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### Middle Space and the Experience of the East – West Encounter

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#### Abstract

*'East-West Encounter' is the gist of diasporic writing. Indian immigrants in different parts of the world differ from each other in their attitudes towards India, Indian region and culture. This attitude is related to their psychology of dislocation and displacement. Culture-clash in Diasporic literature involves an idea of attachment to homeland, tradition, and culture of their country and ethnic group, religion and language which conflict with the culture, tradition, language, religion of host land. The immigrants due to east west encounter face many difficulties such as alienation, nostalgia, racial discrimination and rootlessness. Bharati Mukherjee pinpoints the same pathos in her second short story collection – The Middleman and Other Stories. (1988) which is the major focus of the present paper.*

*The Middleman and Other Stories (1988) is the second short story collection of Bharati Mukherjee which gathers the protagonists from all over the world that broadens the scope by emphasizing the variety of third world immigrants to the U.S.A. and also pictures the dilemmas, traumas, difficulties, and culture-clash faced by them. This collection also focuses on the Diasporic imagination and political – cultural implications of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century migrations from the third world countries to the United States. Mukherjee in the present collection speaks about the protagonists who choose America as their new home and at the same time, they occupy the 'middle space' between home and host culture. They are in America because they encounter political unrest which upset their lives in the native land. Their attraction towards better life makes them to drift into a situation details the lives of her protagonists in America. Their culture is in the back seat as they are in America or trying to adjust to American culture. The basic theme of all stories is the struggle of the immigrants and their encounter with the alien culture and their adjustment in U.S. for earning the livelihood. Christine Gomez comments on these short stories,*

*"The theme of these stories is immigration and the reciprocal effect of the immigrants and American life on each other. In these stories which deal with energetic immigrants, there is a definite movement away from expatriates who were marginal men and women to immigrants who are middlemen in more sense than one. They are not only brokers or go betweens in various deals but people who are in the middle of where action is." (From Expatriation to Immigration P.139-40)*

The titular story '*The Middleman*' is about a man Alfie Judah, an Iraqi Jew, widely travelled person who occupies middle space in his life in the story. The story sets in unnamed American country where Alfie becomes involved in the guerilla war. His story is the story of uprooted man who is in search of satisfaction. He confesses at the beginning of the story that woman is his weakness. He has been forced to do illegal works in the war which is dangerous also. His U.S. citizenship is in jeopardy and he tries to adjust to American life. His adventurous adjustment in U.S. is at the core of the story. His journey is from Baghdad to Bombay, India to U.S. He confesses,

*"...There are aspects of American life. I came too late for and will never understand." (P.5)*

The title 'middleman' is of course for Alfie Judah and it works on two levels. First, he works as a middleman in his profession. He has a connection with the underworld and supplies arms and ammunition. We see that he works between the manufacturer and buyers of the war material. On the other hand, in his life

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also, he is a middleman. At the same time, his master T. Ransome uses him between his wife Maria and her lover 'Bud'. Maria tells Alfie,

*"Clovis wanted a cut of Bud's action. But Bud refused and that got Clovis mad. Clovis even offered money but Bud said no way. Clovis pushed me on him so he took that he still didn't budge. So-----"* (P.16)

In the next story, 'A Wife's Story,' Mukherjee speaks about the Indian woman's entry in the United States where she experiences the conflict of cultures between her home and host land which represent tradition and modernity. Tradition represents India while modernity stands for America. The present story is a story of Panna whose past and present oscillate between the homeland and the host land that shows her shattered immigrant life in America. She shifts to the U.S. for educational purpose and meets a Hungarian fellow Imre. When she goes out with Imre to watch play, she compares the men from India and Hungarian Imre in the U.S.

*"So, I hug Imre instead ..... Then he catches me, we walk arm in arm to the bus stop. My husband would never dance or hug a woman on Broadway, nor would my brothers."* (P.28)

In 'Orbiting,' the next story of *The Middleman and Other Stories*, in which Mukherjee shows the cultural encounter of the immigrant from two different continents. Renata is a girl of Italian origin. Renata is her Italian name. But now, she is Rindy in America which shows her acceptance of American culture. She belongs to the third generation of immigrant and Italianness is now a metaphor. Her present lover is Roshan from Kabul, Afghanistan. She calls him 'Ro'. He flees from his country under Russian occupation.

Manners and Etiquettes is the gist of European culture. However, Renata's family is Italian, they value manners and etiquettes in which Ro lacks. At Thanksgiving dinner, when 'Ro' enters in Renata's home without knocking, Ro's dress is wrong for the occasion, and of course his manners. He stands in an un-American way and speaks with heavy accent. All his behavior at Renata's home, her Italian-American father takes him wrong or mistakes with his timidity. The members of Rindy's family have no idea about Ro's country in Asia stereotype him and his culture. But Rindy has no problem. She knows,

*"Each culture establishes its own manly posture different ways of claiming spate."* (P.70)

She loves him and his emotionality. She appreciates his way. She realizes her love for him. She decides to teach him American way of life.

*"I shall teach him how to walk like an American, how to dress like Brent but better how to fill up the room as Dad does instead of melting and blending but sticking out in the Afghan way."* (P.74-75)

Thus, in this story, we find that Rindy is American with unbound love for 'Ro,' who accepts him as a lover. She also thinks that it is her duty to Americanize him. So, he can survive there. But her family members do not understand Ro's culture and his Afghani life style. They are not ready to accept him as Rindy's husband.

In 'Fighting for the Rebound,' we meet Blanquita, a woman from the Eastern world who responds to the 'emotionless', 'soulless' practicality of the American culture. Blanquita is a young aristocrat immigrant. She is from the Philippines and wants to be an American. She takes a crash course in making nice to Americans. She speaks six languages including Tag log, Spanish, and American. She is struggling for success in the American society. At the same time, she is aware of the difference between cultures.

*"I should never have left Manila" she says. She does same very heavy, very effective sighing. "Pappy was right. The East is east and the West is west and never the twain shall meet."* (P.80)

We find the empty or emotionless practicality of American culture is the major facet of this story. Blanquita has the American lover Griff who is the first person narrator of this story. The institution of marriage is not so strong in America which we have in south Asian countries. It doesn't have the emotional love bond between husband and wife. The young couple prefers only 'live in' relations. In America, love is

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the face and sex is the base. We find the same in the relations of Blanquita and Griff. She realizes that there is only the desire of 'sex' in the name of love or liberation. So, she complains,

*"Not just you Griff," she scolds in that eerily well-bred, Asian convent-schooled, voice. " 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."* (P.85)

She feeds up with the 'soulless practicality of the American lover Griff. It upsets Blanquita. She says to him,

*"I can't stand it anymore, Griff. It's got to stop".*(P.85)

At the end of the story, we notice that the immigrant like Blanquita is in anguish and full of pain due to east west encounter.

In a nutshell, Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories* focuses on the social, political and historical incidents that causes to suffer the immigrants who occupy the middle place because the clash between the home and the host culture. The East West encounter brings the conflict in the manners and etiquettes of the east and west, responses to the soulless practicality of Americans and alienates the protagonist with rootlessness and search for roots. Some stories speak about the shattered illusory American dream of money making, racial discrimination and betterment of the immigrant protagonist.

After the discussion of her short stories we find that she deals with the problems, difficulties, and predicaments of the Diasporic characters in the transnational world in a realistic manner. She portrays the shuttling or straddling of the characters in the alien land due to the conflict between the culture of homeland and the culture of host land. She realistically brings out the character's failure to occupy space in the host land. Due to the displacement, her characters undergo the chaos of the cultural dissonance that they face in the alien land at the same time they also undergo the crisis of identity.

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