

Indian Woman in America and Canada: A Study in Connection with Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories*

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the immigrants' issues specially of Indian Woman in America and Canada. For traditional Indian woman her man is everything. It is inculcated in her mind right from the childhood by the elderly women of the family that her future is her man. She is not trained to live independently with human dignity and honour by hard working. This paper admires that how exactly the author has presented the situations, feelings and adjustment of migrant women.

Key words: Indian woman in America and Canada.

"*The Middleman and Other Stories* is in most respects an insightful and entertaining album of revealing snapshots from a fine artist." (Paul Stuewe)

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the celebrated writers who has given live picture of Indians in America and Canada. Scholarly she has presented immigrants' issues in her works. She has contributed novels and stories. Her two stories collection *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) are the excellent expression of her study of human minds, contemporary world and her command on literary art. Bharati received the 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award for the collection *Middleman and Other Stories*.

The Middleman and Other Stories, the collection of the stories, is published in 1988.

It presents multicultural world of America and Canada and immigrants', especially women's, struggle to adjust with the rainbow-culture world. In this struggle to adjust with the changed world male immigrants also face many hurdles, women face plenty. Bharati has presented profoundly woman's anxiety and her constant struggle to adjust with the changed world. Her journey remains the journey from developing (Third world) nation to developed nation.

Her three stories are selected for study. They are 1. *A Wife's Story*, 2. *The Tenant*, 3. *The Management of Grief*. In all these three stories Indian women are at the centre. They are the first generation of Indian women on the world of prosperity, their journey from India to America or Canada and their struggle to

adjust with the new society, their way of living live, their moral conflict and ultimately acceptance of the change to live, even with changed standards are profoundly and skillfully presented by Bharati. Each story has unique theme and style is appealing too. Nothing is plain in spite of that nothing is ambiguous but straight what the women feel, face ultimately come forward, the journey is realistically presented.

A Wife's Story is the story of Panna Patel who is in America for her Doctoral study. She is from Gujarat, a married woman whose son is dead. Her husband, a vice president at Lakshmi Cotton Mills, manages a cotton mill in Ahmedabad. She got her schooling in Lausanne and Bombay. (27) So she has cultivates refined manners.

In America she has a friend Imre who has been in America over two years. He is a refugee from Budapest. He is courtly, openly protective of woman. His wife is a nurse in Hungarian countryside and they have two sons. Panna comes in contact with him in a seminar on special ed. (27) The reality of immigrants in America society is presented thus;

“First, you don't exist. Then you're invisible. Then you are funny. Then you're disgusting. Insult, my American friend will tell me, is a kind of acceptance.”(26)

This is the anxiety of all immigrants', Indian male and female. Females are badly insulted. For public insult even in play *Seen Their women?* Patels are insulted. When Panna goes to see the play, she feels insulted.

Panna has gone to America, New York to make something in her life. For that she has left her home, her husband “to get a Ph.D. in special ed.”(29) Thus it is clear she has gone to America on scholarship for two years to become different type of, modern woman. Actually she is coming from traditional Indian family, in her words; “my mother was beaten by her mother-in-laws...my grandmother, the eldest daughter of a rich zamindar, was illiterate.”(29) Obviously being a capable of doing something from traditional trend, she joins further study in America.

Panna shares room with Charity Chin. Eric is Charity's estranged husband. (30) Phil is Charity's friend. When in the presence Panna, Phil sneaks his hands under Charity's sweater, as an Indian woman Panna expresses thus; “I'm shy in front of the lovers. A darkness comes over me when I see them horsing around.”(30) Watching somebody's love game, especially for traditional Indian woman, is always a matter of shy and shame. But in American society reality is differently presented.

Panna's marriage was not a love-marriage. She expresses thus;

“... traditional Hindu marriage. My parents, with the help of a marriage broker, who was my mother’s cousin, picked out a groom. All I had to do was get to know his taste in food.”(31)

Most of marriages in India are arranged thus, but with the permission of parents, love comes later on the family life. Sometimes parents also sanctions love marriages. Panna’s marriage is an arranged marriage. Her husband works as a vice president in Lakshmi Cotton Mills, Ahmedabad. They have a son but he died. Panna has also pain for her son’s death.

Panna’s husband from Ahmedabad informs her about the business. Very late night her calls;

“We had a bad mishap at the mill today...one of our lorries was firebombed today. Resulting in three deaths. The driver, old Karamchand, and his two children.”(31)

This is the typical nature of majority of Indian husbands to inform first tragic stories to their wives. Later on he also informs her that he is going to America in fortnight’s time with “arrangement”. He wants to go the Niagara and for that he has arranged “extra dollars through the Gujarati network”. (32)

For traditional Indian woman her man is everything. It is inculcated in her mind right from the childhood by the elderly women of the family that her future is her man. She is

not trained to live independently with human dignity and honour by hard working. Woman’s love for her man must be shown to him. So when Panna’s husband comes she changes her cotton pants and shirt and goes and says thus;

“..put on a sari to meet my husband at JFK. I don’t forget the jewelry; the marriage necklace of *mangalsutra*, gold drop earrings, heavy gold bangles. I don’t wear them every day.”(33)

Her husband identifies her in the crowd. Hindu wife should have mangalsutra, sign of married woman. Panna puts it on her neck. But as a traditional Indian husband he asks her when he doesn’t find the ring his mother’s ring; “How come you aren’t wearing my mother’s ring?” “Because muggers know about Indian women, they know with us it’s 24-karat”. The ring was given to her before her coming to America. It is a gold ring with a blood-red Burma ruby. In traditional family mothering-laws govern the family, directly or indirectly.

In absence of her roommate Charity both are alone have enough privacy. But her husband expresses love in a typical Indian way, by helping her in kitchen when nobody is there. Away from the home, he becomes typical husband. When her husband sends her to buy a tour ticket, the dark man asks in American way at that time her husband doubts and says; “What was the chap saying?. I told you

not to wear pants. He thinks you are Puerto Rican. He thinks he can treat you with disrespect". (36) Full clothes on wife's body are the choice of her man. Bharati has rightly presented this.

Her husband's a few days stay in America creates confusion in his mind. He thinks his wife should be back at home. This is a dominating possessive mentality of traditional Indian husbands. Smartly he says to Panna;

"You are so innocent, Panna, I have come to take you back. I have seen how men watch you. Come back, now, I have tickets. We have all the things we will ever need. I can't live without you."(39)

Panna makes it clear she has joined the course of two years. Hearing this her husband has lost his temper; "picks up our trays and throws them into the garbage." Thus his anger is expressed.

He receives the message from the director of Lakshmi Mills about massive violent labour confrontation. Without satisfying Panna's "woman's desire" he leaves her alone with pain, she remains in two worlds, Indian and American.

Panna, in whole story, does not call her husband by name. Most of women in Gujarat do not call their men by their names. They believe, to call their husbands by name is

insulting. And wife should not insult her man at all.

The Tenant is the story of Maya Sanyal. She has her Ph.D. in comparative literature. She is a universalist. (97) Before going to America she was brought up in traditional Indian family, in Calcutta. She remembers her childhood;

"Going to circuses in Calcutta with her father is what she remembers vividly. It is a banal memory, for her father, the owner of a steel company, is a complicated man."(98)

Further about her family background;

"She was too feminine....her grandmother had been married off at the age of five in a village now in Bangladesh. Her great-aunt had been burned to death over a dowry problem. She herself had been trained to speak softly, arrange flowers, sing, be pliant."(101-102)

She has also taken singing lessons at Dakshini Academy in Calcutta. She plays the sitar and the tanpura. (107) Thus from this sort of family background Maya reaches to America. Due to traditional orthodoxy Maya selects different path in America. She has taken big risks and made a break with parents' ways. Thus she becomes American.

In America Fran Johnson, a Swede friend Maya knows her since ten years. She is more

friendly and helpful than any other. (99) To Fran, Maya tells truth about her life. She has not selected Indian man as her life partner but John, an American. After marriage both are separated. Thus Maya is a divorcee. Why she has not selected Indian man, she tells; "All Indians men are wife beaters, that's why I am married to an American."(99) This is her illusion. She has selected the option. But with American she could not live long. Her family life ends with divorce. Thus she becomes an Indian young divorcee with higher educational qualification and connected with teaching faculty. In India teaching profession is considered as the honorable profession.

After divorce she becomes rootless. She forgets values of married American woman as well as cultured Indian woman. Sex with life partner is legally and religiously sanctioned by every nation. Out of that bond sex is beastly behaviour. This path is strictly banned in Indian culture. Maya has left the path and she has sex with many even with her student; "...she had slept with John Hadwen; and how after that her tidy graduate student world became monstrous, lawless."(106-107) She behaves like a sex-maniac. She forgets, she is a woman not a sex tool, she also teaches, teachers' standard she forgets. The result is; "Maya has slept with married men, with nameless men, with little more than boys, but never with an Indian man."(103)

When she goes to Dr. Chatterji's home, a Bengali Brahmin and the physicist, she is warmly welcomed by Dr. Chatterji's wife. While returning to her rented residence Dr. Chatterji behaves strangely in his car and asks thus;

"Maya is my favorite name....truly speaking, it is my favorite. You are sometimes lonely, no? But you are lucky. Divorced woman can date, they can go to bar and discos. They can see mens, many mens. But inside marriage there is so much loneliness."(108)

Maya sees Dr. Chatterji also in unzipped pants. Woman without man is not safe in society, this fact is presented here.

When Maya returns her residence, the landlord Ted Suminski informs her by the written note that he is going to remarry and requests to vacate the place at the end of the semester, she has to find other place. She finds her place at Fred's place. Fred has an ex-wife and two kids but way from him, one is in Portland other is in Oregon.(112) He is man without arms. Companionship develops between two wounded people. (112). As a result earlier Maya has never slept with a man without arms. (112) Ashok Mehta's contact with Maya is also a path of confusion.

Maya, according to its Sanskrit meaning, is illusion, here a woman who traps all men who come in her contact. Bharati has skillfully used the name.

In this story Maya is a lonely Indo-American woman in America. She is lonely and divorcee so she is not a respectable in the eyes of many. So she becomes victims one by one. She is in search of self, perfection but she is rootless like a nebula.

The Management of Grief is the story reminds us the *Kanishka Tragedy*, the plane was crashed, and many lost their lives. The plane was on the way from Canada to India, near Ireland it was crashed. The story presents how Indian women suffer after deaths of their beloveds.

It is mainly the story of Mrs. Shaila Bhave, Kusum, Dr. Ranganathan and an old Sikh family.

Mrs. Bhave has lost her husband, Vikram and two sons, Vinod and Mithun. Vinod was fourteen and they were good swimmers. When she reaches with Kusum and Dr. Ranganathan to a bay in Ireland, the place where the accident took place, she remembers her happy family; “..my husband would take my hand and the boys would slap water in my face just to see me scream.”(185) Love never die, ever remains fresh in mind.

Mrs. Bhave comes from traditional Hindu family, where love for her man is not openly expressed. When a faithful woman-companion comes in contact with a woman, then only, husband wife’s relationship is told. Sometimes it is told never. It does not mean, there is no love between the couple, but it is

the Indian characteristic of family life. Mrs. Bhave tells to Kusum;

“I never once told him that I love him,...I was too much the well brought up woman. I was so well brought I never felt comfortable calling my husband by his first name.”(181)

On other hand Kusum replies; “He knew. My husband knew.”(181) Kusum is also the unfortunate woman who has also lost her husband Satish and a little daughter in the plane disaster. Dr. Ranganathan has lost his family. Kusum has still one daughter Pam. She is different type of girl; “She dates Canadian boys and hangs out in the mall, shopping for tight sweaters.”(181) For Kusum the daughter is not a support at critical time but problem. Pam is the second generation of Indo-American girl. Kusum, at the time of grief helplessly says to her; “Leave me alone. You know what I want to do? If I didn’t have to look after you now, I’d hang myself.”(182) This a typical characteristic of loving Indian woman to end everything after her beloved has gone. She also bears the responsibility to look after the children after the death of her man. Another path is the path of *sanyasa*

Kusum could get dead bodies of their beloved. With the bodies Mrs. Bhave and she goes to India for cremation. But coffins are stopped for investigation purpose. At that time Mrs. Bhave strongly opposed; “You bastard! You think we we’re smuggling

contraband in those coffins!"(189) The situation made them thus. In her words; "One upon a time we were well brought up women; we were dutiful wives who kept our heads veiled, our voices shy and sweet."(189)

In India these widows have different place. Change come but it is gradual. Shaila comes from progressive family. About her background she further says;

"My grandmother, the spoiled daughter of a rich *zamindar*, shaved her head with rusty razor blade when she was widowed at sixteen. My grandfather died of childhood diabetes when he was nineteen, and she saw herself as harbinger of bad luck. My mother grew up without parents, raised indifferently by an uncle, while her true mother slept in a hut behind the main estate house and took her food with the servants. She grew up a rationalist. My parents abhor mindless mortification."(189)

Recent past of the family creates effect on the minds of family members. But Mrs. Bhavé's parents mentally support her. They also wish she should marry. They also say her husband would not have wanted you to give up things! (189)

For peace of mind at the critical times, Indians seek shelter in the lap of nature, the mysterious mountains the Himalayas or in company with saints. Kusum and Mrs. Bhavé follow the path. Kusum leaves the western

world, Toronto and comes to Hardwar, the holy place for Hindus. She lives there as a live of ascetic, like a *sanyashrasham*, one of the four Ashrams Hindu believed/believes. In India, in a Himalayan village Kusum has very emotional experience;

"..to a hut where a young girl, an exact replica of her daughter, was fanning coals under the kitchen fire. When she appeared, the girl cried out. "Ma!" and ran away."(196)

She remembers her daughters. She also thinks she has seen her husband, Satish. This is wife's faith for her man's immortality.

Mrs. Bhavé was also brought by her mother to a *sadhu*, but she has different experience. In her words; "...a sweaty hand gropes for my blouse. I do not shriek. The Sadhu arranges his robe. The lamp was hiss and sputter out."(190) All *sadhus* are not true seeker of spirituality. Some of them are ordinary human beings, live with human evils. Mrs. Bhavé had this experience, this thing took place in the temple. After coming out of the temple her mother also finds change in her daughter.

Mrs. Bhavé leaves Indian and goes to Canada. She helps Judith Templeton to provide help to the victimized Indians. Judith was an appointee of provincial government. To standby the needy become her life mission. Whatever money her husband has left, she wishes to use for charity to support. (196)

This is a typical Indian characteristic, when a person can't be a sadhu, he can live like a sadhu. She follows the path.

The story presents terrorism is not the solution of any issue. Here woman suffers more than man when she becomes victim.

Bharati has skillfully portrayed of Indian women. Man's migration and adjustment with the new world is considered as an adventurous or heroic but the same adventures of woman are considered from different angles. Woman suffers while her journey to adjust with the change. Panna Patel, Dr. Maya Sanyal, Mrs. Bhav and Kusum are the example of them. All these women are of the first generation of immigrants of traditional families. All are

married women. Panna and Maya seem immature but in comparison of them Mrs. Bhav proves mature, cultured Indian woman, except the episode with *sadhu*. Here also she has not voluntarily surrendered. Circumstance forces her. But later on she emerges as a different lady. By presenting different women in the stories Bharati has successfully tried to bring Indian women before the world.

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Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man.

~ Rabindranath Tagore