian settled in USA. Maya could not resist the temptation. She calls and talks to Ashok Mehata. Mehata learns that Maya is not free of problems. Her sleeping with unmarried men does not deter Mehata from entering into a martial relationship with her. Strangely or perversely it is this meeting with Ashok Mehata that makes Maya realizes her past mistakes, "It is the fate of women like her and men like him. Their Karmic duty to be loved. It is expected not judged". (p.111) Maya now makes advances to Fred, a man without arms, who is already married, though at the same time she has fond hopes of marrying Ashok Mehata. Bharathi Mukherjee ironically says that this is how immigrant courtship proceeds.

This story clearly shows how the immigrants coming to America try to assimilate into the mainstream of American values by repudiating their age-old, inherited customs and traditions.

Place, displacement and cultural syncreticity in "The Tenant" have given rise to forming a number of relationships. Maya's loyalty to the new country manifests itself when she hears Dr. Chatterji, a teacher in Physics; react to his wife's nephew, Paltoo, a Brahmin, marrying a Negro Muslim. Maya is known for her nasty, ironic one-liners. It has taken her friends weeks to overlook her malicious, un-American pleasure in others' misfortunes. Maya would like to finish Dr. Chatterji off quickly. "He is pompous, he is reactionary. He wants to live and work in America but give back not him except taxes. The confused world of the immigrant -the lostness that Maya and Paltoo - that's what Dr. Chatterji want to avoid". (p. 106) Maya hates him. However, Maya knows from her immigrant experience that love is anarchy and realizes that Brahmin is not cast, it is a metaphor. Maya Sanyal, the immigrant's seemingly compulsive and casual sexual liaison are metaphors for her rootlessness, and loneliness and loss of bearing, but the rational provided by Bharathi Mukherjee does not provide a sufficient explanation for them. However, Bharathi Mukherjee portrayed Maya as a very lost, sad character.

The story only reflects that no matter how hard the immigrant may try to adapt to the new mores, everybody does not succeed.

4. *Jasmine*: Mukherjee's *Jasmine* destined to be developed into a novel at a later date, illustrates the Indo-Caribbean immigrant consciousness. It is the story of a girl named Jasmine who comes illegally from Port of Spain, Trinidad who takes a circuitous journey via Canada to reach Detroit, USA. She is a girl with an ambition. She takes up all kinds of jobs like book-keeping, and cleaning and thus emerged as a real survivor. She becomes a housemaid in Bill Moffit's house and slowly she begins to throw her weight around. She wants to pursue a course at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor with the help of Bill Moffit. She works as an au pair girl while Moffit's wife Lara is away. Jasmine's intimacy with Moffit helps her to establish deeper roots in America. At the end of the story, her transformation is so complete with her sexual initiation with Bill that she becomes the 'flower of Ann Arbor' and not a Trinidad. This story shows how a girl from Trinidad is completely absorbed both in letter and spirit into

American culture and ethos. Mukherjee ironically says, "Jasmine was a bright, pretty girl with no visa, no papers, and no birth certificate. Nothing other than what she wanted to invent and tell. She was a girl rushing wildly into the future". (p.138) she feels in this new world, she could act as she really feels instead of play-acting for favours meted. Bharathi Mukherjee's characters are "levitators who float clean over their tawdry circumstances". (p.122, S.T.)

5. *Loose Ends*: In this story, a Vietnam War veteran Jeb Marshall who is working in Miami as hired killer, narrates his story in Miami where he drives into the dark parking lot of the Dunes Motel: "There are a lot of brown people sitting cross-legged on the floor of a regular motel room and eating with white beards, grannies swaddled in silk, men in dark suits, kids and one luscious jailbait in blue jeans. They look at me. A bunch of aliens and they stare like I'm the freak" (p.52). So he is to them but we know that owners are Indians and that Mukherjee in making a point with some subtlety that to them Marshall may be just as freakish. In the event, Marshall, who is given to acting first and then thinking, rapes the Indian girl, Alice who has a certain dignity, before he gets his work done. Jeb has been committing murders for Mr. Vee for money, and without any qualms of conscience, and he rapes the unsuspecting young Gujarathi daughter of the owner of the motel, when he has gone to rent a room in it.

"Loose Ends" tests the responses of white Americans to immigrants. Marshall is hurt when his Filipino girlfriend, Blanquita leaves him, but quickly takes another woman to assuage his loneliness. When Blanquita has a change of heart, Marshall is prepared to take her back.

6. *Orbiting*: In this story, a New Jersey woman of Italian origin, Rindi invites her parents Dad and Breut, and her Afghan boyfriend Ro (Roshan) to a Thanksgiving dinner at her home, and a crisis begins over who should carve the turkey-her father or her boyfriend. This cross-cultural conflict is a common theme in Mukherjee's stories, and is often a source of comedy, that leads on to misunderstanding and then to anger and violence. In this story, however, the Afghan boy, who has moved from airport for refuge from his country's battle-fields, 'brings out

his daggerand slashes and slices, swiftly, confidently at the huge browned juicy turkey breast'. (p.74) The girl concludes, "I am seeing Ro's naked body as though for the first time, his nicked, scarred, burned body. In his body the blemishes seem embedded more beautiful like wood". (p.74) Renta (Rinda) loves Ro and so she will give him citizenship too if he asks. She wants to teach him to walk like an American.

Mukherjee does not seem to suggest that sex is antidote to human loneliness and suffering. It suggests sexual energy and desire and burnt-out objects whirling in space. It directly suggests the emptiness of life.

Immigrants from different countries try to forge harmonious relationship with members of the opposite sex in an attempt to adapt themselves to the demand of the society. Bharathi Mukherjee brings out the pair of the frivolity of the man-woman relationship in American society. In this story, Rinda (Renta) and Vic (her first boyfriend) had been going steady and living together for some time. All of a sudden one day he announced, "I am leaving babe. New Jersey doesn't do it for me anymore".(p.62) Renta realizes that Roshan, her "current lover is very different" (p74.) and more again determinedly makes an attempt to find happiness.

7. *Fathering*: In this story, Eng, a Vietnamese child, rescued by her American father from Saigon, Jase is brought home. Jase is torn between his white girl friend Sharon and his own baby, Eng from Saigon. Bharathi Mukherjee does a good job of highlighting the hospitality between the woman and the child. Jase tries to explain to Sharon that love, not spite makes end. The writer brings out the trauma of the child's war experiences and exile from Vietnam. The child keeps displaying a variety of bruises. Sharon pleads Jase to send Eng back. Pathetic Jase is filled with guilt and not love. Later he separated from Sharon and he lived with Eng in a separate house. Thus Jase is willing to change his whole life for Eng.

8. *Danny's Girls*: In this story, Danny Sahib is a 20 year old Dogra boy from Simla, sizzling with ambition to make it in a greedy town called Flushing. He thinks on a mega scale and defies both the law and the Indian attitudes. He is not in the new world

to become a mere scientist or engineer when the big money lies in working scams. So, he sets up a 'marriage businesses.' He arranges marriages between beautiful Indian girls and Indian boys settled in America. Danny is a real thriver who makes a good fortunate by using whatever skill that sells in the new world. He decides to liberate himself from old world morals in order to establish himself in the New World.

The story also recounts an adolescent Ugandan Indian's infatuation for the Nepalese prostitute, Rosie, whose charms Danny unwittingly helps advertise. Danny thinks on 'mega scale' and defies the low and native Indian audiences. He was a hustler. He began his life in the U.S. by starting out with bets and selling tickets for Lata Mangeshkar or Mithun Chakrabarthy concerts and organizing beauty contests. It is then he discovered the marriage racket.

9. *Buried Lives*: It narrates the story of the middle-aged school teacher Mr. N.K.S. Venkatesan who decides to leave Sri Lanka after his terrible experience with the Tamil Tigers and his own part in killing a Buddhist monk. He succeeds in getting a fake passport through a middleman by paying a huge sum of money which would ensue him a safe passage to Germany. He takes a circuitous route from Sri Lanka via India and Russia to Berlin. On his arrival in Berlin, he is taken to Hamburg by an Algerian in a truck. He is accommodated in a cheap motel meant for undocumented transients where he is exposed to filthy language used by the inmates of the place.

The story tells us the immigrant's quest for freedom and passage to new world is achieved through great difficulties.

10. *Fighting for the Rebound*: It is the story of a young beautiful aristocrat immigrant woman, Branquitta from Asia. She struggles to succeed in the American society but is conscious of the trauma involved. The East is the East and the West is the west and never the twain shall meet. Her relationship continuously breaks up because the institution of marriage in giving way in America. 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 are caught in the web sexual freedom in the name of liberality in desperate attempts to succeed in the United States.

Branquitta and Griff, too, go through the process of breaking up. Griff is keen to save the relationship. But she complains that he does not love her. This reminds him of his previous relationship breaking with another woman, Wendi. The story appears to be repeating with Branquitta also.

One notices that an immigrant's story is not always one of success. It is full of pain and anguish as that of Branquitta.

11. *The Management of Grief*: This story is not about celebration 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. There is no hysteria but 'calm' not peace, just a deadening quiet. A lot of immigrants, mainly Indians have lost their family members in this tragedy. It is the people she encounters, the Irish authorities and the policemen who cannot control their feelings. Some carry flowers with them and give them to any Indian they see. The policemen cry, "I am so sorry, I am so sorry Madam, I really thought we have a match", when she is taken to the hospital to identify her sons and husband through photos. Later Mrs. Bhave goes to her parents in India after the tragedy where her mother pleads to stay with her. She decides to stay on. During a visit to a Sadhu, she had a vision of her deceased husband. He asks her to go and find solace in an ashram at Haridwar. Another widow, Kusum too has withdrawn from her surviving daughter and lives at the ashram. Similarly Dr. Ranganathan lost his family and treated his house as a temple.

Bharathi Mukherjee admirably brings out the stoic, depressed acceptance of reality by the protagonist, Mrs. Bhave. Bhave sets up a trust in the name of Vikram, her husband to help the distressed people. Mrs. Bhave is admired by the whites as a mature and self-controlled lady.

Conclusion:

Most of the stories delineate the struggle for survival of the immigrants in the U.S.A. The atmosphere in America is suffused with violence and murder. It is a world operated by middlemen, drug pushers, Pimps and other underworld men who exploit people to make a living. The immigrants face tough competition which makes them resort to any method to survive in the new land.

After going through these stories, the reader gets a feeling of disgust at the murky atmosphere that prevails in America-men and women pursuing sex very freely, the sense of artificiality seen everywhere, violence and murder in American cities. What is really disturbing to the sensibility of the Indian reader is the use sexual material very abundantly. A woman having sexual affair with a male partner who is already married is not viewed as adulterous at all. No doubt, America also provides plenty of freedom and unlimited opportunities for personal and social advancement. Immigrants coming from different parts of the world freely intermix with other people leading to a better understanding of other cultures and traditions, thus promoting a feeling of the cosmopolitanism. But unfortunately, the American freedom and the melting pot atmosphere have been carried to excess.

The setting of the stories is the 1980s in the U.S.A. and the theme is the mutual metamorphosis of the characters, tearing of masks, and opening old wounds in new ways.

Critique: In these stories Mukherjee fulfils the dictum of short fiction to tell little but suggest much. She select the small moment which is a keyhole to an entire revelation. To suggest, hinting to imply but not to state directly or openly-this is one of the Mukherjee's methods of telling her story. It is not directly stated why Maria, Ranna Bhatt, Maya Sanyal and others behave the way they do. All this is left to the imagination of the readers.

Technically, the stories range rather freely and widely in time, space and point of view, and they pass through tense moments. A feminist reading of the text shows that Mukherjee is in quest of a body experienced by women, as subject as their desires and not as object of man's desires. The women characters in Mukherjee's stories like Maria

in 'The Middlemen', Panna Bhatt in 'A Wife's Story', Maya Sanyal in 'The Tenant' and others live according to their own terms. They are liberated from the shackles of the patriarchal system. Mukherjee's growth as a writer is that she no longer limits herself to Indian immigrants but to the whole developing countries'. Her characters do not ask for our sympathy nor are they plunged into doom, gloom and nostalgia. They are trying to carve a niche for themselves. But it is not sure if they really get a share of the American pie in return.

There are many levels within the stories which provide the reader a collective experience of America. At a simplistic level, the author includes the sheer geographic scale of the nation by placing her stories across a vast territory from Ann Arbor in the North to Atlanta in the South. At a more metaphorical level, the stories move at a high speed, to keep in time with America's jet-set space. The reader has difficulty keeping track of characters who act fast, hustling careers and life styles. A reader's initial reaction to these stories may be almost negative. If one reads Mukherjee's stories for their moral implication or as a guide to life, one is likely to be disappointed. But Mukherjee's style is consistent with the mood and settings to the stories give us a haunting quality of evocation as the final effect. She resorts to both irony and satire to reveal the superficial aspects of American life. She also uses appropriate imagery to bring out the American social life, surcharged with violence. Bharathi Mukherjee has been very successful in the use of other language, in the speech acts and body language of characters which helps in setting them and the text, into their situational context.

All in all one can say that Bharathi Mukherjee succeeds admirably in the realistic portrayal of the diasporic experience in the lives of the women characters she has chosen for her short fiction. The look presents a rich vision of the American society.

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