

CHANGING POWER EQUATIONS IN *THE MIDDLEMAN AND OTHER STORIES*

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Bharati Mukherjee's collection of short stories *The Middleman and other Stories* portray the struggle immigrants undergo for survival in USA, East Germany and Canada. Their aim is to prosper materially. Despite all the tensions in the new world, the immigrants do not suffer from liminality. They adapt themselves to the new culture with ease. They suffer less from cultural conflict but more from falling relationships and changing power equations.

In one of her interviews, Mukherjee tells Alison B Carb, "The immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformation in America and at the same time they alter the country's appearance and psychological make-up" (26). This two-way transformation is the theme of her collection of short stories, *The Middleman and Other Stories*.

The story "The Middleman" is the view point of Alfie Judah, an illegal immigrant from Iraq. He works for Clovis T. Ransome, an American who runs clandestine arms deals along with Bud Wilkins, another American in one of the Latin American countries with the backing of Gutiérrez, the president of the country. The relationships between the president and Ransome and Wilkins are not free from prejudice and suspicion. They work together for the sake of money and power. The revolutionaries hate the Americans and the English people more than their president. They call the Americans and the English, *gringos*, a derogatory term for foreigners.

Alfie Judah, the middleman, employed by Ransome is aware of the hatred that runs deep in the hearts of the natives, the Mayans, against Ransome and Wilkins. He prefers to stay in the ranch whenever Ransome moves into the jungle. Ransome too does not insist Alfie to accompany him. Alfie suspects that Ransome wants to keep him away from certain secret confabulations. Alfie is of the view that he will not be the target of the Mayans as he cannot be mistaken for an American because of the dark colour of his skin. He feels disturbed when he finds out that his services are exploited to settle political and personal rivalries.

The relationships in the story revolve around sex. Maria, the Mayan woman moves from one man to the other. These relationships on most of the occasions are thrust upon her. She becomes a commodity without any dignity. "Not just the beatings; the humiliations. Loaning her out, dangling her on a leash like a cheetah, then the beatings for what he suspects. It's the power game, I try to tell her. That's how power is played" (Mukherjee 19).

With the help of Alfie, Maria transports arms to the revolutionaries. She develops a relationship with the guerilla leader Andreas and Alfie. She kills her husband Ransome with

Andrea's gun. Alfie's life is saved simply because he had sex with her three times the previous night. "Never has a truth been burned so deeply in me, what I owe my life to, how simple the rules of survival are. She passes the gun to Andreas who holsters it, and they leave" (21).

Mukherjee brings out the facts that not only the illegal immigrants but the native women are also exploited by the wealthy and those who wield political power. She draws the attention of the readers towards totally opposite views on adultery in the cultures of America and Iraq.

Alfie suspects that the revolutionaries might kill Ransome, but he does not alert him. His interest in his own survival, his relationship with Maria, and his relationship with Ransome as an employee and employer which is not backed by emotional feelings prevent Alfie from coming to Ransome's rescue. He is least bothered about loyalty and morality.

Critic Subhash Chandra observes, "Bharati Mukherjee's fiction is in line with the mainstream fiction written in the post-second World War decades in America. Robert Stone's novels, for example, portray a Vietnamed America in which aggression has so thoroughly triumphed that tenderness no longer exists" (217).

Alfie, the middleman takes advantage of the differences in the cultural values to fulfil his desires. He spots opportunities to make money in politically volatile situations.

"A Wife's Story" focuses on two aspects. It reaffirms the hostile attitude of Americans towards Asians and Hispanics. It highlights how the immigrants and the prospective immigrants too gradually distance themselves from their roots in the process of assimilation and Americanization. These aspects have a significant impact on human relationships as they bring fissures in relationships and pave way for fresh connections.

Panna Bhat of Gujarat moves to USA to do Ph. D in special education. While watching a play in a theatre, she feels humiliated by the sarcastic remarks against Indians embedded in the play by the script writer David Mamet. Hostility runs so deep in the American socio-cultural scenario, even the field of theatre arts is not spared to humiliate Indians. The phenomenal success of Indian immigrants as industrialists, traders, doctors, engineers, scientists and professors has become an eyesore to the Americans. The myopic view of some of the White Americans, prevent them from realizing the fact that USA owes a lot to the immigrants for its terrific economic growth. The contribution of immigrants to American economy is often ignored due to racial prejudice and apathy towards the cultures of immigrants.

Panna who suffers from insults pours out her feelings. "First you don't exist. Then you are invisible. Then you're funny. Then you are disgusting. Insult, my American friends will tell me, is a kind of acceptance. No instant dignity here" (Mukherjee 26).

The influence of the newly found freedom on the immigrants who are driven by the "American Dream" is the other aspect of the story. Panna starts flirting with Imre, a refugee from Hungary and hugs him in the street. "I've made it. I'm making something of my life. I've left home, my husband, to get a Ph. D. in special ed. I have a multiple-entry visa and a small scholarship for two years. After that, we'll see" (29).

It is evident that she is not determined to go back to India after two years as planned originally and join her husband in Ahmedabad. She postpones the decision. She may weigh the advantages and disadvantages of going back to India. The temporary separation from her husband does not affect her the way it affects her husband. Mukherjee symbolically reveals the change in Panna. Her language undergoes change. She stops wearing her mother-in-law's ring. During her husband's brief stay in New York, she behaves as if she were the traditional and faithful Indian housewife. Unaware of her gradual assimilation into American culture, he requests her to come back to India. She reminds him that she should stay for two years to complete her Ph. D. She is relieved as her husband does not suspect her infidelity.

She watches her naked body in the mirror and feels that she is watching someone else. This symbolizes her changed persona. Her individuality, her outlook towards native ethos, and her not so loyal relationship with her husband, and the freedom she enjoys in the American society stand for her "Unhousement" and "Rehousement." In an interview, Mukherjee tells Geoff Hancock "Unhousement is the breaking away from the culture into which one was born, and in which one's place in society was assured. Rehousement is the re-rooting of oneself in a new culture. This requires transformation of the self" (19).

Panna's housemate Charity Chin is a classic example for metamorphosis, for total assimilation into American culture. Mukherjee's characters give the impression that liberal sex is a significant marker of adventure, change and progress. Answering to a question about her characters sexual freedom as an index of their Americanization, Mukherjee says:

So, for me and my authorial vision, having had the guts to take that step outside the safe parameters of the old self is in itself a kind of progress. It is positive, it is saying that change is possible, it is saying, "I'm willing to look for a new identity."

The risk-taking of some of these characters and their self-discovery can take many forms, but in the case of these women characters, because they have been so confined in terms of gender, their form of self-control takes the form of sexual liberation. But in my head, I never equated that with Americanization because I do not believe as an author, as an individual and as a citizen that there is any such thing as a fixed "Americanness". (Interview by Gabriel)

Mukherjee's portrayal of women characters gives the impression that her vision is blurred. She equates sexual liberation to self-discovery. In the diasporic space the immigrant women may find that the traditional social norms of the country of their origin cannot control them any longer and they are free. However, by breaking relationships and making new sexual relationships at will, Mukherjee's women characters have become slaves to senses. Does slavery to senses lead to emancipation? Never.

Individualism is the foremost tenet of American culture. In its positive way, it has helped the citizens to strive for personal achievements and also for the tremendous economic

growth of America. However, in its perverse form it has a disastrous effect on human relationships.

“Loose Ends” is the view point of Jeb Marshall, a White American. He is a Vietnam war veteran and returns to America after two decades, and is shocked by the transformation America undergoes due to the presence of immigrants from Asia and Latin America. Here Mukherjee employs imagery to make Marshall's prejudice against the immigrants vivid. Marshall compares the immigrants to locusts. It is obvious that though he is a war veteran his services are not considerably recognized in his homeland. He compares his life as a hired assassin to the affluent life styles of immigrants and develops a deep dislike towards them. He repels the conditions in which he has to live as a labourer while immigrants boss over him. He feels that his America in its ideal state is hijacked by immigrants making him an alien, a freak in his homeland. His long time girl friend Jonda loses her job in a mall run by immigrants when a guy from the same ethnic group of the immigrants shows up. There are fissures in Jeb's relationship with Jonda and as she leaves he becomes more pessimistic.

Jeb kills Chavez and his mate, a 14 year old girl for money, steals a car and heads towards Pensacola. On the way, he is robbed, and the robbers keep his car too. He hitch hikes and then walks down to a motel run by Patels, who are in celebration mood and ignore him. “They've forgotten me. I feel left out, left behind. While we were nailing up that big front door, these guys were sneaking in around back. They got their money, their family networks, and their secretive languages” (Mukherjee 53).

His bitterness towards the immigrants further deepens as he suspects that the young girl who shows him the room has a disgusting feeling towards him. He rapes and kills her. This violent act symbolizes offence against the immigrants by the racist white Americans. Jeb suffers from nostalgia. He compares the old Florida of two decades back with the new Florida inhabited by the Asians and Hispanics. He is disturbed by the changing relationship of self and society due to the presence of diasporic communities. Race consciousness prevents him from understanding the facts about the emergence of the United States of America. It is the land of immigrants. The great grandparents of almost every citizen of US A has passed through the Ellis Island.

Hasina Diner, professor of history at New York University observes, “Tens of millions of immigrants over four centuries have made the United States what it is today. They came to make new lives and livelihoods in the New World; their hard work benefited themselves and their new home country” (Immigration and US History, Online Posting).

The expression “new home country” is significant. It speaks volumes about the national spirit behind the contribution of immigrants to the economy of USA and its transformation from a British colony to a powerful nation in the world.

In “Orbiting”, Mukherjee uses body language as a prominent signifier to differentiate between American and Asian cultural norms. Food is the other cultural signifier in this story. These differences are perceived either positively or negatively depending on the attitude of individuals towards other cultures and the level of intimacy between the practitioners of

different cultures. Mukherjee chooses party time on Thanksgiving Day for the grand first meeting of Roashan, a refugee from Afghanistan and the family members of Renata, whose parents are of Italian origin. When Roashan turns the key and enters the apartment of Renata, her mother screams considering him an intruder. Though Renata's parents are waiting for her new boyfriend, her mother gets the wrong impression because of her apathy towards the people of dark skin colour. Renata's father too, thinking that Afghanistan is somewhere in Africa near Ethiopia comments arrogantly. He says, "We saw your famine camps on TV. Well, you won't starve this afternoon" (Mukherjee 68).

A series of shocks trouble the parents of Renata. Her father is under stress when he comes to know that Ro (Roashan) does not drink alcohol. He considers it abnormal and has a poor impression about Ro. Renata has to explain the taboos in the culture of Islam. Renata's brother-in-law's daughter Franny turns hostile as she observes the body language of Ro. She says that Renata always picks up wrong men and her comment irritates Renata. Mukherjee points out the different ways of registering one's presence in different cultures through the observations and feelings of Renata. "Asian men carry their bodies differently, even these famed warriors from the Khyber Pass. Ro doesn't stand like Brent or Dad. His hands hang kind of stiffly from the shoulder joints, and when he moves, his palms are tucked tight against thighs, his stomach sticks out like a slightly pregnant woman's" (70).

Ro's description of his pro American stance, his arrest and the torture he has undergone in jail in Kabul further distances him from the family members of Renata. However, to Renata, he remains a hero. To her, he is Clint Eastwood. She compares the scars on his body to those on the bodies of her father and brother-in-law. In the case of Ro, the scars are the result of his adventures in the war-torn Afghanistan. The scars on the bodies of her father and brother-in-law are due to a little bit of sporting activity. As Renata assesses the men, her love towards Ro deepens. However, the irony is that despite all her admiration for Ro, for what he is, she expects him to behave like an American. "I shall teach him how to walk like an American, how to dress like Brent but better, how to fill up a room as Dad does instead of melting and blending but sticking out in the Afghan way" (74-75).

While describing the passion and emotion in the relationship between Ro and Renata Mukherjee draws the attention of the readers how fragile the relationships between man and woman in the culture of America. Renata's former boyfriend declares his intention to separate.

He said, "I am leaving babe. New Jersey doesn't do it for me anymore." I said, "Okay, so where're we going?" I had an awful job at the time, taking orders for MCI. Vic said, "I didn't say we, babe." So I asked, "You mean it's over? Just like that?" And he said, "Isn't that the best way? No fuss, no hang-ups." Then I got a little whiny. "But *why*?" I wanted to know. But he was macrobiotic in lots of things, including relationships. (62)

The story "Fighting for the Rebound" further reflects the nature of interethnic relationships in the diasporic space. The relationships are based on the convenience, with the

sole aim of having physical pleasure without any emotional bonding. The story is the view point of a white American Griff. The behaviour of Blanquita, an immigrant from Manila creates the impression that the impact of Asian cultural values on the American lifestyle is insignificant, and the influence of American cultural norms on immigrants is enormous.

Griff is a small time financial consultant in Atlanta. His relationship with his clients is volatile depending on the matrix of profit and loss. He often unlists his telephone number to save himself from the ire of the customers. His relationships with Wendy and Emilou start casually and end with equal ease. However, his new girl friend, Blanquita is different from others. The difference is not just the physical appearance. Unlike his American girl friends, Blanquita insists that their relationship should be enriched by the feeling of togetherness. She differentiates between liking and loving. She generalizes the behaviour pattern of Griff and makes a profound analysis of the behaviour patterns of Americans. “You're all emotional cripples. All you Americans. You just worry about your own measly little relationships. You don't care how much you hurt the world” (85).

Critique Subhash Chandra observes, “In this fictional world of the story, it is not the emotions but the holding of the tea cup that warms the hands. Brief breathlessness of sex passes for love. No wonder, they are all so lonely and so alienated” (215).

One day Blanquita leaves Griff thinking that Griff's “chief” will be a better option. Griff does not suffer much from the separation. He meets Maura in an art frame's shop. Her status as a divorcee with no kids is an added attraction for him. Within a few hours, they have a physical relationship. While Maura is still in his bed, Blanquita calls him and says that the “chief” has cheated her, and he should rescue her. The phone call sounds warning signals to Maura. The relationship breaks after just one night.

Relationship between man and woman has different meanings in different cultures. Mukherjee's story re establishes the pattern in American culture where relationship between man and woman revolves around sex. In Asian cultures, an emotional relationship precedes physical union, and because of this strong emotional bonding the relationship lasts longer, and in many cases a connection lasts for a lifetime. The Americanization of Blanquita reveals how immigrants while negotiating new identities in the diasporic space, get assimilated into the dominant culture bypassing the traditions of their homelands.

Precepts and prejudices make or mar relationships. The story, “The Tenant”, set in Cedar Falls, Iowa, explores the relationships between immigrants and between immigrants and the white Americans. The most shocking part of the story is the assumption of Maya Sanyal about the likely attitude of Fred, her landlord and lover, and the most elevating part of the story is the way Mrs. Chatterjee establishes communion with God.

In this narrative Mukherjee uses the present tense mostly. However, the shift in the tense between past and present affects the readability factor. Mukherjee brings out the difference in the views of Maya and her friend Fran, a Swede, regarding strained relationships. When Maya's marriage with John, an American, lasts just for two years, she repents for marrying him and for mistaking sex for love. The separation inflicts pain on her which remains for a long time. Gradually the pain subsides, but she still feels that loss. Fran

who breaks up with Vern has an opposite view. "I don't feel abandoned." She pushes her chair away from the table. "Anyway, it was a sex thing totally. We were good together. It'd be different if I'd loved him" (Mukherjee 98).

Maya has friendly relationships with Fern. She helps Maya in getting an appointment as a lecturer in the Northern Iowa University. Though Fern is the most trusted and reliable friend, Maya does not reveal the secrets of her life. She simply tells her that she is a divorcee. Despite her 10 year long stay in USA, Maya is often disturbed by the feeling that she does not belong to that country fully. Further exploration of her character reveals that there is a cumulative effect of a couple of issues on her persona. 1. In the eyes of the white Americans she remains the cultural other despite her legal citizenship. 2. The gossiping among the Bengali community in USA about her family scandals in Calcutta (now Kolkata), about her revolutionary interethnic marriage with a white American and the subsequent break up and about many men in her life who often remind her, her roots.

Maya's visit to another Bengali family, Chatterjees creates in her mind a negative impression about Dr. Chatterjee. She hates him for his views against the possible interethnic marriage between Mrs. Chatterjee's nephew Poltoo and a "Negro Muslim." He poses as if he were the custodian of the traditions of Bengali Brahmins. However, his stance on traditions is not backed by virtues. Maya, a divorcee feels loneliness and surprisingly Dr. Chatterjee a married man too feels loneliness. This reveals the hollowness in human relationships. One may feel lonely even in the intimate space of home amidst family members.

Wounded by the loss of the break up with John, and embarrassed by the sexually explicit expressions of Dr. Chatterjee, Maya looks for Indian men settled in USA in the matrimonial columns, and contacts Ashok Mehta. After their meeting, she feels that he is the one who can fill the "dead space" in her life. While waiting for his promised call, she has to move to a new house. Her new landlord Fred has no arms, but he is self reliant. As there is no call from Ashok Mehta, she considers settling with Fred. However, she finds it difficult to relate herself to Fred the way she relates herself to Ashok Mehta. She imagines a possible situation. "Two wounded people, he will joke during their nightly contortions. It will shock her, this assumed equivalence with a man so strikingly deficient. She knows she is strange, and lonely, but being Indian is not the same, she would have thought, as being a freak" (112).

One night, Ashok Mehta calls and Maya moves out to meet him. Eveliina Pääkkönen in her critical work quotes Andrea Daska. "Mukherjee tells her story in third person, which Daska interprets as a way of emphasizing Maya's lack of authority over her own life as she wavers between the rejected Indian identity and the unfitting American one" (86).

In the story, "The Tenant", Mukherjee subtly draws the attention of the readers towards the highly rewarding experience of speaking to God. Both Maya and Mrs. Chatterjee are in grief. In contrast to Maya, who feels void in her life, Mrs. Chatterjee gets solace by invoking the grace of God through music. She establishes a relationship with God through devotional singing. In that attempt, she raises her consciousness to higher planes.

The story "Fathering" addresses the challenges of hybrid families in USA. Jason, a veteran of Vietnam War returns to America after the war and makes teaching his profession.

He tries to let go his experiences in Vietnam including his interethnic sexual encounter with a bar girl in Saigon. However, he has to track down his Vietnamese daughter after 10 years. His girlfriend Sharon too encourages the idea of adopting the girl. Gradually, the initial enthusiasm wanes away, and the girl Eng and Sharon find it extremely difficult to tolerate each other's presence. They both become possessive of Jason, and he is torn between the roles of boyfriend and father. Sharon fails in Americanizing Eng. As there is no genuine intercultural interaction, Eng and Sharon remain alien to each other though they reside under one roof. They hate each other's presence and this drives them crazy. "Everything was fine until she got here. Send her back, Jase. If you love me, send her back"" (Mukherjee123).

The fate of Eng's mother in Saigon is not known. By refraining from giving those details, Mukherjee tries to focus on the conflicts in the interethnic family in USA. Eng and Sharon hold fast to their cultural identities. Eng becomes hysterical due to the feeling of insecurity and hatred, and inflicts bruises on her body by fiercely pressing coins. Sharon too feels depressed. The three end up in a doctor's house and Eng refuses to cooperate with the doctor when he tries to treat her. Jason decides that he should rescue his daughter from her "enemies"- Sharon and the doctor. He prefers to desert Sharon for the sake of his Vietnamese daughter.

Eveliina Pääkkönen observes, "The unsympathetic portrayal of Sharon as the evil step mother is another way to question the norm of the ideal American family. Sharon resists the role of the nurturing mother, wanting to return Eng when she does not fit her preconceptions" (53).

Sharon symbolizes the American's intolerance towards the cultures of Asia and the Asians remain the West's Other. However, the bonding between Jason and Eng is the positive side of the relationship as Eng will become an orphan if he sends her back to Vietnam.

In the beginning Sharon believes that adoption of Eng will boost her relationship with Jason, and it will lead to their marriage, but Eng's presence culminates in breaking up of the family as the cross cultural conflicts run deep into their minds resulting in treating each other as alien, and even potentially evil. When Jason tries to calm down Eng by reading from a novel, Eng shows no interest and stops listening. The theme in the novel, the takeover of USA, state after state, by aliens, is a metaphor for the fears Sharon has about the presence of an alien kid in her home.

In the story "Jasmine", the relationship between Jasmine, the illegal immigrant from Trinidad, and her American employer, Bill Moffitt, is open for contradicting interpretations. Bharati Mukherjee tells Connel, Grearson and Grimes in her interview that the sexual relationship between Jasmine and Bill should not be understood as exploitation. Mukherjee argues "Jasmine is a woman who knows the power, is discovering the power of sexuality" (50).

Though Mukherjee's argument is still debatable, some of Jasmine's actions and her feelings give some credence to her argument. Jasmine flirts with the Asst. Manager of a bank in Trinidad to get the loan sanctioned to meet her travel expenses. While making love, Bill calls her "flower of Trinidad" she corrects him saying "flower of Ann Arbor". This shows her

ambition to become part of USA, the land of opportunities. Jasmine's travails of migration are not the result of poverty. As the daughter of Dr. Vassanji, she enjoys respectable social status in Trinidad. This is evident from the way she compares her position with Daboos from Trinidad who run a motel in Detroit. She feels that she is above them from the social positioning point of view. The desire to move to U S A is so irresistible that she cannot assess the real life situations logically.

Her relationship with Daboos appears to be normal outwardly but Jasmine knows that she is exploited by them. She keeps books for them, clean rooms and works on the marriage service too. Though Daboos promise to pay wages, it never materializes. Mr. Daboo complements her giving the impression that she is significant and has an identity.

Her move to the house of Moffitts does not bring remarkable changes in her status. However, Jasmine has her own reasons for being cheerful. Now, she gets wages, three times more than promised by Daboos. She admires the well settled Americans, Moffitts, as she is hopeful that with their help she gets some foothold in America, and in the course of time, she can realize her ambitions.

Moffitts are smart enough to create the feeling that they care for Jasmine and she is part of the family. "Lara said, I think I'm going to like you, Jasmine. You have a something about you. A something real special. I'll just bet you've acted, haven't you?" (132). When Jasmine describes her hometown, Port-of -Spain, Lara says, "It wouldn't surprise me one bit if you were a writer, Jasmine" (132). On Christmas Day, the Moffitts give her a red cashmere sweater. All these small favours make her believe that she is part of the family and make her feel good, despite the fact that she is a domestic help in that house.

Andriana Raducanu analyzing the state of Jasmine says:

Jasmine's new existence is still drudgery, it still lacks the attributes of liveliness, cheerfulness and resourcefulness, which are the qualities of the character, unable to be projected onto the new circumstances; the readers are made aware of it, too. Thus it can be inferred that the use of the omniscient perspective marks a female character's saga, which is still not a story of success, but a tentative way of adapting to a new existence, which is, in spite of the appearances of emancipation and self-determination, not much more than a perfected replica of the former one. (13-14)

Jasmine and her father Dr. Vassanji believe that the quickest and surest and smartest way for legal citizenship of USA, is getting married to an American citizen. In negotiating this cherished new identity, values are dropped with ease. Mukherjee's women protagonists treat sex as the most potent weapon to get emancipated. Most of her women characters believe that liberal sex is a synonym for Americanization. This is the recurring motif in the short stories of Mukherjee.

The story "Danny's Girls" focuses on the trafficking of women from the Indian subcontinent to USA under the cover of the mail-order bride business, and on relationships

between individuals within the ethnic communities. Danny (Dinesh) an Indian origin business man runs a marriage racket. The story is the viewpoint of another Indian origin teenage boy who works for Danny. The boy helps Danny pasting the posters on the walls in subways and passing out pamphlets. He admires Danny for his dynamism and business talents. The boy takes pride in his job and identifies himself as the partner of Danny. The abilities of Danny in carrying out the marriage racket successfully without being caught by the immigrant officials impress the teenager.

“Danny's Girls” shares some aspects with “Jasmine.” In both the stories, the protagonists take up menial jobs owing to circumstances. In both the cases, their employers exploit them. However, their perceptions differ. At the end of the story, Jasmine remains in the world of fantasy. Though there is a possibility for interpreting that Jasmine uses her power of sex and her beauty to realize her dream, the ending of the story does not give any signs of emancipation. In contrast, the protagonist in “Danny's Girls” realizes that he is exploited. He revolts against employer when he humiliates him. His admiration for Danny vanishes, and he treats him as his enemy. The boy finds solace in the company of Rosie, who migrates to USA as a mail order bride. His romantic feelings towards Rosie make him rebel against Danny. In Mukherjee's stories, exploitation of immigrants by fellow immigrants is a recurring motif. This raises questions about the value system in ethnic communities settled in far of lands.

In the story “Buried Lives”, set in Sri Lanka and East Germany, two women are responsible for the unexpected twists and turns in the life of a humble school teacher, Venkatesan. One woman creates troubles for him and the other rescues him. The title “Buried Lives” is the modification of Mathew Arnold's poem “Buried Life.”

Venkatesan, the 49 year old school teacher in Trincomalee teaches English and has a great admiration for Mathew Arnold's poetry. Venkatesan is restless just like the lover in “Buried Life.” The poem evokes sad feelings and the life of Venkatesan too is emotionally disturbed. He is a peace loving resident of Sri Lanka without any links with Tamil organizations, which are fighting against Sri Lankan government for freedom. His life takes a violent turn as he is instigated to participate in a march by his sister's suitor, a revolutionary. In the march when his sister is attacked By Buddhist monks, Venkatesan throws an axe and it hits the hand of a home guards officer. Afraid of the consequences he desperately tries to move out of Sri Lanka. His affection towards other members of his family decreases as his sister threatens him that she will report to the police that he is the one who has thrown the axe if he doesn't agree for her marriage with the revolutionary boy. Venkatesan's desire to go abroad gains strength when one of his colleagues in the school, Miss Philomena tells that she will leave for Michigan though as a “domestic” initially, in the next autumn she will sign up for postgraduate studies. His sister's suitor introduces him to a middleman who creates fake documents and Venkatesan believes that he will be able to travel to Canada with those papers and settle down there and takes the help of Tamil tigers for his journey. Despite his protests, he is dumped in Hamburg near a refugee centre. Rammi, a solicitor takes him to his cousin Queenie who runs a hotel, promising him that he will stay his deportation orders. Queenie, a

widow with a daughter of eight or nine years old, is of Sinhalese origin, and Venkatesan is able to relate to her in that depressed mood.

Venkatesan who is attracted by her beauty strikes an emotional bonding with her and has a fatherly feeling towards her kleptomaniac daughter. He loses interest in moving to Canada. When he is caught by the German tourist from Lübeck who tries to get him arrested, Queenie intervenes. "Then, suddenly, Queenie the beautiful, the deliverer of radiant dreams, burst through the door of the kitchen. "leave him alone!" she yelled to the man from Lübeck. "You're harassing my fiancé! He's a future German citizen. He will become my husband!" (Mukherjee 176).

Eveliina Pääkkönen points out, "The plot is a reversal not only of the direction of colonial adventure stories, but also of the gender roles of a conventional immigrant romance. It is the hero who has to seek for stability and meaning via his role in the family, whereas the heroine is the one who is in a more powerful and stable position" (75).

The life of Queenie is not similar to the lives of the women characters in "The Middleman" and "Danny's Girls" In "The Middleman" Maria is exploited. She is made a toy in the hands of politicians and businessmen. Some of the women characters in "Danny's Girls" are commodified. However, Queenie is in a commanding position. Though she runs the business of sheltering transients without valid papers, as a German citizen she feels secure and confident. With that authority, she confronts the tourist who tries to get Venkatesan arrested. The announcement of the marriage appears to be sudden and without any proposal. However, Venkatesan has been contemplating on it for some time though he doesn't exchange his thoughts to Queenie. She too entertains similar ideas.

The surge of thoughts Venkatesan has when his presence is questioned by the German tourist are insightful. He feels that the situation he finds himself is not at all accidental. "He remembered what had consoled Dr. Pillai at the time of his arrest. Fractals. Nothing was random, the math teacher used to say. Nothing, not even the curliness of a coastline and the fluffiness of a cloud" (Mukherjee 175). Here, Mukherjee touches the depths of cause and effect and permutations and combinations that govern not only the human life but also the existence of the world.

Mukherjee's short story "The Management of Grief" is based on the 1985 bombing of an air India plane mostly occupied by the Canadian citizens of Indian origin. The plane crashed off the Irish coast. Mukherjee and her husband Clarke Blaise had written a book titled *The Sorrow and the Terror*, and it was published in 1987.

In the short story, Mukherjee focuses on the grieving Indian community in Toronto, the apathy of the Canadian Government and on how the Irish share their grief with the Indians. The story starts with the loss of life and the abrupt end of family relationships. The story is the view point of 36 year old Shaila Bhavé who has lost her husband and two sons in the plane crash. Members of Indo-Canadian Society join hands to help the bereaved families. Shaila's neighbour Kusum has lost her husband and younger daughter. An elderly and illiterate Punjabi couple have lost their son. Dr. Ranganathan has lost several members of his family.

Shaila who is in the shock is silent most of the time and people around her think that she is stoical. When Kusum joins her and starts the conversation she opens her mouth. The loss and the adversity make her recollect and analyze her attitude towards her husband. She worries about her possible shortcomings in expressing her love to her husband in the proper way.

“I never once told him that I loved him,” I say. I was too much the well brought up woman. I was so well brought up I never felt comfortable calling my husband by his first name.

“It's all right,” Kusum says. “He knew. My husband knew.

They felt it. Modern young girls have to say it because what they feel is fake.”
(181)

Here, Mukherjee points out the differences between generations in the ways they express their emotions. These days the word “love” is frequently used by boys and girls in their conversations, and the expression is not always backed by affection. In this story, Mukherjee brings out the prejudices between siblings and their affect on the relationships between mother and child. “Mummy wishes my little sister were alive and I were dead” (182).

Shaila, Kusum, Dr Ranganath and some other mourners visit Irish coast with the hope to recover the bodies. There they find the difference between the Canadians and the Irish. “The Irish are not shy; they rush to me and give me hugs and some are crying. I cannot imagine reactions like that on the streets of Toronto. Just strangers and I am touched. Some carry flowers with them and give them to any Indian they see” (187).

Cultures differ but not compassion. People of different cultures can unite when disaster strikes. However, Canadians are insensitive to such moral obligations and react coldly when hundreds of Canadian citizens of Indian origin die. Shaila does not trust Judith Templeton, an appointee of the provincial government who seeks her help in reaching the mourners. She fails to understand the feelings of the mourners and proves incompetent as she goes by the guidelines given in textbooks on managing grief.

People react differently to family tragedies. Some men within a few months of the demise of their wives remarry and start new families. Shaila is not cut for such moves. When Shaila visits the elderly and illiterate Sikh couple along with Judith Templeton, she is able to transcend the religious barriers and interact with them. The fact that Sikh terrorists are behind the plane crash does not deter her as she identifies with them as innocent parents who have lost their son just like her.

Shaila's spiritual experience in a temple in India and later in Toronto can be interpreted as that she might be listening to her inner voice. In Queen's park in Toronto, she hears the voices of her family one last time. “Your time has come, they said. Go, be brave” (197).

Here, the phrase “one last time” is significant and is open for several interpretations. Dropping the package symbolizes dropping of the worldly burdens. She starts walking away

from the pulls of the worldly attachments into the freedom of eternity.

P.A Abraham observes, “The stories do not give any solutions for the problems faced by these expatriates. They just point out certain crucial moments in their lives and that moment is indeed a moment of revelation or as James Joyce who was also an expatriate called it "epiphany.”

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