

Becoming American: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's Women

Md. Momin Uddin*

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee, an American writer of Indian origin, wrote mostly about the South Asian Diaspora in Canada and the USA. She wrote both fiction and non-fiction: while her fiction chronicles the weal and woe of South Asians in Canada and the USA, her non-fiction digs out the causes of their problems and sufferings. Therefore, her fiction is based on her research and has an air of authenticity in what she presents through her fictional characters. Moreover, her own experiences of living in both Canada and the USA also serve as a kind of background for her fiction. Mukherjee finds in her research that in Canada, South Asians fail to integrate with Canadian culture mostly because of Canada's discriminatory immigration policy, and in the USA, South Asians fail to acculturate because of their retrogressive attitude and expatriate mindset. Nevertheless, Mukherjee's women seem to be more progressive in attitude than her male characters unlike whom her women give up their retrogressive attitude and try to acculturate to the new setting. While her male characters live in America as South Asians, some of her women are busy making themselves Americans. Therefore, this paper makes an attempt to critically examine how Mukherjee's women, particularly her heroines, attempt to plunge into American melting pot culture.

Introduction

The problems of adapting to a new culture that South Asian immigrants face in the USA and Canada are a common theme in Bharati Mukherjee's fiction. This paper is a critical reading of two novels and some short stories of Mukherjee, in which she shows that South Asians migrate to North America and live there for decades, but unfortunately fail to be American. According to Mukherjee, South Asians fail to integrate with Canadian culture mostly because of Canada's discriminatory immigration policy, and in the USA, South Asians fail to acculturate to American life because of their retrogressive attitude and expatriate mindset. However, although this observation seems to be appropriate to Mukherjee's male characters, some of her women characters attempt to emerge as new persons ready to do what they are needed to do in America to be labeled as Americans. While the men live like expatriates carefully keeping them away from the American values of life, the women try to come out of expatriate mentality and become American by veering off the native culture. While the men are in what Mukherjee called "self-exile" in

* Associate Professor, Department of English, Jagannath University, Dhaka

America, and are unable to remake themselves as Americans owing to their past memories and psychological attachment with their native land, the women shed their past and emerge as “self-assertive individuals, free from the bondage imposed by relationships—mostly of the past.”¹ To comment on the divergent attitude of South Asian men and women to their settlement in America, Mukherjee says in an interview:

[An Asian man] comes for economic transformation, and he brings a wife who winds up being psychologically changed. This is one of the tragedies you see being played out in all the New Jersey shopping malls these days. The Indian woman walking around in the malls with nothing to do all day, while the men are out busily making money. The men have a sense of accomplishment. They have no idea of staying there. The idea is saving money and going. But they don't realize the women have been transformed.²

Mukherjee seems to have welcomed the changed attitude of these women and implies that living in America like expatriates with intension of coming back to the homeland would be unwise as readjusting to the native culture might be difficult for one who has lived abroad for decades. She herself goes through such experience. After living in Canada for long with her Canadian husband Clark Blaise, when she came to India in 1973, she felt going through a kind of feeling akin to that one feels in a foreign land. As stated in her book, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), written in collaboration with her husband on the experiences that they had met while staying together for few months in Calcutta in 1973, Mukherjee felt like having uprooted herself from India because of living away for long. Almost a similar perspective we find in Tara Banerjee Cartwright, the heroine of Mukherjee's first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972). Calcutta-born Tara Banerjee, after being educated in the US, has married an American named David Cartwright and settled in New York, but when she comes to India after seven years, she finds the city of her birth changed beyond recognition and cannot connect to it. When the experiences that Mukherjee had imagined for Tara Banerjee Cartwright coincided with her real experiences that she went through while staying in Calcutta with her husband in 1973 after a long time of living in Canada, she felt that South Asian immigrants should give up their expatriate mindset and try to acculturate to American life, instead of remaining connected to the culture of their motherland.

Textual Analysis

Mukherjee's second novel *Wife* (1975) reflects this changed, new perspective. The heroine of *Wife*, Dimple Dasgupta finds her marriage

with Amit Kumar Basu upbeat for her settlement in America. Dimple feels elated on the prospect of immigrating to the US as her husband applied for immigration, and when she has really had the opportunity, she goes so crazy that she does not feel hesitant to induce an abortion to go to New York. What Dimple does is quite unthinkable for an Indian woman, yet the writer's sympathy seems to go with her as she dreams to establish her identity in her dreamland and is ready to follow any route whatever it is to realize her dream. In New York, unlike other Indian women who remain Indians in America by being obedient wives of their husbands and confined to the social life of the Indian immigrant community in New York, Dimple wants to be liberated: she cherishes to be "a more exciting person, take evening classes perhaps, [and] become a librarian."³ Therefore, she carefully "chooses as her role model not Meena Sen, who is the type of the Indian wife promoted by patriarchal society, a woman who is content with motherhood and a social life confined to the Indian immigrant community in New York, but Ina Mullik, who is 'more American than the Americans' and who dresses skimpily, flirts, smokes in public, is publicly disdainful of her arranged marriage, and seems to be wholly liberated."⁴ This is how while her husband has been in America completely for earning money, Dimple is busy trying to be an essential part of the melting pot of America by following its women's lifestyles. She shows eagerness to talk to the white Americans she comes across on the streets in New York, develops acquaintance with some of them and tries to be like them. Dimple's desperateness for becoming American creates a kind of alienation in her from her husband as his reasons for coming to America are purely financial gains, not becoming American. Her sense of alienation from her husband gradually turns into a bitter feeling that bewilders and traumatizes her, and finally caught by a violent fit of anger and bewilderment she kills her husband.

Despite the bizarre ending, the novel *Wife* is an important work as it sets Mukherjee's tone about how she would handle the theme of migration and settlement of South Asians in North America. By lightly terming Dimple's killing her husband as a "misguided act of self-assertion" and an act of her "slow and misguided Americanization,"⁵ Mukherjee seems to side with Dimple and praise her effort of immersing in the exciting world of America by breaking out of the cocoon Indian wives are confined to in America, and, side by side, seems to admonish those Indians who, despite living long in America, keep themselves aloof from the currents of American world. This attitude of Indians in America is, for Mukherjee, very much like 'fishing without wetting feet in the

water'. What Mukherjee seems to suggest through Dimple's effort of Americanizing herself is that instead of taking immigration as an opportunity for earning money like expatriates, it should be taken as an opportunity of working for becoming part of the mainstream society. Therefore, Dimple, a woman with manic depression, appears to be the promoter of Mukherjee's ideology about the diaspora issue.

Mukherjee's third novel *Jasmine* (1989) comes up with the story of an Indian woman who completely comes out of Indian values to successfully plunge into the melting pot. Entering into America as an illegal immigrant Jasmine's way forward is not as smooth as it is to legal immigrants, but she bravely manages everything by being what situations demand as she is a brave "fighter and adapter."⁶ She begins to work as an au pair, develops affair with the man of the house, and is ready to be brave to go on to any extent necessary, and thus she "progresses from being a girl in a semi feudal, rural, and patriarchal society in the Indian Punjab to being a tough and liberated American woman in Iowa."⁷ Guided by Lillian Gordon, a benevolent American woman working to help illegal immigrants to settle in the country, Jasmine "learns to transform herself to be able to survive in America." Without being weighed down by Indian sense of morality, she "walk[s] and talk[s] American."⁸ And all this has been possible for her because unlike other Indians who live in Little India, pass time among themselves, try to remain connected to India by watching Hindi films on video, and savour nostalgic memories, she feels that "to bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheath the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward."⁹ She leaves her past behind and floats happily on the currents of American ambiance. Without being ghettoized and taking Little India as her home, she takes whole America for her home and quickly learns how to become an American. She learns from everything around her; she absorbs American English, American lifestyles, and lives as an American.

What Mukherjee implies through the character of Jasmine is that both ghettoization and retrogressive tendency are serious obstacles on the way of getting plunged into the ambiance of the mainstream life. Living in Little India, Mukherjee feels, one cannot be part of the big America. With Indian culture in heart one in the melting pot will be very much like water in the oil in a mixture. Mukherjee's message in *Jasmine* is that to settle down successfully in the new world one must shed one's past and adapt to the new culture. Therefore, what is good and what is bad has to be decided by taking the present context into consideration. About her portraying the character of Jasmine, Mukherjee opines that Jasmine is

“lovable, but . . . not moral in the conventional sense. She’s moral in her own way. She knows what’s right and wrong for her. But she does not end up being a tornado who leaves a lot of debris behind.”¹⁰ This is how Mukherjee has Jasmine hoist the flag of her message.

Mukherjee’s other two novels, *Holder of the World* (1993), and *Leave It to Me* (1997), are not actually about the migration and settlement of the South Asian diaspora. But her short stories collected in *Darkness* (1985) and *Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), which were written in the interim period between *Wife* and *Jasmine*, present brave women like the Dimple in *Wife* and the Jasmine in *Jasmine*. Four of the twelve short stories in *Darkness* Mukherjee wrote when she was living in Canada and the rest were written after she had migrated to the USA, and all the stories in *Middleman and Other Stories* Mukherjee wrote after she had settled in the USA. The women whom we meet in the *Darkness* Stories written in Canada do not have much opportunity to be Canadianized due to Canada’s discriminatory immigration policy that technically barred South Asians from assimilating into the mainstream culture. Despite their efforts to be part of Canada’s mainstream society, they failed due to the implied hostility of the immigration policy of Canada. As we notice, in “In Isolated Incidents” Dr. (Miss) Supariwala applied for lectureship but is discriminated against in the selection board. The board finds her a competent candidate for the post, having doctorates from Western Ontario and Bombay and having published numerous articles; her discipline and preparedness are beyond question, yet she is denied the job on some grounds that are absolutely racial. The interviewers think “students would not relate easily to her, some might complain of her accent, her methodological stiffness, her lack of humour.”¹¹

“The World according to Hsu” presents the traumatic feelings and experiences of a Canadian woman of South Asian origin. In this story, Ratna, a Canadian journalist of mixed origins—half Czech and half Indian—faces racial taunts in Canada, and after living with her Canadian professor husband for a long time has the feeling that she is neither a Canadian nor an Indian. She says how South Asian women are treated in Toronto. She remembers being “called, after the imported idiom of London, a paki” in Toronto. “And for pakis, Toronto was hell.”¹² However, although Miss Supariwala and Ratna fail to assimilate in the Canadian society, mostly because of Canada’s hostility to South Asian immigrants, Angela, the titular character of the story “Angela,” a girl from Dhaka orphaned in the 1971 Independence War of Bangladesh and

adopted by the Brandons in the USA, has successfully remade her as an American. Like the Jasmine of *Jasmine*, she is a brave fighter and adapter. She courageously walks her path to self-fulfillment. Although she has not forgotten the horrors of the 1971 Independence War of Bangladesh, she has not let her past be an obstacle on her way to getting immersed in the melting pot. She feels she can be herself only as long as she is guided by herself, and so she refuses the easy option of reaching her goal by marrying Dr. Vinny Menezies, a physician of Indian origin. Similarly, Leela Lahiri, the central character of "Hindus," does not allow her Indianness to prevent her from entering into the American ambience. She is a new immigrant but proudly declares, "I am an American citizen."¹³ Only within two years she "tried to treat the [New York] city not as an island of dark immigrants but as a vast sea in which new Americans like myself could disappear and resurface at will."¹⁴ She cherishes individual freedom to do and be whatever she likes. She marries a white man and even separates from him at will. Thus she is ready even to be a "blind and groping conquistador,"¹⁵ if necessary, to remake her as an American. The heroine of "The Lady from Lucknow," Nafeesa Hafeez westernizes herself by developing extramarital relationship with a 65 year old white American. Nafeeza feels her long cherished dream of independence being shattered by the conservative Islamic code of life and so defies it for self-fulfillment by indulging in free sex and lust with her old American lover James Beamish. While her husband feels insecure and "not quiet"¹⁶ in America, Nafeesa is quite happy because her new home has offered her the opportunity of enjoying the love that she has cherished all her life. She does not have any guilty feeling for her illicit love with James Beamish because to her it is not only an attempt of expressing her independence and individuality but also a way of identifying herself with America and its culture.

In the story 'A Father,' Mr. Bhowmick's daughter Babli is a complete American as she has adapted herself to the American values and ways of life. She does not have any love for the age-old culture of India that Mr. Bhowmick worships the most and tries to keep intact in him even in America. Babli despises the practices of matching blood lines, matching horoscopes, matching castes, etc., which are held as holy customs for a marriage in India. Instead of a marriage of such type, she prefers artificially inseminated pregnancy, which she compares to the practices of marriages of convenience in India—an analogy that enrages Mr. Bhowmick beyond his control. Mr. Bhowmick comments on his Americanized daughter thus:

She was brighter certainly than the sons and daughters of the other Bengalis he knew in Detroit, and she had been the only female student in most of her classes at Georgia Tec, but as she sat there in her beige linen business suit, her thick chi dropping into a polka-dotted cravat, he regretted again that she was not the child of his dreams. . . . She was not womanly or tender the way unmarried girls had been in the wistful days of his adolescence.¹⁷

Finally, unable to tolerate Babli's being too Americanized, Mr. Bhowmick calls the police. Even Mrs. Bhowmick, who is also too American to Mr. Bhowmick is utterly disappointed by their unmarried daughter's artificial pregnancy through a sperm bank. Mrs. Bhowmick, no doubt, has fascination for America as it was she who "wanted America, nothing less . . . [and] forced him to apply for permanent resident status in the US,"¹⁸ but she is half-way in the American ambiance and fails to assimilate completely. Mukherjee's message for the immigrants who want to settle down successfully in the new country is that there should not be half-measures and that they should not be simultaneously both South Asian and American. Otherwise, such actions would result in failure. As we find, in "Visitors" both Vinita and her husband Sailen Kumar fail to assimilate into the new culture because of their nostalgic bond with India. Kumar, a St. Stephen's graduate who also studied at London University and Harvard and who now works in a respectable investment house in Manhattan, intends to be a millionaire in New York City, but he does not like to be like Americans. Therefore, when he goes out to work in Manhattan, like a traditional Indian husband he expects his wife to be at home like a traditional Indian wife. He feels his nostalgic bond with India gives him a kind of security.

While Kumar is careful about retaining his Indian nature intact in America—a tendency that prevents him from assimilating into American culture, Vinita's plight is pathetic as she finds herself in between becoming an American and remaining an Indian at the same time. When her husband is at work, she passes her time mostly by watching soap operas on TV channels and often imagines herself "on the television screen, in the roles of afternoon wives taken in passion."¹⁹ The passion derived from the soap operas makes her so intoxicated that one day in her husband's absence she welcomes a young, handsome Indian student named Rajiv Khanna who encourages her to follow "American shortcuts" and forget the traditional values of Indian femininity. Vinita allows Rajiv Khanna to come in and take liberty of her in her husband's absence unlike an Indian wife who would never welcome any stranger in her home when her husband is absent. She tends to believe that "the rules

are different in Guttenberg. Here one has to seize up the situation and make up one's own rules."²⁰ Thus she follows the "American shortcuts" to gratify her passion, but she turns things into a mess when she also wants to remain "*deshi*."²¹ Like an Indian wife, she feels that "letting him in might lead to disproportionate disaster"²² and that she should not steal out of her husband's bed to "run off into the alien American night where only shame and disaster can await her."²³ Thus she fails to embrace the licentiousness of American culture because of her '*deshi*' attitude.

More eloquently than in *Darkness*, Mukherjee celebrates the possibilities of migration and settlement of the South Asian Diaspora in her second book of short stories titled *Middleman and Other Stories*. Even in Canada, which is portrayed in *Darkness* stories as being hostile to the settlement of South Asians, *Middleman and Other Stories* has a woman who attempts to succeed amidst all political and cultural odds. In 'The Management of Grief,' a Canadian woman of South Asian origin—who lost her family members in the 1985 Air India tragedy that killed 329 people most of whom were Canadian citizens of South Asian origins, but most shockingly, Canada did not acknowledge it as a Canadian tragedy, rather took it for an Indian tragedy, thinking that those killed in the plane crash were not natives of Canada but naturalized Canadian citizens of Indian origin—decides to stand up overcoming all sorrows. Encouraged in a vision by the dead members of her family to "go, be brave,"²⁴ she challenges all odds and decides to confront the future in Canada.

In 'A Wife's Story,' Mukherjee shows how her protagonist Panna Bhatt moves gradually from being an Indian to getting plunged into the ambiance of American culture. Panna Bhat, who goes to America for a PhD degree leaving her husband in India, brings her out of the confines of the conservative Indian culture in order to survive in the US. She is quick to understand that she needs to change herself to meet the demands of the new place. She sees "whole people have moved before me; they have adapted"²⁵ and feels encouraged to refashion herself as the new culture demands. She adapts herself so well to the cultural ambiance of America that she now does not feel weighed down by the Indian sense of morality; rather feels "light." Therefore, unlike an Indian wife who never thinks of developing relationship with another man, Panna Bhat befriends and flirts with a Hungarian named Imre who has left wife and two sons back home. While in India she had to be a passive wife, her experience of living in America has filled her with confidence and freedom. As she feels, "Memories of Indian destitute mix with the hordes

of New York Steel people, and they float free, like astronauts, inside my head. I've made it. I'm making something of my life."²⁶ While in India a woman's status is like that of her mother who "was beaten by mother-in-law . . . when she has registered for French lessons at the Alliance Francaise,"²⁷ in America Panna Bhat has the freedom of moving over a large space. As she says, "If I hadn't left home, I'd never have heard the Wuchang Uprising. I've broadened my horizons."²⁸ However, one may feel that despite plunging into the American ambiance, Panna Bhatt remains Indian by heart as when her husband comes to meet her in New York, she changes her American cotton pants and shirt and wears traditional Indian dresses: sari and mangalsutra, but unlike an Indian wife she just lets her play the role of being the wife of her husband that night, and her sense of freedom, becoming a different person—an American—is perceivable when, before joining her husband in bed, she looks at herself in the mirror and feels that she is no longer an Indian wife, rather a woman "free, afloat, watching somebody else."²⁹ Similarly, the titular character of 'Jasmine' is desperate to become American. An illegal immigrant in the USA, she faces oodles of challenges but she does not give away. She is ready to follow any route to plunge into the melting pot. She happily works as an au-pair girl in Michigan and even lets herself be seduced by the owner of the house, but neither Jasmine feels shocked or humiliated by it, nor does Mukherjee see anything objectionable in Jasmine's effort of plunging into the melting pot by letting her be seduced by her white American employer. To comment on Mukherjee's approval of Jasmine's sexual licentiousness, Fakrul Alam opines:

Far from wanting us to read this as an example of how an illegal immigrant girl is sexually exploited by her American employer; Mukherjee's intention seems to be to depict a woman 'who knows the power, is discovering the power of sexuality' (1990 Interview, 22), and is 'smart, desirous, and ambitious enough to make something of her life' (27). Jasmine, in effect, feels she has the license to be whatever she wants to be in the new world.³⁰

Alam further says:

Mukherjee has no qualms about showing her new immigrants in illicit situations or making shady deals as they attempt to succeed in America, she seems to think that hustling will inevitably be a way of life for those negotiating their way through America. It is as if Mukherjee is placing her South Asian immigrants in a "frontier" situation, a moral wilderness where they must struggle and survive anywhichway they can.³¹

Conclusion

This paper concentrates only on the women of South Asian origins in Mukherjee's fiction. Since the other stories of the *Middleman* collection are not exactly about South Asian immigrants, I would like to conclude here by saying that Mukherjee's women, particularly her heroines, have fluidity to remake and reinvent their lives in the new world. While the male immigrants seem to be conservative trying hard to remain in proximity to their native culture anyhow, Mukherjee's heroines are avant-garde: instead of remaining weighed down by the ethics and morals of their country of origin, they come out of them without any qualm and trepidation and plunge into the culture of the new world and thus become part of it. While the men are nothing but immigrants in the USA, earning as much as they can so that they can live prosperously after their return, the female protagonists of Mukherjee's fiction are busy trying to make America their permanent abode and themselves permanent Americans.

Notes and References

1. Sumati Jha and Pashupati Jha, 'Mind and Movement: Metamorphosis of Women in Bharati Mukherjee,' in *The Post –Colonial Space: Writing the Self and the Nation*, Nandini Sahu (ed.), Delhi, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (p) Ltd., 2007, p. 2
2. 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee,' (by Michael Connell, Jessie Grearson and Tom Grimes), in *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3, Fall 1990, pp.7 - 32
3. Bharati Mukherjee, *Wife*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1975, p.42
4. Fakrul Alam, *Imperial Entanglements and Literature in English*, Writers.ink, Dhaka, 2007, p. 337
5. 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee,' *op. cit.*
6. Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, Grove Press, New York, 1989, p. 40
7. Fakrul Alam, *op. cit.*, p. 351
8. Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, *op. cit.*, p. 34
9. *Ibid.* p. 185
10. 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee,' *op. cit.*
11. Bharati Mukherjee, 'Isolated Incidents', in *Darkness*, Markham, Ontario, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 79
12. Bharati Mukherjee, 'The World according to Hsu,' in *Darkness*, Penguin Books, Markham, Ontario, 1980, p. 41
13. Bharati Mukherjee, 'Hindus,' in *Darkness*, Markham, Ontario 1985, Penguin Books, p. 133
14. *Ibid.* p 136
15. *Ibid.* p. 141
16. Bharati Mukherjee, 'The Lady from Lucknow,' in *Darkness*, Markham, Ontario, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 25
17. Bharati Mukherjee, 'A Father,' in *Darkness*, Markham, Ontario, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 79
18. *Ibid.* p. 69
19. Bharati Mukherjee, 'Visitors,' in *Darkness*, Markham, Ontario, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 171
20. *Ibid.* p. 167
21. *Ibid.* p. 168

22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.* p. 176
24. Bharati Mukherjee, 'The Management of Grief,' in *Middleman and Other Stories*, New York, Grove Press, 1988, p. 194
25. Bharati Mukherjee, 'A Wife's Story,' in *Middleman and Other Stories*, New York, Grove Press, 1988, p. 39
26. *Ibid.* p. 29
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.* p. 31
29. *Ibid.* p. 41
30. Fakrul Alam, *op. cit.*, p. 339
31. *Ibid.*