

Interpreting Experience: Self-fashioning in Mukherjee's Fiction

Abstract

The transformative elements in Mukherjee's Fiction underscores how the cultural identity of her protagonists (South-Asian immigrants in America) provides them with the necessary tool for the Socio-cultural transformation they are willing to undergo. The knowledge and understanding of themselves enable them in acquiring and manipulating the knowledge and understanding of the 'other', thus, helping them to forge an identity that neither completely negates the 'self' nor the 'other'. Standing on the threshold of two cultures, they are in a position which enables them to objectively view both cultures, thereby gaining a wider perspective. This allows both for interpretation of their experience as well as making sense of their experience, helping them to construct a suitable, tolerable narrative of their past while attempting to construct a positive narrative of their life in the New World.

Keywords: "Other", "Othering", "Cultural Identity", "Epistemic Status", Race, Gender, Sexuality.

Introduction

Multicultural politics in America favours difference. Its adherents, their honest intentions notwithstanding, trigger the process of "Othering". A close study of some of Bharati Mukherjee's works reveals that the protagonists suffer principally because of their lack of knowledge about the other. In as much as the problem is one of identity, it can be better appreciated in terms of our knowledge of American identity politics.

Review of Literature

Intercultural Communication remains central to Bharati Mukherjee's diasporic poetics. Unlike other expatriate writers of Indian origin, she does not permit her characters to be incapacitated by spasms of nostalgia. She stubbornly refuses to be labeled "a Third World woman writer". She maintains the "international flair of a highly individuated existence". Indeed, in her case, it is difficult to differentiate the person from the persona.

Her characters experience the shock of an alien culture but they refuse to be alienated, for Mukherjee favours intimacy with the "other". But then it is fraught with obstacles and dangers. The Mukherjee characters, however, are definitely determined to be members of the responsible citizenry like the white settlers.

In her fiction, she seeks to integrate cultures – vastly different – like those of the "first" and the "third" worlds. In certain respects, her fiction is transnational and transcultural.

Unlike other expatriate writers of Indian origin, Bharati Mukherjee does not permit her characters to be incapacitated by spasms of nostalgia. She stubbornly refuses to be labeled "A Third-world woman writer. In her article "J is Juxtaposition: The Legacy of Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine" Minal Hazariwala observes that Mukherjee is among the key pioneers who have moved ahead beyond the focus of first generation South-Asian American writing in the United States. Like Jasmine, the eponymous protagonist in Mukherjee's novel, she has dared to forge a new destiny in her genre of writing; pushing its horizon like Jasmine who in the novel moves on from 'lifetimes ago' to 'reposition the stars'. (BLARB, Los Angeles Review of Books, 02/06/2017)

Objective of the Study

The essay seeks to develop a theory of identity based on an interpretation of the experiences of the Mukherjee's protagonists. In other words, it seeks not only to interpret their experiences but also to develop an understanding of how they make sense of their experiences.

In his book 'Literary Theory and the Claims of History' Satya P. Mohanty posits that:

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No matter how different cultural others are, they are never so different that they are, as typical members of their culture, incapable of acting purposefully, of evaluating their actions in light of their ideas and previous experiences, and of being "rational" in this minimal way. Without the capacity for such rational agency,... they would not be capable of social existence, since they could not develop the kind of adaptive mechanism that enables them to learn and survive, to possess a "history". (198)

Mohanty implies that the resources of "self-understanding" are derived from our cultural moorings, physiological constraints and presuppositions and that they guide as well as determine the very 'observations' that lead to rational evaluation. Moreover, it is, these presuppositions, ideas and previous experiences, which become, as he points out, indexes of our 'individual' or collective "stand points" in relation to the world. Hence he points out that:

Cultural identities are good everyday instances of our deepest social biases; even when they are openly espoused, they are often based on submerged feelings and values, reflecting areas of both sensibility and judgment. They are neither to be dismissed as mere social constructions, and hence spurious, nor celebrated as our real unchanging essences in a heartless and changing world. We have the capacity to examine our social identities, considering them in light of our best understanding or the social facts and our other social relationships. Indeed this is what we do whenever we seek to transform ourselves in times of social and cultural change. (201)

This applies to the Mukherjee characters in a significant way. For, their cultural identity as Indians or Asians provide them with the necessary tool for a keen observation, introspection and active participation in the socio-cultural transformation that they are willing to undergo once they have decided to settle in America. Their knowledge and understanding of themselves enables them in acquiring and manipulating the knowledge and understanding of the "other", thus, helping them to forge an identity that neither completely negates the 'self' nor the 'other'. Standing on the threshold of two cultures, they are in a position to objectively view both the cultures, thereby gaining a wider perspective.

The novel 'Jasmine' demonstrates that while life may be uncomfortable for those poised on the "membrane between cultures", the position often gives them the clearest view of what is really happening on both sides of the divide. I argue that in the novel Bud, the American, views things one – dimensionally, whereas, Jasmine the Asian American, has the privilege of observing things from the double perspective. Now let me examine a situation of this

kind in 'Jasmine', "I wonder if Bud ever sees the America I do", Jasmine says of her banker husband who has been shot and paralyzed in an attack by an irate farmer, "We pass half-built, half deserted cinder-block structures at the edge of town; with mud-spattered cars parked in an uncleared lot, and I wonder, who's inside? What are they doing? Who is hiding? Empty swimming pools and plywood panels in the window frames grip my guts." (98) The scene recreates for Jasmine painful images of the deserted motel near the Florida Coast, where she had been raped again and again by the evil 'Half-face'. "And Bud frowns because unproductive projects give him pain. He says, "wonder who handled their financing" (98).

A comparatist reading of the reactions of Jasmine and Bud to the dilapidated structure gives us some clues about the differing perceptions of two individuals coming from two different cultures. The scene evokes in Jasmine the traumatic experience of rape which results in her murdering the man who violates her body. Bud, a banker as he is, finds it painful, in a different way. He sees the financial waste in it. Chastity, in India, is jealously guarded, so much so, that any violation of it amounts to sacrilege. That is precisely why Jasmine reacts to it so violently. It is indeed ironical that even pain is valued differently in different cultures.

What changes Jasmine's course is not the dignity and freedom available in her new land but its "infinite opportunities of evil." And so Jasmine can disappear into America after committing the greatest crime of all (murder). Yet Jasmine also finds its people dangerously unfit for the reversals and frustrations of life. The New York woman for whom she works as a 'day mummy', leaves her perfect home, child, and husband for what seems to Jasmine the inexplicable frivolity of 'happiness'. An Iowa farmer falls in love with Jasmine and is driven to suicide finding Jasmine unresponsive. To a woman who has survived every kind of terror in her temporary sojourn though America, Americans seem fragile and babyish, too frightened of struggle to remember that it can build strength. It is a sad commentary that a land that has prided itself on such puritan virtues as hard-work, tenacity, determination and a rigorous work ethic, should lose one of its prime strengths, the capacity for suffering.

Suffering endows one with a certain amount of maturity leading to a clarity of vision which becomes the very basis through which we acquire" the capacity to examine our social identities considering them in light of our best understanding of the social facts and our other social relationships. Indeed this is what we do whenever we seek to transform ourselves in times of social and cultural change" (Mohanty 201).

Pain engendered by the other is discussed here in its three distinct manifestations; race, gender and sexuality. Suffering and pain is a recurrent motif in Mukherjee. Talking about the characters in her short story collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*, the author indicates that it is impossible to adopt to life in the New World without sustaining some

Remarking An Analisation

kind of wound to one's spirit. It is apparently a deeper wound for the women of the Third World, who are engaged in the struggle to fashion a new identity for themselves in an alien culture. Perhaps this struggle results from their sudden freedom from the bonds of traditional value system and cultural chauvinism that held them in their old familiar cultures. Freedom seems to leave them floating, unbalanced, in the complex, sometimes treacherous air of this new and unfamiliar culture. Paradoxically, this "refashioning" of the self is both painful and exhilarating; a change that is arduous and that entails the powerful act of rejecting the past and moving ahead, 'greedy with wants'. In "Massachusetts Review" interview, Mukherjee asserts:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries, which are plagued by civil and religious conflicts. We have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived. When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable, often heroic. (654)

Her character she asserts, "are filled with a hustlerish kind of energy" and, more importantly, They take risks they would not have taken in their old, comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are reborn. (654)

Mukherjee's choice of metaphor is especially apt with reference to the women in her fiction. For the act of rebirth, like birth itself, is both painful, and, after a certain point, inevitable. The women in Mukherjee's fiction experience this ongoing process of rebirth from which they can neither extricate themselves nor reverse the process, nor even want to do so. There is a part of them, however, that is able to stand back and observe their own reaction to the process. It is at these moments, when one is going through the experience and is capable of "standing back" that,

.... Epistemic reorientation takes place, on a very personal level, where an individual's recognition and conscious acceptance of her feelings makes possible the search and discovery through which [he]/ she comes to discern crucial features of[his]/ her situation" (Mohanty 214).

Many of Mukherjee's works expatiate upon the south Asian immigrant experience in North America, much of which is painful. Especially painful is the ignominy of racism. Indeed, one possible reading of her book 'Darkness' is as a reference to racial prejudice which can be interpreted as ".... A darkness of the mind toward the darkness of another person's skin." (C.L.Chua 55)

Before I analyse the racist experiences of the Mukherjee characters I should like touch upon racist thought. Racist thought is essentially ethnocentric.

Those espousing racist ideas invariably view ethnic groups as inferior. Moreover, such thought naturally leads to the idea that ethnic groups must be kept socially and especially, physically apart. To encourage social integration is to encourage physical integration, which, it follows, contributes to the degeneration of the superior group. (Marger, 27)

Most of the Mukherjee characters are voluntary immigrants. Driven by the success myth, they pursue their American dream relentlessly. In this pursuit, if they find anything most challenging, it is their encounter with a society steeped in racist ideology. The confrontation, gives them a social lesson. They come to realize that they have to cope with this most humiliating ideology.

The belief in innate differences among groups is used to justify the unequal distribution of a society's rewards. The place of groups at the top of the social hierarchy and those at the bottom is explained quite simply as "natural". Racist ideology, then, promotes an ethnic status quo in which one group predominates in the society's economy, polity, and other key power institutions and thus, receives the greatest share of the society's wealth.

Mukherjee's fiction represents such a Manichean view in matters of race. The characters in her fiction can be divided into two groups in terms of their ability to analyze their experiences. One group has neither the ability nor the will to learn from experiences. The other not only has the ability to analyze experiences but also has the power to make sense of those experiences. Such knowledge is essential to make their life in America meaningful. It is observed that those who fail to learn also fail to enter the mainstream of American Life. Her works set in Canada, reveal a greater amount of anger and bitterness than those set in the United States, especially on the topic of racism. It is retaliation against the discrimination that she herself encountered during her stay with her Canadian husband Clark Blaise. In fact, Mukherjee goes so far as to account for the violence of the novel *Wife* by saying that New York was only its "nominal setting"; "in the mind of the heroine, it is always Toronto" (Mukherjee, "An Invisible Woman," 39). For Mukherjee, the Canadian *Green Paper* of 1975 gave "implied consent... to racism" to Canadians of the "founding races" (ibid, 38). She bitterly reports, "I was followed by detectives in department stores who assumed I was a shoplifter or treated like a prostitute in hotels. I was even physically roughed up in a Toronto subway station" (Carb. 652).

In *Darkness*, perhaps the most graphic story about Canadian racism, is "Tamurlane," whose title is derived from the Central-Asia warrior king a plunderer, who was derisively nicknamed 'Timur the Lame' (Nazareth 185). It concerns an Indian

Remarking An Analisation

Canadian cook who becomes so incensed when a Mountie mistakenly tries to arrest him as an illegal immigrant that he chops off the Mountie's hand, defiantly holds his Canadian passport in front of his face as he is shot (125). "The World According to Hsu" is a much less shocking, more ironic, and nonetheless despairing story. Ratna, a Eurasian woman of Indian descent, and her husband, a white Canadian professor, are vacationing on an island nation in the Indian Ocean off the African coast. The couple is trying to decide whether to move their home from French Montreal to Anglo Toronto in order to advance the husband's career. As if in concert with their decision making, a military coup breaks out on the island which may determine its future. The uncertainty and insecurity of being uprooted and homeless is reflected in a back drop of uneasy politics and directionless supporting characters. The wife is unwilling to move home because of her experience of "Toronto racists". "In Toronto, she was not a Canadian, not even Indian. She was something called, after the imported idiom of London, a Paki. And for Pakis, Toronto was hell" (41). She also recalls a Punjabi boy's having been struck there by a car sporting a bumper sticker reading "KEEP CANADA GREEN, PAINT A PAKI" (47). But conflict, Mukherjee implies bitterly, seems to be fundamental to the world, not just racial or marital:

...abrasiveness is embedded in the very structure of the planet. The trope for this lies in the story's title, which derives from an article (by a scientist, Hsu) that the husband is reading. The article is on plate tectonics and describes how continents have been formed by plates of the earth's surface smashing or grating against each other. Informed by this metaphor of fundamental and ubiquitous conflict, the apparently facile optimism of the story's ending is open to an ironic reading: "She poured herself another glass [of wine], feeling for the moment at home in that collection of Indians and Europeans babbling in English and remembered dialects. No matter where she lived, she would never feel so at home again." (Chua, 56)

But if being "at home" means feeling at ease, secure, and free from conflict, then she is only deluding herself. The inescapable fact remains that Ratna is shunned as a "white rat" in India (44) and scorned as a "Paki" in Canada. Besides, she is clearly an alien on that island, surrounded by tourists (derogatorily described as "that collection") who are without homes there, "babbling" with each other without a "common unifying language" in a country without political stability. It may be concluded that Mukherjee's message here is full of irony and despair. For Ratna, it seems, will never really be "at home" anywhere.

Another story "Isolated Incidents" narrates incidents of what Mukherjee calls "institutionalized racism" at its worst. Annie Vane, a young woman working at the Human Rights Department has to deal with such cases of blatant racial discrimination on a regular basis.

She had been gathering data on the Supariwala case. Doctor (Miss) Supariwala was a stern, stocky woman of forty-three, with doctorates from Western Ontario and Bombay, who claimed to have been passed over at job interviews in favour of lesser candidates. She was a Canadian citizen, she had published numerous articles, she had won a few research grants. No one could fault her promptness, her discipline, her preparedness. Against these accomplishments were arrayed certain half-articulated, coded objections. Students would not relate easily to her, some might complain of her accent, her methodological stiffness, her lack of humour. My social poise and may good humour might be enhanced, Dr. Supariwala had written, if I had a position commensurate with my training. "She belongs to the world of research, not of the classroom," wrote one chairman, adding shyly, "like many of her countrywomen". "She should apply to Statscan", said another, "Sing-song accent" "The University year is a six-month voyage in a first-class stateroom, "wrote another, choosing the higher road." (66-67)

Dr. Supariwala's angst is obviously that of Mukherjee herself. Her protest and bitterness stem from the indignity that she had to suffer during her 14 years stay in Canada with her Canadian Husband Clark Blaise.

Canada is a country that officially and proudly, resists cultural fusion. For all its rhetoric about a cultural "mosaic", Canada refuses to renovate its national self-image to include its changing complexion. It is a New World country with Old World concepts of a fixed, exclusivist national identity. Canadian official rhetoric designated me as one of the "visible minority" who, even though I spoke the Canadian languages of English and French, was straining the absorptive capacity" of Canada. (Mukherjee "American Dreamer")

In the "Invisible Woman" Mukherjee writes that she identifies with these victims, and has explained her own traumatic series of 'entrapment' and 'claustrophobia' while living in Canada. Whatever identification she has managed to achieve as a writer

has been subject to the class expectation of the dominant race.

Great privilege had been conferred upon me; my struggle was to work hard enough to deserve it. And I did. This bred confidence, but not conceit Calcutta equipped me to survive theft or even assault; it did not equip me to accept proof of my unworthiness", ('Invisible Woman' 36, 38)

A second case of assault and violence, this time physical – that the young protagonist Miss Vane has to deal with in 'Isolated Incidents' is of John Mohan Persawd, a trained Indian electrician from Guyana. The location of assault being Queen Street Station, the victim arrives to complain of human rights violation with: "chipped teeth, cut lips, broken nose, blackened eyes, cuts, abrasions" (70). The victim's young lawyer has no faith in the police.

But what good are the police? The assailants fled. We have no witnesses. The police suggest my client got drunk and started a fight, Miss Vane. They make this boy feel like a complainer. The victims are made to feel guilty. (70)

The girl at the Human Right knows exactly what the outcome of such a complaint would be : an addition of documents to an already thick file. Incapable of mitigating their pain she remains merely a silent onlooker in this "small human drama that had lost its power to touch her" (71). All she can do is make a wry observation on her fellow countrymen, the perpetrators as well as silent and blind abettors of such human indignity:

And Torontonians were proud of their subway, their politeness, proud of their moral spotlessness. This after all was not New York. Assaults on John Mohan Persawd and dozens like him would always be considered isolated incidents, and who's to say they were racial in nature "Police treated it as simple assault, rowdiness, and drew no necessary inferences regarding race. No witnesses, no case, and police involvement ended. (71)

Reading into this observation of Miss Vane's (and by proxy Mukherjee's), I conclude that this , kind of racism which silences 'the other' can be beneficial neither to the perpetrator nor to the victim. As can be evinced from the above quote, by summarily dismissing such cases of 'violence' to both the body and the mind of 'the other' as 'isolated incidents', a society conveniently does away with the moral and political responsibilities towards its subjects thereby encouraging violent repercussions exemplified in the gruesome act of the chopping off the hand of the Mountie by the Indian cook in "Tamurlane". Whether you accept them or not these immigrants are here to stay, showing remarkable grit and determination to

make this country their own. For, as Miss Vane wonders.

... in spite of everything, the Supariwalas wanted to stay on. That was what amazed Ann. They came to her, cowering, crying, thundering, insulting – rehearsed or spontaneous – and still they found reasons for staying where Ann herself, on bad days, found few. (67)

Mukherjee herself admits that years of race-related harassments in Canada "politicized me and deepened my love of the ideals embedded in the American Bill of Rights". So we find that like her, the characters in her fiction emerge from the 'darkness' of racial oppression and 'exclusion' in Canada to acquire what Satya P. Mohanty calls on 'epistemic status' which allows them the freedom to become "the middle man" in the process of forging a new 'cultural identity'. As Craig Tapping rightly remarks: "Canada's loss – a generation of immigrants is the vitality and idealistic future that she now fictionally locates in America ..." and "By the time she emerges from this harassing exploration of Canada's institutionalized racism, India is no longer a geographical place that connotes "home" for Mukherjee, but rather a way of perceiving reality and adapting to the empirical world (297) America therefore becomes the adopted 'home' of the Mukherjee protagonists where their identity has to be re-invented. "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." (Mukherjee, "American Dreamer" 4).

'Re-invention' of the self is possible only when one can glean "knowledge" from "experience". The female protagonist Maya in the 'Tenant' (The Middlemen and Other Stories) is shocked when her landlord lover Fred, a man without arms refers to the two of them as "two wounded people," and thinks to herself that "She knows she is strange, and lonely, but being Indian is not the same, she would have thought, as being a freak" (112). Maya does not see herself as being as freakish as Fred. The implication in Fred's remarks appears to be that Maya's relationship with him, a man of the dominant culture with a woman of the 'visible minority community' has only been possible due to their 'commonality' or their 'woundedness'(physical in one case and psychological in the other). Maya resists being recognized as a 'freak' and does not see herself as being, as "armless" as Fred, though the story makes clear that she has been wounded emotionally and spiritually by the struggle to come to terms with her new life in America. The American colleague, Fran, chats about her own life and gossips a little about Maya's landlord while Maya contemplates the immensity of her isolation and loneliness. She longs to confide, but realizes that Fran is unable to receive these confidences because she cannot see that Maya is a woman caught in the mingled web of two very different cultures. To Fran, "a utopian and feminist" (100) Maya is a bold adventurer who has made a clean break with her Indian past. But she understands that, there is no such thing as a "clean" break. "She has a job, equity, three friends

Remarking An Analisation

she can count on for emergencies. She is an American citizen. But on the other hand, she feels she lives in a “dead space” and that “she has changed her citizenship, but she hasn’t broken through into the light, the vigour, the bustle of the New World” (110). And yet, at the end she does bustle off to meet the man who will make her whole again in this new life.

Maya is doubly marginalized: as ethnic and a divorcee, she is a “freak” for the white manlike Fred. As a divorcee, whose “misadventures in America” brands her as a loose woman she becomes the target of lewd sexual advances by Professor Rabin Chatterjee. “Ethnic women in America are clearly twice marginalized: by virtues of their ethnicity and their gender” (Bose, *Critical Perspectives* 47).

In the Mukherjee world, both “gender” and “sex” contribute to the process of othering. The distinction between the two needs to be stated.

The relations between women and men were ordained by nature. Sometimes a distinction is made between ‘sex’ as the biological differences between male and female and ‘gender’ as the cultural distinction between femininity and masculinity along with the social division between women and men. Not all feminists accept this distinction. Some think that it denies the importance of the physical body, while others argue that our understanding of the anatomically sexed body is itself socially constructed. We ourselves endorse the latter view. (Jackson and Scott, 2)

So much for the difference between gender and sex. In this study I take gender as a cultural category and permit a slight overlap of gender and sex in the course of my argument. In fact I seek to narrow it down further. The issue of gender comes up when I explore and explain the experiences of Mukherjee protagonists as women against men. Instead of ‘sex’ I prefer to use the term ‘sexuality’ in so far as the latter implies the inherent potentiality of the Mukherjee women to empower themselves. Sexuality thus is a mode of empowerment. When it suits my argument I borrow Leslie Bow’s ideas of feminism and sexual politics.

Mukherjee’s women have to battle “violently with the images of their own selves as representations of “Otherness” – exotic yet silent, capable yet repressed” (Bose 48). If “acquisition of Americanness” is an obsession with the “ethnic”, the other concern is to fight against a stereotypical image of Third-world “gendered subjectivity” and to acquire and retain an individual female identity that no longer needs to conform to traditional patterns.

For example, in “A Wife’s Story” a PhD candidate at Columbia narrates her adaptation to New York City’s special brand of Americanism. It becomes an alienating force in her interactions with her visiting Indian husband. While sitting through a play by David Mamet, she cringes at the insults meted out to Indians

– the acquisitive Patels, their passive women. She contemplates writing David Mamet and Steven Spielberg to complain of their stereotypical interpretations of her culture (‘Indians don’t eat monkey brains’). To Imre, her Hungarian boy friend, she says:

I don’t hate Mamet. It’s the tyranny of the American dream that scares me. First you don’t exist. Then you’re invisible. Then you are funny. Then you are disgusting. Insult, my American friends will tell me, is kind of acceptance. No instant dignity here. A play like this, back home, would cause riots. Communal, racist, antisocial. The actors wouldn’t make it off the stage. This play, and all these awful feelings, would be safely locked up. (The Middleman and Other Stories 26)

True, she is disgusted at the insults but she also seems to imply that it is only in America where “Freedom is worshipped as a Godhead” that such plays can be enacted without causing “riots”. This, she realizes, is a cause for celebrating America. Ironically, while defending her own culture, she is at the same time irrevocably estranged from it and finds herself viewing her husband in a distorted, disquieting light – “the result of her passage into and through one culture and his state of embeddedness in another” (35). Her immediate reaction is to protest. “Tears come, I want to stand, scream, make an awful scene, I long for ugly, nasty rage”. Yet she can still stand back and analyze the angst of both the acquisitiveness of the Patels on one hand and the actor salesman on stage who is only giving vent to his anger at the Patels’ “exploiting” his “space”. I know how both sides feel, that is the trouble” (27). There are moments when one has to strike a balance between emotion and reason. Panna seems poised in such situation:

Emotions fall somewhere between conscious reasoning and reflex like instinctual responses to stimuli. They are as Ronald de Sousa has proposed, ways of paying attention to the world. They fill the “gaps” between our instinctually driven desires, on the one hand, and our fully developed reasoning faculties, on the other, especially when we need to decide what to do or believe. (Mohanty 210)

The end of the story encapsulates both strength of her spirited “Struggle to refashion herself” and the difficulty of achieving wholeness when one is pulled between two cultures. On her way to bed with her husband, she stops to look at herself, finds herself transformed into a new self, as it were.

In the mirror that hangs on the bathroom door, I watch my naked body turn, the breasts, the thighs glow. The body’s beauty amazes. I stand here shameless, in ways he has never seen me. I am free afloat, watching somebody else. (41)

The strange luminosity of the lines makes the reader feel as if she had reached a moment of epiphany. One can only say that the freedom available to her in America facilitates the process of

self-discovery. She acquires a new knowledge of herself. And this, one can say, is the result of understanding the other, of being able to make sense of her experience in America.

The title "Wife's Story" has a charming irony about it. It would have been a wife's story if she had stayed in India, the American soil, somehow, changed it all. Instead of being cabined and confined as a wife, she permits herself to grow into a new woman, a true woman. Thus, in Mukherjee's hands the story transcends wifely limits to become, what I should prefer to call, "A Woman's Story". At last, the ending suggests so. Clearly, it is an instance of how the knowledge of the other helps one understand herself/himself better.

The next story, "Jasmine", also explores "the possibility of accurately interpreting the [inner] world" (Mohanty 214) by the eponymous protagonist, a young Trinidadian Indian woman who has been smuggled illegally into the U.S., by way of Canada "in the back of a gray van loaded with mattresses and box springs" (127). Once in U.S. she works first in a motel run by an Indian family who helped her get there, and later as a "mother's helper" ("Americans were good with words to cover their shame") (128) for an American family. When her American employers ask about her family and home, Jasmine recognizes the need to deceive them:

There was nothing to tell about her hometown that wouldn't shame her in front of nice white American folk like the Moffits. The place was shabby the people were grasping and cheating and lying and life was full of despair and drink and wanting. But by the time she finished, the island sounded romantic. (132)

Jasmine must construct a suitable, tolerable narrative of her past and her roots, in the same way that she is attempting to construct a positive narrative of her life in the New World. She seems precariously balanced between what she once was in Trinidad and what she hopes to become in her adopted homeland. America, for she remembers her father's warning: "Girl, is opportunity come only once" (128). Like other Mukherjee characters, she attempts "... to transcend the isolation of being a foreigner not only in another country but also in their own cultures" (Rustomji-Kerns 664). At the end of the story Jasmine accomplishes her "accommodation" to American life by "half-submitting" and "half-willing" an adulterous affair with Bill Moffit, the husband of her employer.

She felt so good she was dizzy. She'd never felt this good on the island where men did this all the time, and girls went along with it always for favours. You could not feel really good in a nothing place ... She was a bright, pretty girl with no visa, no papers, and no birth certificate. No, nothing other than what she wanted to invent and tell. She was a girl rushing wildly into the future.... It felt so good, so right that

she forgot all the dreariness of her new life and gave herself up to it. (138)

Jasmine here is conscious of the excitement of her new found independence where adultery feels "so good" and "so right". Yet Mukherjee subtly blends this positive sensation with a negative one "... she forgot the dreariness of her new life" Jasmine is allowed this double – vision of the other, her American life, which "emphasizes the compromised – exhilarating but painful – experience of the immigrant" (Morton – Mollo 39). Her Daddy was so right when he had said "You is a Luella girl, Jasmine" (134). Coming to America, we realize, "She had become her own person" (135).

Any [mis] interpretation that views Jasmine's sexual act as a form of exploitation by the other has been dispelled by Mukherjee herself. In an interview with Michael Connell she says:

Reviewers loved that story generally and loved that scene, but they saw Jasmine as an exploited young woman, and the white male, her employer, as a sleazy boss who is taking advantage of this poor, innocent, put-upon, au-pair girl. Whereas I meant for Jasmine to know exactly what it is she wants and what she is willing to trade off in order to get what she wants. She is in charge of the situation there. The man has succumbed to lust and to her sexuality. Jasmine is a woman who knows the power, is discovering the power of her sexuality. But no one got that, you see. (22)

I will conclude this chapter by going back to the novel 'Jasmine', illustrating upon a particularly poignant moment in the course of the protagonists journey from a feudal village. Hasnapur, in India to the flat lands of Baden in Iowa. The apocalyptic moment of Jasmine's self-assertion occurs as she sets foot on the American soil and is raped by Half-Face. In killing Half-Face, she experiences a violence that leads to a "life-affirming transformation".

For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. It was about not being human ... It was a very simple, very clear perception, a moment of truth, the kind of understanding that I have heard comes at the moment of death. (103)

She takes a decision that is momentous. Instead of committing "suttee" which amounts to killing herself, she decides upon another mode, a metaphoric death, which is death of her former self. Adopting the form of the terrible and ferocious Goddess Kali of the Hindu Pantheon, with named body, a bleeding tongue (that she has cut herself) she cuts the throat of her violator. "What a monstrous thing, what an infinitesimal thing, is the taking of a human life; ... I was walking death. Death incarnates (106). Jasmine has come to an understanding of the 'self' and the latent power, the "Shakti" (which

goddess Kali represents) within her, which enables her to become the destroyer of evil "Shakti" to Gloria Anzaldua would mean "the power of intuition". She says:

For centuries now ... it has always been a world of the intellect, reasoning, the machine. Here women were stuck with having tremendous powers of intuition experiencing other levels of reality and other realities yet they had to sit on it because men would say, well, you are crazy. All of a sudden there's reemergence of the intuitive energies – and they are very powerful. And if you apply them in your life on the personal and political plane then that gives you a tremendous amount of energy – it's almost like a volcano erupting. (qtd. In Dayal 82)

Jasmine understands the necessity to kill the evil "other" in order to make space for the "self". Jasmine in her childhood was "Jyoti", meaning "light" or "luminescence", that is, clarified and glowing, transformed by a dynamic acceptance – which allows her once more to be a 'travelling light' in the world" (Morton – Mollo 42)

Concluision

The Mukherjee characters studied here pass through a series of crises before they settle upon, what they feel, is a workable prescription for survival. They reach the stage through analysis and interpretation of experience and is this endeavour they defy every possible social/cultural construct. Experience, thus, helps them understand life. "It is on the basis of this ... understanding of experience that we can construct a realist theory of social or cultural identity in which experiences would not serve as

foundations because of their self-evident authenticity but would provide some of the raw material with which we construct identities. (Mohanty, 205)."

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