

# THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE: THE OTHER IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S FICTION

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**Abstract:** A study of the predicament of the immigrants in Bharati Mukherjee's fiction reveals two facts: that they must prepare themselves to embrace the American reality and have to recognize the intersection of the normative cultural values of their native land and the basic principles that constitute American identity. Put another way, it is not merely a problem of adjustment to the culture of the New World; it is a crisis that goes beyond the manifestations of their social reality, a crisis of the epistemic status of cultural identity. These protagonists find themselves mined in intractable difficulties that "otherness" engenders. They are 'othered' by the dominating culture and they themselves, owing emotional allegiance to their native culture, other the culture of the New World. To get out of this impasse they need, not only the legitimization of their native culture, but also the "epistemic status of their cultural identity".

In colonial and post-colonial studies, the 'Other' tends to stand for the colonized culture or people as viewed by the dominant power. In a society like the America, known as the nation of nations, the immigrant community, particularly the Asian immigrant, is viewed as the other. Similarly, Asian immigrants on their part look upon the dominant power as the "Other". Whatever its precise complexion, the other in these accounts is primarily an impingement from outside that challenges assumptions, habits and values and that demands a response. The other is the other because its center of consciousness, its ethical claim on "me" or some such fact about it is wholly beyond "my" grasp, absolutely foreign to "me" and to "my" experience.

How the characters in Mukherjee's fiction meet the challenge of this "other" is the focus of this essay. Alpana Sharma Kipling argues that, Mukherjee, in attempting to write 'non-traditional' stories of Asian immigrants, is far from being radical in approach in her representation of 'the other'. She says:

Mukherjee ignores the role that representation (of the other) plays in the textual production of her writing and, second, that she homogenizes her ethnic minority immigrant subjects, instead of calling attention to the actual heterogeneity of ethnic minority immigrant subjects in the United States. (Critical Perspectives 144)

Such homogenization is not tenable in so far as it runs counter to Mukherjee's own pronouncements about herself:

From childhood we learned how to be two things simultaneously: to be the dispossessed as well as the dispossessor .... History forced us to see ourselves as both the "we" and the "other", and the language reflected our simultaneity .... Perhaps it is this history-mandated training in seeing myself as 'the other' that now heaps on me a fluid set of identities denied to most of my mainstream American counterparts. ("Immigrant Writing" 29)

Kipling's allegation that Bharati Mukherjee 'homogenizes her ethnic minority immigrant subjects' in her writing necessitates a wider discussion of the term 'ethnicity' and what it has come to mean in the American contest. According to Bonnie TuSmith ("All my Relatives" 32) the word 'ethnic' has been derived from two sources, the Greek Words 'ethnos' and 'ethnicos'. The word 'ethnos' meaning 'nation' or people refers to a sense of peoplehood or community. The word 'ethnikos' on the other hand definitely points at a derogatory meaning used for 'heathen' or 'other'. TuSmith says that Werner Sollors, in Beyond Ethnicity, refers to this second meaning and points out that the traditional Christian use of the word 'heathen' as opposed to the 'chosen' may be transferred to the American context in defining 'ethnic' versus 'American'. In this sense an ethnic is differentiated as the 'other' or "not fully American" (Sollors 25). "This definition" says TuSmith "makes it difficult for WASPS (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) to be considered as ethnics. After all, in order to have an "other" there must be a self. In other words, WASPS are the norm to whom ethnics are "other". ("All My Relatives" 2)

In the context of Mukherjee writings, the Asian Immigrant is the 'other' to which the dominant culture is the self. However, Mukherjee in many of her short fiction reverses the process where the alien, somebody who is not me nor mine, is considered the other. So, the other here is discussed not merely as the ethnic Asian Immigrant but also the dominant American culture. Even though the common usage makes 'ethnicity' synonymous with 'otherness'.

The challenge of the other in the fictional world of Mukherjee leads to violence and subsequent reconciliation with either the perpetrator or the victim arriving at a psychosocial poise which allows for a fresh beginning. The essay deals with this idea elaborately by evaluating both the short stories as well as the novels of Mukherjee. Towards this purpose, it will be convenient to

divide the characters into two types. First the dominant culture as it sees the 'ethnic' (here the Other is the Asian – American) and secondly the ethnic as it negotiates with the dominant culture (the Other).

In "Sexuality as a Symbolic Form: Performance and Anxiety in America", David Kemnitzer explicates the 'mediate identities' or identities between two or more modes of existence according to which

One does not exist solely as an individual and a citizen or a member of a species; the gap between the two is filled by other group memberships of a particular sort: families, ethnic groups, and so on, to which one is recruited by 'birth' (which is by blood: a sharing of substance, of being between people), and voluntary organizations of which one is member because of the kind of person one is .... (Dolgin, Symbolic 301)

Once an ethnic decides to immigrate he automatically comes into the fold of a "consent-relationship" with the 'other'. David Schneider's differentiation between 'involuntary blood relationship' and the relationship by law like marriage here can be a metaphor for the relationship between American and ethnic identities. The ethnic's willingness to choose America as his political and social destination presupposes a willingness to have a constructive relationship with the 'other' dominant culture. It becomes 'a matter of volition' and according to Schneider is symbolized by marital sexual intercourse (38). As Werner Sollors points out these two, one a descent relationship and the other a consent relationship, are opposed to each other. He says:

"To say it plainly, American identity is often imagined as a volitional consent, as love and marriage, ethnicity as seemingly immutable ancestry and descent." (Beyond Ethnicity 151)

The conflict between the culture of their native country and that of the western world to which they have moved is a strong influence on the characters in the stories. The extent of their ability to succeed in their negotiation with the other in the process of Americanization is in direct proportion to the degree to which these characters can step outside the roles of their ethnicity and assert their independence. But often it is not easy to define roles and make independent decisions in a strange world.

In "A Wife's Story" in *The Middleman and Other Stories* Panna the protagonist squirms as she sits through a play written by David Mamet, where white Americans poke fun at and dart sarcastic, crude remarks on Indians and their acquisitive business class. "Patels are hard to sell real estate to. You buy them a beer, whisper Glengarry Glen Ross, and they smell swamp instead of sun and surf. They work hard, eat cheap, live ten to a room, stash their savings under futons in Queens, and before you know it they own half of Hoboken" (25). Reacting to this insult Panna says:

"I don't hate Mamet. It's the tyranny of the American dream that scares me. First, you do not exist. Then you are invisible. Then you are funny. Then you're disgusting. Insult, my American friends will tell me, is a kind of acceptance. No instant dignity here. (26)

The fear and suspicion of the other usurping the position, place and employment of the dominant culture is also evident in another story "Loose ends". The protagonist sneers at the illegal immigrants who penetrate through the coastal regions of America, threatening to grab what the dominant culture rightfully considers its own. As the protagonist barges into a motel owned by Indians, "Vaults into the staff area" and "kicks open a door that say 'STRICTLY PRIVATE' he is suddenly faced with a crowd of Indians eating with their hands while seated on the floor cross-legged. "They look at me. A bunch of aliens and they stare like I'm the freak" (52). Clearly this is situation where the dominant suddenly feels dominated and is enraged by a sense of betrayal, threat and disgust. "While we were nailing up the big front door, these guys were sneaking in around the back. They got their money, their family networks, and their secretive languages." (52).

Overtaken by the fear, the frustration of being a nobody in one's own country, has violent consequences, manifested in the man raping the girl who volunteers to show him to his room. 'I pounce on Alice before she can drop down below and take America with her' (53). This becomes his revenge; his way of grabbing at what he feels rightfully belongs to him as he steals one of the parked cars and races away towards an unknown destination.

This may be taken as a classic case of "cultural hegemony at work", "a relationship of power, of domination" (Orientation 6,7). It is the perpetrator's way of overpowering the other (here the unfathomable Orient). In his study on Orientalism Edward W. Said points out that in the relationship between, the "Occident" and the "Orient", the balance of power has been always tilted towards the former. In defining Orientalism Said says:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient-dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (p-3)

America is looked up to as a neo-colonial power. Yet, ironically, even on its own soil, it feels threatened in the presence of the aliens, who it thinks are out to usurp its supremacy. Its "authority" appears to be slipping away as the Orientals become more

prosperous in the new world of the South Asia. As Feroza Jussawalla in her essay “Chiffon Saris: The Plight of south Asian Immigrants in the New World”, points out:

Californians and Texans have long known the value of Sikh farmers and yet often have been resentful of their success .... This is the enigma of the South Asian immigrant in the New World – the enigma of success, of accomplishment, of having made an impact, and also of denigration, of discrimination – the enigma of “holding on” versus of “letting-to” as in Naipaul’s Enigma of Arrival. (5)

A similar violent reaction of resentment surfaces in “Nostalgia”. Mr. Horowitz, a 319 – pound schizophrenic, an inmate in a New York hospital where Dr. Manny Patel is a Psychiatric Resident, suddenly lunges forward at the doctor calling him in exquisite English “Paki Scum”, (a derogatory term used to describe immigrant Pakistanis in the U.S), unaware that he is from India. Thus, resentment for ‘the other’ culminates in an act of violence.

Strangely enough, apart from the relationship of hegemony of the dominant culture with the immigrant, there is also an attraction for the strange or the exotic Orient “... the many stereotypical perceptions of the mystic and inscrutable East trapped in abject poverty and exotic timelessness” (Katrak, and R. Radhakrishnan).

In the eponymous novel *Jasmine*, the protagonist is treated as the inscrutable, the exotic Maharani by her banker-lover Bud Ripplemeyer. Confronted by repeated pleas from Bud Ripplemeyer, Jasmine reflects upon how much he does not know about her. In fact, he has studiously avoided such knowledge, since her “genuine foreignness frightens him” (22). Instead his desire and interest in her are spurred by his images of ‘Eastern’ women. For her prospective husband, she is “darkness, mystery, inscrutability”. The East plunges me into vitality and wisdom.” (178). In contrast to her, Bud lives innocently within “the straight lines and smooth planes of his history” (190).

As an exotic young woman from the East her role is defined by the expectations of others around her. Her neighbor a young farm-owner Darrel Lutz is also attracted to her and grows spices in his farm to please her. “Last Summer Darrel sent away to California for ‘Oriental herb garden’ cuttings and planted some things for me – coriander, mainly, and dill weed, fenugreek and about five kinds of chilli peppers.” (77)

Jasmine continues to keep up the façade of the charming Indian hostess- “They get disappointed if there’s not something Indian on the table”. (7) Jasmine’s well-defined role as a temptress and a charming hostess is dependent upon her conforming to the myth of the woman from the East. The strange combination of Bud, a white American and Jasmine a brown Indian is not unusual to the changing American mind. In fact, even though they are only living together and not officially married, people make their own assumptions.

People assume we are married. He is a small-town banker, he is not allowed to do impulsive things. I am less than half his age, and very foreign. We are the kind who marry. Going for me is this: he was not in a wheel chair when we met. I did not leave him after it happened. (5)

Jasmine’s role as a nurse and caregiver devoted to her spouse is also a mythical construct of the oriental women.

The immigrant’s survival is threatened at the moment of their emergence into visibility. They then become the locus of suspicion and discourse. As a “visible minority” they are enveloped in an “atmosphere of hostility” based upon a whole series of “crippling assumptions”. (Bharati Mukherjee, Interview, Connell et al) that are the product of prior colonialism and cultural myths. These myths then represent and influence their behavior towards the native. For the protagonist of *Jasmine* these myths of the available and passive Eastern woman create the climate that legitimizes her rape.

As an illegal immigrant travelling on a forged passport, she must complete her pilgrimage to Tampa abroad ‘the Gulf Shuttle’, a shrimper engaged in the “nigger-shipping bizness” (99). She ends up in a motel room at the run-down Florida Court with the captain of the trawler, Half-Face, whose name derives from the loss of any eye, an ear and half his face in Vietnam, where he served as a demolition expert. Half-face, a character “from the underworld of evil” (103), is thus marked by his neo-colonialist experience in Southeast Asia, and in this sense is like the young man at the bar later in the novel who reacts to Jasmine’s entrance with the remark that ‘I know whose power when I see it’ (179). Recognition and association are immediate: “His next words were in something foreign, but probably Japanese or Thai or Filipino, something bar girls responded to in places where he’d spent his rifle-toting youth” (179). The young man and Half-Face both veterans of the East, respond similarly because Jasmine represents the stereotype, an already “known and gendered subject”.

With banal conviction, Half-Face tells Jasmine, “you know what’s coming, and there ain’t anybody to help you, so my advice is to lie back and enjoy it. Hell, you’ll probably like it. I don’t get many complaints.” (102). For Half-face, Jasmine’s vulnerability is a “sort of turn-on” (101), and his boast implies a prior knowledge of known Eastern women. The myth of the available and passive Eastern woman eliminates any possibility of resistance, any possibility that these women did not “really” like it. For Half-Face, Jasmine is merely “One prime piece”, a gendered marking of the body that “cancels out” any other considerations (103).

In the story “The Lady from Lucknow” Mukherjee reveals another facet in the relationship between a Muslim woman and her American lover, ‘an older man, an immunologist with the center for disease control’ (Darkness 18), James Beamish, that she just happens to meet at a reception for foreign students on the Emory University campus. In response to his phone call and subsequent advances she gladly surrenders to passion and cherishes the fact that “James flatters me indefatigably: he makes me feel beautiful, exotic, responsive. I am a creature he has immunized of contamination.” (18). This temporal possession of a white American male’s body symbolically implies her empowerment over “the other”, the America where her husband cautions her that they are merely the “not-quites”. She enjoys the novelty of this new relationship and even goes out of her way to act the temptress enjoying the sense of “Adventure and freedom” (23) while it lasts, buying ‘silky new underwear’. Her conquest is complete when for a change she is invited to James’ house in the absence of his wife. Nafeesa Hafeez (the protagonist) says ‘It was a thrill to be in his house. I fingered the book spines, checked the colour of sheets and towels, the brand names of cereals and detergents .... Real intimacy, at last. (24). However, the euphoria of victory and empowerment are soon to be shattered. She is suddenly confronted by James’ wife who makes a sudden entry upon the scene to find her husband and his Indian mistress in bed. The wife’s reaction is totally uncalled for, as she is neither jealous nor angry. Instead, she dismisses Nafeesa with pity and contempt and by not take the affair seriously. “I might have stabbed you if I could take you seriously. But you are quite ludicrous lounging like a Goya nude on my bed” (26).

The fact that she is not even taken into account as an outsider a ‘not-quite’ and is only a passing fancy of the white American’s temporary attraction for the exotic, fills her with hurt and bitterness. She is made to feel a non-existent threat, not even worth feeling jealous about.

I was a shadow without depth or color, a shadow-temptress who would float back to a city of teeming millions when the affair with James had ended.

I had thought myself provocative and fascinating. What had begun as an adventure had become shabby and complex. I was just another involvement of a white man in a poky little outpost, something that “men do” and then come to their senses while the memsahibs drink gin and tonic and fan their faces. I did not merit a stab wound through the heart (27).

Her humiliation is complete and the pain of dislocation wrenches her soul as she realizes that her status as a “not-quite” in this alien world will remain with her forever.

The painful process of refashioning the old in the mould of the new is vividly portrayed through the immigrant characters in Mukherjee’s fiction. There is something within, which resists change. Change involves the reshaping of existing configurations: the ideas of home, husband family, etc. in a confrontation with the other the immigrant must succumb to two equally unappealing pitfalls; “ethnic chauvinism” on one hand or a “faceless universalism” on the other (Cornel West). A senseless “ethnic chauvinism” which resists any change amounts to “a determination to live only on our past cultural capital... But to live on our capital without using it for fresh gains is to end in bankruptcy and pauperism” (Sri Aurobindo 21). Mukherjee appears to conform to this view.

In the story ‘A Father’ Mr. Bhowmick’s behavior is defined by an ideology of family and gender roles that is grounded in Indian tradition and affected by a capitalist mode of production. Barrett points out that “at an ideological level the bourgeoisie has certainly secured a hegemonic definition of family life: as ‘naturally’ based on close kinship, as properly organized through a male bread-winner with financially dependent wife and children... To a large extent this familiar ideology has been accepted by the industrial working class”(Darkness 204).

Mr. Bhowmick the father, in this story, was born and brought up in India Ranchi, where he spent much of his life, in a relatively homogenous city which has little tolerance for new ideas. Growing up in Ranchi has had its effects on Mr. Bhowmick. Although he claims to be “a modern man, an intelligent man”, (“A father”, 64) Mr. Bhowmick is superstitious and religious. He has very traditional ideas of what is appropriate and considers it only right that he controls the women in his life in a manner that suits him. What frustrates him is that he rarely succeeds. Her behavior is unbecoming of an Indian wife. He traces the origin of her unorthodox behavior to the two years they spent in America immediately following their marriage. Living in America has corrupted her. After her exposure to the opportunities in America, Mrs. Bhowmick had “wanted America, nothing less” (69). She had “forced him to apply for permanent residence status in the U.S.” (69). Now, in Detroit, Mrs. Bhowmick is “a claims investigator for an insurance company” and buys pink nylon negligees “with her own Mastercard card” (59). Mrs. Bhowmick no longer exists merely as an extension of her husband. Through her financial independence in the new country, she has been able to free herself from the limitations that the patriarchal order of her culture had placed on her. America is “the other” that Mr. Bhowmick resists at any cost even though circumstances have forced him to live in that country.

Mr. Bhowmick’s daughter Babli is probably a more complete symbol of the America that threatens to disturb his status and identity as an Indian man. Born as first generation American “Babli was not the child he would have chosen as his only heir ... she was not the child of his dreams”(63). Mr. Bhowmick has a clear idea of what constitutes “real femininity”. Babli does not fulfil the womanly role as nurturer or care taker, and thus has failed him. She is also unmarried at twenty-six. Babli’s accomplishments instead, are of the kind that would be expected of a son. She has a good job as an electrical engineer, a career

more usually undertaken by men, and she even drives a “fiery red Mitsubishi” (65); significant as a sign of independence that America offers to its women.

Babli is the woman who, ultimately, goes completely outside the realm in which Mr. Bhowmick is traditionally supposed to have power as a patriarch. One fine morning when he hears Babli vomiting in the bathroom, a “revelation” comes upon him: “Mr. Bhowmick knew at once that his daughter, his untender, unloving daughter who he could not love and had not tried to love, was not, in the larger world of Detroit, unloved (66).” Even though Babli’s pregnancy goes outside the accepted ideology of how a family should be structured, Mr. Bhowmick begins to feel excited at the thought of a man actually thinking of his daughter in a romantic light, confirming her femininity after all. But ironically enough when she is asked to name the father she responds with a typical feminist’s contempt for all men.

‘Who needs a man? She hissed. “The father of my baby is a bottle and syringe. Men louse up your livers. I just want a baby. Oh, don’t worry – he’s a certified fit donor. No diseases, college graduate, above average, and he made the easiest twenty-five dollars of his life .... (72).

Babli’s declaration stuns her father. That his daughter was pregnant before marriage was a notion he had talked himself into accepting. Now, he realizes that his daughter’s action strikes at the root of traditional Indian patriarchy. She no longer needs a man for the ultimate act of production, birth. Firmly rooted in Indian beliefs, he finds it too hard to accept. Her actions go completely outside the very structures that hold together family in the way Mr. Bhowmick defines it. Producing an offspring without the aid of any man is too far outside the accepted ideology. And so, in his attempt to preserve a semblance between ideology and reality, Mr. Bhowmick resorts to violence. “Mr. Bhowmick lifted the rolling pin high above his head and brought it down hard on the dome of Bali’s stomach.” (64)

Mukherjee’s second novel ‘Wife’ is also a strange but an upsetting account of the conflict between western and Indian cultures. It is the story of Dimple Basu, romantic wife of a Bengali engineer, who is translated with catastrophic suddenness from Calcutta to New York, where she experiences the psychic dislocation of “future shock”. Dimple leaps into the electronic age with her traditional values almost intact, only partly defined by the pop culture of modern Calcutta. She is unable to make the transition between “Before” and “After” and chooses violence as a problem-solving device.

Dimple Dasgupta is the most unstable of dreamers-she day dreams. And because she takes the myths of her culture for literal truths, life is always betraying her. Marriage, which should bring her freedom, cocktail parties, and love, brings her instead a marriage contract with Amit Basu, an engineer, who lacks the wealth and inclination for high life and passion. Under the passive posture of Amit’s wife, there is considerable enactment of violence. Dimple lives with her fermenting frustrations and puts her faith in the New World or America.

However, violence is Dimple’s fundamental experience of New York. Newspapers, car radios, and casual conversations announce murders in alleys and ice-cream parlours. When the fun of parties and new friends wears off, Dimple finds herself stranded in a fully furnished, fully apportioned apartment in Greenwich Village, terrified of the city outside. She kills time in the style familiar to anyone watching soap operas and Johny Cason, gradually losing the ability to separate fantasy from reality. Television introduces her to ‘love’, middleclass American style. Amit, she feels, has betrayed her. In Calcutta, he had been an emblem of strength. Now he seems weak and vulnerable. He has none of the features of T.V. heroes, and he is preventing her from metamorphosing from obedient wife into independent Westerner.

Mukherjee develops her theme, the North American education of Dimple, with complex irony and skill, transforming cultural symbols into surreal images of Dimple’s final madness, where television becomes the voice of conscience in her head. But Mukherjee makes it clear that television does not make an eagle out of a dove – like most people, Dimple has a subterranean streak of violence. She is uprooted from her family and her familiar world and projected into a social vacuum where the media becomes her surrogate community, her global village. New York intensifies her frustrations and unhooks her further from reality. She kills her husband, like a sleep walker. Wife is the story of a woman who is trapped between two cultures and aspires to a third imagined world. Living in her social vacuum, Dimple is not unlike hundreds of American men and women who believe and are betrayed by the promise of fulfillment offered by the New World, and who choose the solution suggested by a violent environment. The novel carries frightening implications about North American society. It suggests that there is a vacuum where once was society, and that violence becomes increasingly ordinary where there is no anchoring community.

A study of the predicament of the immigrants in Mukherjee’s fiction reveals two facts: that they must prepare themselves to embrace the American reality, and that they have to recognize the intersection of the normative cultural values of their native land and the basic principles that constitute American identity. Put another way, it is not merely a problem of adjustment to the culture of the New World; it is a crisis that goes beyond the manifestations of their social reality, a crisis of the epistemic status of cultural identity. These protagonists find themselves mined in intractable difficulties that “otherness” engenders. They are “othered” by the dominating culture and they themselves, owing emotional allegiance to their native culture, other the culture of the New World. To get out of this impasse they need, not only the legitimization of their native culture, but also the “epistemic status of their cultural identity”.

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