

## **A Critique of Bharati Mukherjee's Neo-nationalism**

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In its traditional usage, culture is associated with the nation state; but because most such entities are now increasingly aware of their multicultural mix, the concept of cultural minorities or ethnicities is useful in undermining a centrist construction of culture as a privileged discourse concerned with the definition of core values ... The recognition of 'ethnicity' as a category of difference thus serves as a safeguard against the development of imperialisms or 'nationalisms'. (1990: 24-5)

In contrast to this general line of argument which is dominant in Australia, Bharati Mukherjee's discourse on migrants in the U.S. positions them not on the margin of contemporary American culture but, rather, as exemplars of a hegemonic nationalism. She characterises her writing about migrants not as oppositional to mainstream America but as representing the voice of 'the new America' (1989: 73) and thus, I would argue, enunciates a neo-nationalism. Her own literary success places her firmly within the American literary canon and this success reflects the receptivity of certain constituencies to a reinvention and revitalisation of American nationalism.

Mukherjee's discourse of nationalism is articulated from two sites; in her fiction (to date, three novels and two collections of stories), she constructs stories about the entry into American culture of immigrants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, for the most part Indian. In addition, she constructs a personal mythology of immigration and 'assimilation' in numerous autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical writings (which take the generic form of non fiction, interviews, essays and articles, the latter often comprising readings of her own fiction). In this article I also gesture to the wider discourse of literary criticism in which she is placed and refer to several reviews and articles which focus on her and her fiction.

In her non-fictional writing (specifically, in interviews and articles) Mukherjee explicitly endorses the notion of 'assimilation' - a concept that generally carries negative connotations in the Australian context, especially in terms of Aboriginal history and the notorious assimilation policies of the 1940s onwards - and contrasts the American policy with what she sees as the less successful Canadian 'mosaic' policy of multiculturalism (Healey 1988; Blaise and Mukherjee 1987, quoted in Goodwin 1989: 412).<sup>2</sup>

Mukherjee's endorsement of American nationalism is paralleled by the canonisation of her fiction; in 1988 her second collection of stories *The Middleman and Other Stories* was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award (which, one reviewer tells us, 'is given by the organisation of 485 professional book editors and critics from across the country and carries more clout in literary circles ... than the National Book Awards [sponsored by the publishing industry] or the Pulitzer Prize' [Patel 1989: 72]). Since then she has had front page reviews in the *New York Times Book Review*, has published high profile articles in magazines ranging from the *New York Times Book Review* to *Harper's Bazaar* and has been invited to prestigious literary festivals in Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

Mukherjee's fiction and her attitude to immigration and nationalism follows a trajectory located in geography; her 'early' work (in which category I place the two novels *The Tiger's Daughter* [1972] and *Wife* [1975] and the four Canadian stories of her first short story collection *Darkness* [1985]) is separated from the later work by a space of ten years (1975-85) during which time she emigrated from Canada to the United States (1981). The 'early' work (with the exception of *The Tiger's Daughter*) is set in Canada and generally articulates a pessimism, anger and sense of homelessness; in a story from this period (one quite stylistically distinct from the 'later' work) published in *Darkness*, 'The World According to Hsu', Ratna Clayton, a woman married to a Canadian academic and bitter about Canadian racism, holidaying amongst a hotch-potch of tourists on an island off the coast of Africa, muses that '[n]o matter where she lived, she would never feel so at home again' (1986: 56).

*Wife*, in its depiction of the central character's alienation and depression, also articulates a bleak vision of an immigrant woman's failure to 'assimilate' into Western culture. Although the novel is set in New York City, Mukherjee has commented that it in fact reflects her life in Toronto (1981: 39; see also Goodwin 1989: 411). *Wife* and the later novel, *Jasmine* (which articulates what I have called neo-nationalism), in this schema can be said to represent each other's opposite.<sup>3</sup> Mukherjee distinguishes quite sharply between her Canadian and American phases and quite consciously shapes and

prescribes a reading position for her fiction. She states that 'by the time I came to write *The Middleman*, I was exhilarated, my vision was more optimistic' (1990d: 28) and characterises the collection as her 'tribute to America' (Patel: 72). She describes *Jasmine* in similar terms: 'I want this novel ... just like the last book of stories [*The Middleman*], to be seen as providing an optimistic vision of America' (1990c: 221). The heady exuberance of *Jasmine* and Mukherjee's reading of the novel's celebratory nationalism contrast markedly with the disillusionment of the earlier Canadian novel and the bitterness of her outspoken article on racism, 'An Invisible Woman' (1981), and its scathing critique of Canadian racism.

This trajectory - from Canada to the United States, from pessimism to optimism, from racism and homelessness to a celebration of assimilationist nationalism - takes on further significance in terms of Mukherjee's career path from relative literary anonymity and lack of recognition in Canada (Mukherjee 1981: 39) to award-winning success and canonisation in the States; Patel reports that 'it is with *The Middleman*, that this ... woman has found her true literary identity - something that she claims coincided with her discovery of herself as an American' (1989: 72-3).

This trajectory actually has an earlier starting point in postcolonial India and the 'biculturalism' of Mukherjee's first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*. Here Mukherjee explores the postcolonial dilemma of an English-educated elite expatriate on a visit to India. The central character, Tara, is something of an outcast in this society because of her 'mleccha' husband and she feels alienated from her friends and their way of life which are depicted (and exoticised) from an outsider's viewpoint. The narrator mourns the decline of Calcutta in the face of communist-inspired populist uprising; there is no place in this world for the likes of Tara. The world-weariness and angst of this novel culminates in the violent metaphor of rape: Tara is raped by a brutal, unscrupulous and evil politician - who is also in the process of 'raping' the peasants and the land in the name of industrial progress. Needless to say, the novel closes with Tara's passionate statement of attachment to her American husband (who had remained at home in the States) and her desperate wish to 'get out of Calcutta (1987a: 210).

The experience of the postcolonial elite is inevitably 'bicultural' (a term Mukherjee uses to describe the author of *The Tiger's Daughter* [1989: 73]) and biculturalism is an experience of detachment and irony. Mukherjee claims that in later writings she rejects the irony of the narrative voice of *The Tiger's Daughter*; this irony (typical of exiled expatriates such as V. S. Naipaul) she says is 'mordant and self-protective' and:

promised both detachment from, and superiority over, those well-bred postcolonials much like myself, adrift in the New World, wondering if they would ever belong. (Seligman 1986: 38)

Mukherjee rejects the nostalgia of this early book and the myth of the nomad 'adrift', in favour of an affirmation of belonging and the theme of the successful 'conquest' of the New World; the immigrant of *The Middleman* she describes as a 'new pioneer' (1989: 73) and the eponymous character of *Jasmine*, 'a conqueror, a minor hero' (Healey 1988). In rejecting the experience of expatriation figured in *The Tiger's Daughter* she takes on the myth of the immigrant in its place. Expatriation, she argues, is 'the great temptation ... of the ex-colonial ... writer' (like Naipaul) and she endorses instead its 'opposite', immigration (1988: 28). Once again she figures this transformation in geographic terms; in Canada she was a 'psychological expatriate' (1988: 28), in the United States an immigrant and a citizen. Not undergoing this conversion from expatriation to immigration is, in Mukherjee's eyes, evidence of nostalgia and a refusal to participate in the New World and embrace its citizenship and nationalism. To refuse to do this is to fail as a writer, in Mukherjee's terms: 'lacking a country, avoiding all the messiness of rebirth as an immigrant, eventually harms even the finest sensibility' (1988: 29) she claims, and numbers Salman Rushdie, for example, among a number of writers who choose 'exile' and dispossession rather than psychological citizenship.

Mukherjee's 'conversion' narrative invests India with the status of the 'old world'. The old world of India is figured in ways that are repressive: India represented for her 'that kind of Third World hierarchy where your opportunities are closed by caste, gender, or family' (1990c: 219). India, for the elite postcolonials of *The Tiger's Daughter* as for Mukherjee herself, was 'past [its] prime' (1981: 36) and the existence of the elite itself was threatened as Mukherjee notes: 'the class of women I belonged to ... has become more or less extinct' (1990c: 219). She goes on to say that '[t]he old world no longer excited me in ways that the new world did' and that 'the loss of old culture is exciting. Is exhilarating ... I was thrilled to have the opportunity to give it up, to assume a new identity' (1990c: 219-20). (The process of abandoning the old order is explored most fully in the novel *The Tiger's Daughter* and her first non-fiction book co-authored with Clark Blaise, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*.) The 'conversion', then, rests upon the discarding or abandoning of the old order (Vignisson 1992) and the embracing of the new:

I was [bicultural] when I wrote *The Tiger's Daughter* ; now I am no longer so and America is more real to me than India ... I realised I was no longer an expatriate but an immigrant - that my life was more here ... I need to belong. America matters to me. It is not that India failed me - rather America transformed me' (1989: 73).

The New World is figured as a place where anyone can be a success, including immigrants. The immigrants Mukherjee writes about 'make their futures in ways they could not have done in the Old World' (Hancock 1987: 303). The New World is the world of the individual and all you need to make it is 'gumption' (Vignisson 1992). Mukherjee stresses the 'battler' quality of her characters and romanticises the struggle of the individual:

These immigrants are grabby and greedy - and I'm using these words in healthy ways. Larger than life. Eager. In order to be American you have to hustle. (1990c: 220)

Timothy Brennan numbers Mukherjee among what he calls Third-World cosmopolitan writers and hails this group for their 'vision of democracy, freedom, "popularity", "truth" - largely lost or devalued in the metropolis [which is] seen as an arena of disintegration and postmodern decentring' (1989: 39). However, this myth of democracy and freedom (which I believe Brennan is accurate in attributing to Mukherjee) is somewhat eroded by her own admission that she enters the New World already endowed with considerable privilege.<sup>4</sup> And this privilege, it has been noted, is characteristic of many Indians due to the particular nature of their diaspora.<sup>5</sup>

The discrepancy, and therefore the impulse to romanticise, occurs in the gap between Mukherjee's own personal history and her reading of her fictional characters; they are not always endowed with the privileges of their author (many are in fact peasants or working class) and yet they inevitably succeed in the New World. Class, racial and ethnic differences are elided in Mukherjee's equation of her own experience with that of immigrants generally. This tendency becomes more marked in the later 'American' phase of her fiction where her fictional characters are not only Indian or from South Asia but hail from other areas of the globe (for example, the Philippines, Iraq, Italy, Afghanistan, Vietnam, the Caribbean and Africa). In this phase of her work Mukherjee clearly no longer feels constrained to speak for or from her own ethnic or class background but embraces different versions of the 'exotic', as it were, and, as her commentary on her fiction indicates, subsumes various immigrant experiences under the stereotype of the tough, hustling, 'grabby and greedy' battler; what she has also called the 'conqueror', the 'minor hero', the 'new pioneer'.

Mukherjee's romance of immigration and vision of a New World of democracy, freedom and unlimited possibility is figured very vividly at the close of *Jasmine* when Bud's adopted Vietnamese son, Du, leaves his American 'family' to be reunited with his immigrant sister. The event is figured in terms of an Oedipal struggle as Jasmine, the narrator, acknowledges the immigrant's destiny to 'inherit' America. She observes that Du 'was given to us to save and to strengthen; we didn't own him, his leaving was inevitable. Even healthy' [224]) as the boy, his eyes 'glittery with a higher mission' (221), 'steps into his future' (223). At the same time Jasmine also leaves the crippled old man, Bud, for a fascinating younger man (and in case we missed it, the allegory is spelled out: 'I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness' [240]).

The discourse of the migrant as metropolitan and the fantasy of the land of opportunity could be described, borrowing Spivak's phrase, as a phantasmatic hegemonic nativist counternarrative (1989: 281-2). Although she uses the term in a slightly different context (ie to describe the discourse of the diasporic elite in representing the country of origin), it can be deployed with slightly different emphasis to describe Mukherjee's neo-nationalist discourse, a discourse constituted by both her fiction and her comments on and readings of that fiction, and the ways her writing has been mobilised by critics and reviewers within the wider discourse of literary criticism.

Spivak also suggests that the counternarrative of the diasporic elite disavows the elite's postcoloniality and this further point is relevant to my discussion of Mukherjee who disavows her own class and postcolonial insertion into the New World of America. Mukherjee identifies the UK and Canada with imperialism and describes her choice to emigrate to the US as a choice for freedom from imperialism.<sup>6</sup> Her mythologising of herself as a writer is aimed at constructing herself as an American and at rereading her own experience as national or, more precisely, neo-national.<sup>7</sup> Mukherjee's neo-nationalism, figured in the fantasy of the land of opportunity and the romance of the immigrant, is, therefore, the counternarrative to her own diasporic condition and the dilemma of postcoloniality. She no longer wants to be 'post' (the India of *The Tiger's Daughter* and of her childhood is, after all, 'past [its] prime' [1981: 36]) but to be 'neo', to identify with the centre and she in fact re-enacts its imperialist strategies in her appropriation of the label 'immigrant'. I would like to suggest, after Spivak, that Mukherjee's neo-nationalism is a 'species of collaboration with neocolonialism' (1989: 281) whereby the postcolonial diasporic 'finds a nurturing and corroborative space in this enclave [ie the discourse of canonised literature] in her attempts to remake history' ['in her own name', I would add] (1989: 279).

Taking a further cue, this time from Baudrillard, I would suggest that the US of Mukherjee's neo-nationalism is a hyperreal America. Baudrillard suggests that '[w]hen the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning' (1983: 8) and I would argue that Mukherjee's neo-nationalism is nostalgic and fills the absence of the real in the current demise and crisis of America's global power. (This would, of course, account for the favourable reception of her fiction and critical discourse.) Mukherjee's 'new pioneer' immigrants occupy the abandoned site of the 'real' in the national arena: the 'real' is reinvented in what Spivak calls 'the US semiotic field of citizenship and ethnicity' (1989: 279).

In her project to construct the 'real' Mukherjee becomes, in Baudrillardian terms, an 'ethnologist' of the immigrant. In her romance of the immigrant Mukherjee 'exoticises' character by taxonomising 'genuine foreignness'. In this project we can see that the immigrant as 'other' in the US occupies the same site as the postcolonial elite 'other' in the country of origin. Tara, on her return visit to India in *The Tiger's Daughter*, feels like an alien: in her aunt's house she wonders '[h]ow does the foreignness of the spirit begin?' (37). Jasmine and Du, on the other hand, are Bud's 'others'; Bud worries that 'we'll never really have Du to ourselves, that he'll always be attached in occult ways to an experience he can't fathom' (231) and Jasmine relates that 'my genuine foreignness frightens him [ie Bud]' (26). A character from *The Middleman*, the banker Griff who's having an affair with a Filipina in 'Fighting for the Rebound', is also confronted with the 'other'. He says:

there's a difference between exotic and foreign, isn't there? Exotic means you know how to use your foreignness, or you make yourself a little foreign in order to appear exotic. Real foreign is a little scary, believe me. (83)

In statements such as these the evocation of 'genuine foreignness', 'real foreign' and 'occult' signal a preoccupation with reclaiming the real.

Ethnology, a mode of knowing in hyperreality, is the means by which Mukherjee catalogues and names the 'real' (new) America and reinvents a semiotics of American citizenship and ethnicity. While Timothy Brennan, for example, praises Mukherjee for her comopolitanism and her 'defiant challenge to traditional ways of conceiving the "national"' (1989: 34), he neglects to analyse the way in which she reconceives nationalism and recuperates the experience of diverse constituencies into a new hegemony. Roger Rouse's analysis of Mexicans in the United States proposes an alternative model (to Mukherjee's) to describe the experience of migration. He resists the temptation to talk about migration in utopian terms as 'an inexorable move towards a new form of sociocultural order' such as neo-nationalism (1991: 14). In this

way the nostalgia of reconstituting a 'home' is avoided. In his particular study of Aguilillans living in the United States he suggests that migration has produced 'neither homogenization nor synthesis. Instead, Aguilillans have become involved in the chronic maintenance of two quite distinct ways of life' (1991: 14). This would be one way of talking about the experience of immigration which maintains the complexity of crosscultural experience without romanticising the experience and subsuming and homogenising it. What Rouse in fact describes, as Khachig Tšlšyan accurately observes, is the United States' 'inability to transform migrants into citizens' (1991: 1). He focuses more on 'the implosion of the Third World into the first' (1991: 17) and the manner in which migrants resist and transform the hegemonic social order, rather than constructing the myth of 'what it is to become an American' as one of Mukherjee's reviewers does (Gorra 1989: 9) or homogenising postmodernity under the label 'America' as Mukherjee is want to do:

I believe that some people were meant to be American even if they never leave their village in Punjab - at heart, they are American (1989: 73).

It is significant that Rouse's study is based precisely on the constituency that Mukherjee's fiction depicts, namely what Brennan describes as 'the new immigrant underclass discovered eloquently in the writing of Mukherjee' (1989: 34). Brennan himself contrasts the 'new immigrant underclass' with 'the other kind' of 'cosmopolitan', the 'shifting, "rootless" intellectual ... [which] Mukherjee herself represents'. Yet he does not question how/if the one can represent the other. Mukherjee, I would argue, can only legitimately speak for/represent the latter cosmopolitan, specifically, the diasporic postcolonial elite. Her representation of the (diasporic postcolonial elite) immigrant articulates the desire to be metropolitan, to be American, a 'new world citizen' (Vignisson 1992) and above all to not be a minority.<sup>8</sup> The 'immigrant underclass' can only ever be a fantasy for her, like Jasmine is: she's so gutsy, she has so much spirit, she's the kind of person I'd have wanted to be if I hadn't been as educated, as polite, as hesitant [and, one might add, as elite] as I am. (Vignisson 1992)

The immigrant underclass, exemplified by the Mexicans of which Rouse speaks, enters the New World not with the privileges of the elite but as cheap and exploited labour and has an entirely different relationship to the metropolis and to transnational postmodernity.

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I would like to thank Runar Vignisson for generously passing on to me several reviews and articles.



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## Notes

2 The differences between Australian discussions of 'migrant writing' and multiculturalism and Mukherjee's celebration of assimilationist policies and neo-nationalism are interesting, especially in light of the fact that Australian culture has a greater percentage of immigrants than the United States (Pettman 1992: 35), but will not be a central issue in this article. See Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, (New York: Doubleday, 1977), and Barth Healey, (1988) 'Mosaic Vs. Melting Pot', *The New York Times Book Review*, June 19: n.p.

3 Dimple, the protagonist of *Wife*, is timid and passive, where Jasmine is courageous and active. Dimple does not make Jasmine's successful transition into American culture as the following episode demonstrates:

Ina doodled on the margin of a leaflet until there was a woman with her sari wrapped around her like a shroud on one side and another woman in a bikini with a pert bosom on the other. "That's me," she said, with a shallow laugh. "Before and After. The great moral and physical change, and all that."

"I'm always a Before," Dimple said. "I guess I've never been an After." (1985b: 95)

4 In fact the myth of the all powerful and successful individual is seen to arise directly from Mukherjee's class position in India in this extract from 'An Invisible Woman':

"Our girls can take their places with the best anywhere in the world," Mother John-Baptist, the headmistress, had promised my father on my first day of school. (And we have, all over India and the English-speaking, even German-speaking, world.) On a sticky August night in 1961, when my younger sister ... and I, on my way to the University of Iowa, left by Air India for New York, I felt that I could.

Great privilege had been conferred upon me ... I had built-in advantages: primarily those of education, secondarily those of poise and grooming. (1981: 36)

5 As William Safran notes, in the United States the 'Indian diaspora status has not always been associated with political disability or even minority status' (1991: 88). Gayatri Spivak makes a similar observation about the privilege of diasporic Indians of her generation:

[a]s the only colored community ... in the US that did not have a history of oppression on the soil, they were often used in affirmative action employment and admission where blacks, Hispanics, and 'Asian-Americans' (meaning US citizens of Chinese and Japanese extraction) were bypassed (1989: 278).

6 See the interview with Runar Vignisson: '[f]or me it was especially exciting to go to America because England to me connoted colonialism. It was associated with all that I had left behind'.

7 Clearly it is Americans such as Marshall (in 'Loose Ends' [The Middleman]) and Jason (in 'Fathering' [The Middleman])- both Vietnam veterans and both displaced and/or challenged in their close contact with immigrants - who, like Bud in Jasmine, represent the old order, the old world within America, that is, the former 'nation'. Jasmine's remarks that with the demise of the Iowa farming community, 'I see a way of life coming to an end,' and that here there was being enacted 'a final phase of a social order that had gone on untouched for thousands of years' (229), have clearly symbolic significance.

8 See her interview with Runar Vignisson where Mukherjee explains her reasons for choosing to come to the US rather than the UK:

Because I had gone to school in England as a child I was aware of what it felt like to be a minority, and I knew I didn't want that.