The Middleman Study Guide

The Middleman by Bharati Mukherjee

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

The Middleman Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....5

Characters....6

Themes....8

Style....10

Historical Context....12

Literary Heritage....14

Critical Overview....15

Criticism....17

Critical Essay #1....18

Critical Essay #2....22

Critical Essay #3....25

Topics for Further Study....31

What Do I Read Next?....32

Further Study....33

Bibliography....34

Copyright Information....35

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee's short story *"The Middleman"* was originally included in her second collection of short fiction, *The Middleman and Other Stories*, which won the 1988 Book Critics Circle Award for best fiction. *"The Middleman"* is told from the perspective of Alfie Judah, an Iraqi immigrant to the U.S. who is a "middleman" for illegal arms deals to rebel armies in an unnamed Latin American country. Alfie is staying at the home of Clovis Ransome, a trader in illegal goods. When Ransome leaves for the day, Alfie is asked to drive Ransome's wife, Maria, on an errand. He takes her to the nearby headquarters of a group of guerilla fighters where Maria meets up with her lover Andreas. Alfie eventually becomes a "middleman" in a conflict between Andreas and Ransome over Maria, during which Maria shoots Ransome but spares Alfie.

"The Middleman" focuses on several themes common throughout Mukherjee's fiction. Alfie is an immigrant with a tenuous U.S. citizenship who has become caught up in the shadier side of American imperialism and capitalist enterprise. His lust for Maria is in part an attraction to a fellow darkskinned person, although they are from two completely different cultures. Alfie is ultimately a character who survives in a multicultural setting in which he always finds himself as the "middleman" in business, political, and romantic conflicts.

Author Biography

Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940, in Calcutta, India. Her father, a chemist, was the head of a pharmaceutical firm, and Mukherjee was raised in an upper-middle-class Brahmin Bengali family. She received a privileged education, attending schools in Britain and Switzerland as well as in India. In 1959, she earned a B.A. in English from the University of Calcutta. In 1961, she earned an M.A. in English and ancient Indian culture, also from the University of Calcutta. In 1961, Mukherjee went to the United States to participate in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she met Canadian writer Clark Blaise, whom she married in 1963. In 1963, Mukherjee also earned an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. She held several teaching posts in universities in the United States, including Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (1964- 64), and the University of Wisconsin (1965). She moved with her husband to Canada in 1968, and in 1969 was awarded a Ph.D. In Canada, Mukherjee was a victim of racism; the experience had a profound affect on her personally as well as on her writing. She held a position as instructor and eventually associate professor at McGill University, Quebec (1966-78), but in 1978, fed up with the racism she encountered in Canada, she moved with her family to the U.S., where she held teaching positions at several different colleges and universities between 1978 and 1987. In 1987, she became a professor at the University of California at Berkley.

Mukherjee's writing career began with the publication of her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, in 1972. Her second novel, *Wife*, was published in 1975. This was followed by two collections of short stories, *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). *The Middleman and Other Stories* won the prestigious National Book Critics Circle Award for best fiction in 1988. Mukherjee published three subsequent novels: *Jasmine* (1989), based on a short story that appeared in *The Middleman*, *The Holder of the World* (1993), and *Leave It to Me* (1997). Mukherjee has written a number of nonfiction books, including *Kautilya's Concept of Diplomacy: A New Interpretation* (1976), *Political Culture and Leadership in India* (1991), and *Regionalism in Indian Perspective* (1992). In addition, she and her husband have co-written two nonfiction books: *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), which recounts their differing perceptions of India during a visit there, and *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987), about an Air India plane crash.

Plot Summary

The narrator is Alfie Judah, an Iraqi-born man with U.S. citizenship who works as a "middleman" in illegal arms deals. As the story opens, Alfie is staying at the home of Clovis Ransome, an American dealer in illegal goods, in an unnamed Latin American country. Alfie lusts after Ransome's wife, Maria, who is mostly Indian in origin. Bud Wilkins, a man in business with Ransome, pulls up in a pickup truck full of illegal merchandise. Ransome and Bud are going "fishing" for the day, although Alfie knows they are going out in a boat in order to pick up or drop off illegal merchandise. When Ransome and Bud leave, Maria asks Alfie to drive her to a nearby town to do some errands in Bud's pickup truck. Alfie, expecting a sexual affair with Maria, agrees to drive her. Maria, however, directs him to what turns out to be the headquarters of a group of guerilla rebel fighters. Much to Alfie's disappointment, Maria takes off with Andreas, one of the rebel fighters, leaving Alfie to fall asleep while waiting for her. Alfie also notes that Maria has brought the illegal arms in the back of Bud's truck for the rebels to unload and make use of. On the way back, Maria explains to Alfie that she had been kidnapped from her school at the age of 14 by the country's minister of education. She had then been "traded," like a piece of property, to Ransome as part of a business negotiation. When Alfie and Maria return to Ransome's home, Ransome is drunk. He tells them that Bud has been killed by rebels, although Alfie is sure Ransome himself ordered the killing. Ransome then passes out from drunkenness, and they carry him up to his room and lay him on the bed. Then Maria and Alfie spend the night together in Alfie's bedroom. When Alfie wakes up, a group of the guerilla rebels have entered Ransome's house and are in Ransome's bedroom. Andreas hands a gun to Maria, and she shoots Ransome. She then aims at Alfie but doesn't shoot him because, Alfie believes, "She had made love to me three times that night." Alfie has the insight, "Never has a truth been burned so deeply in me, what I owe my life to, how simple the rules of survival are." Maria then leaves with Andreas and the other rebels. Alfie stays in Ransome's house for a few days, after which he plans to call someone in the capitol in order to sell his information about the guerillas or the American arms dealers to whoever may be willing to pay him for the information. He concludes: "There must be something worth trading in the troubles I have seen."

Characters

Andreas

Andreas is a guerilla rebel fighter at the hideout to which Alfie drives Maria. Andreas and Maria are clearly lovers, and they leave Alfie for a tryst. That night, Andreas is among the rebels who enter Ransome's home. Andreas hands Maria the gun with which she shoots Ransome.

Eduardo

Eduardo is the "houseboy" at Ransome's house. He turns out to be one of the guerilla rebel fighters, who lets them into Ransome's house and leads them to his bedroom where he is shot.

Alfred Judah

Alfred Judah, the narrator of the story, is also referred to as Alfie. He is an Iraqi-born immigrant with a tenuous U.S. citizenship who works as a "middleman" in various illegal arms trades. As the story opens, he is staying at the home of Clovis Ransome, a dealer in illegal trades, in an unnamed Latin American country. Alfie lusts after Ransome's wife, Maria, and when Ransome leaves for the day, Maria asks Alfie to drive her on some errands. He believes she is intending to seduce him, but she has him drive her to the hideout of a group of guerilla fighters, where she leaves Alfie for a tryst with Andreas, one of the guerillas. However, on their way back, and that night, Maria and Alfie engage in their own tryst, while Ransome is passed out drunk and taken to his bedroom. In the middle of the night, the group of guerilla fighters enters Ransome's house and Maria shoots Ransome, but spares Alfie. Alfie ultimately plans on selling his knowledge of both the illegal traders and the guerillas to whomever might find the information valuable. Thus, Alfie remains a "middleman," in all of his economic, political, and romantic encounters.

Maria

Maria is the wife of Clovis Ransome and the object of Alfie's lust. Alfie notes, "With her thick dark hair and smooth dark skin, she has to be mostly Indian." Maria is aware of the fact that she is merely an object of exchange between a series of men in the course of their political and financial dealings. She was kidnapped at the age of 14 by the minister of education of her country, and then traded to Ransome as part of an illegal trade deal. When Ransome leaves for the day, Maria asks Alfie to drive her on some errands. She directs him to the hideout of a group of guerilla fighters, where she leaves Alfie for a tryst with Andreas, one of the fighters. In the process, she allows the rebel group to remove cargo that belonged to Ransome. That night, while Ransome is passed out

drunk, she sleeps with Alfie. In the middle of the night, members of the rebel group are let into Ransome's house, and Andreas hands Maria a gun with which she shoots Ransome. She then aims the gun at Alfie, but spares him.

Clovis Ransome

Clovis Ransome is an American dealer in illegal goods who makes his home and runs his business in an unnamed Latin American country. He leaves for the day to go on a "fishing" trip with Bud Wilkins, although Alfie knows that they are making a pickup or delivery of illegal goods. When Alfie and Maria return to Ransome's house that night, Ransome is drunk. He explains that Bud Wilkins had been killed by rebels and then he passes out. It is clear to Alfie that Ransome had ordered the killing of Bud for unknown reasons. However, given Ransome's jealousy regarding Maria, there is an implication that perhaps Bud was killed for having an affair with Maria, similar to Alfie's recent affair with her. They carry him up to his room and lay him on the bed. In the middle of the night, the guerilla rebels enter Ransome's house and his bedroom. Andreas, one of the rebels, hands Maria a gun, with which she shoots Ransome.

Bud Wilkins

Bud Wilkins pulls up to Ransome's house with a pickup truck full of illegal goods. He and Ransome then leave to go "fishing" for the day. That night, Ransome informs Alfie and Maria that Bud has been killed by rebels□although it is clear Ransome himself ordered the murder of his business partner for reasons which are not specified.

Themes

The Middleman

The title of this story, "The Middleman," is also the title of the collection in which it was first published, *The Middleman and Other Stories*. The theme of the "middleman" is significant in terms of Mukherjee's concern with the immigrant experience in America. Alfie, the story's narrator and main protagonist, is a "middleman" both literally and figuratively in several ways. He makes his living as the "middleman" in illegal arms deals; although the precise nature of his work is not specified, it is clear that he works as a go-between in the sale of illegal merchandise. Alfie is also a "middleman" in terms of his cultural identity. He is Iraqi, with a tenuous and questionable American passport, doing work in an unnamed Latin American country. Thus, he is between two cultures and two cultural identities□that of his Iraqi origins, and that of his current, Americanized life. Alfie is also the "middleman" in the relationship between Maria and Clovis Ransome. Alfie has a sexual affair with Maria, who is Ransome's wife, and is thus caught in the middle of their tenuous marriage. In the final scene of the story, Maria is handed a gun by the rebel Andreas, and it is unclear at first whether she is going to shoot Ransome or Alfie or both. Thus, Alfie is again caught in the middle of a conflict between the rebels and Ransome; he holds no particular allegiance to either side, and yet finds himself in the midst of a deadly encounter. After Maria chooses to shoot Ransome and not Alfie, Alfie once again plays the part of the "middleman"; he plans to sell or trade the inside information he has learned about both the American arms dealers and the rebel guerillas to whoever may be interested. Thus, Alfie, a man without strong ties to any particular nation, cultural identity, relationship, business partnership, or even political cause, remains a "middleman," a free agent motivated only by lust for women, greed for profit, and an instinct of self-preservation.

Americanization, Capitalism, and Immigrant Identity

A central theme of Mukherjee's fiction is the experience of immigrants, particularly Asian American and Middle Eastern immigrants in America. Alfie is an Iraqi-born immigrant, the legality of whose status as an American citizen is questionable. Alfie has chosen to pursue the proverbial American Dream through business transactions in the underworld of capitalist enterprise. Alfie is a "middleman" in illegal arms deals. The implication of this story is that Alfie's lifestyle as a "middleman" in illegal trades is a measure of the degree to which he has become Americanized. Alfie is often reminded of his own childhood experiences and his own culture in contrast to American culture and his life as an immigrant. Alfie recalls that he has always lusted after white, blonde women, the implication being that white women represent an American cultural ideal which he has internalized. However, the presence of Maria, who, dark-skinned and darkhaired, is mostly Indian, arouses Alfie's lust. He speculates that, beneath his surface level attraction to blonde white women, he finds that Maria's darkness arouses a sense of camaraderie and nostalgia for his own culture. Maria, in turn, functions as a unit of

exchange in a whitewashed system of capitalism, whereby she is traded between men as part of their business negotiations. Thus, while American- style capitalism makes of Alfie a "middleman" with no ties or allegiances to any cultural identity, it similarly makes of Maria a type of "middleman" who is treated as a unit of exchange in a capitalist system.

Style

Narration

This story is told from the first person restricted point of view, which means that the events of the story are presented to the reader from the perspective of one character in the story, in this case Alfie Judah. This first-person narrative is important to Mukherjee's concern with immigrant Americans struggling to formulate a sense of self and a sense of cultural identity within their new environment. As Fakrul Alam has pointed out, "In most of the stories collected in *The Middleman* and in her third novel, Mukherjee eschews the omniscient/superior perspective she had adopted earlier and attempts to allow her new Americans to tell their own stories."

Setting

This story is set in an unnamed or fictitious Latin American country in which guerilla rebels are attempting a revolution. However, the story's setting is clearly meant to evoke real historical locations and political struggles in such Latin American nations as Nicaragua. Passing reference to revolutionary leader Che Guevara, who was instrumental in the success of the Cuban Revolution, indicates the sense of realism Mukherjee wishes to convey. Furthermore, the setting in a Latin American country is significant to Mukherjee's concern with writing stories about immigrants from a broad range of cultures who have moved into a broad spectrum of geographic and sub-cultural milieus throughout the Americas. In this case, the main character and narrator, Alfie, is Iraqi, holds an American passport, and is currently located in a Latin American country in the course of his work as a "middleman" in illegal arms deals. Fakrul Alam has pointed out that, in the collection of stories included in *The Middleman*, "Mukherjee's expanded range and confidence in her ability to write about old and new Americans being transformed by nontraditional immigration patterns can... be seen in her choice of settings... ." Alam goes on the say that "all the stories of *The Middleman* seem to be deliberately set all over North America to prove how the entire continent was being transformed by the influx of immigrants of Asian origin." Alam notes, "Mukherjee manages to assemble such a diverse gallery of characters from almost half the globe and makes use of such disparate settings in *The Middleman*... " In addition, Alam notes that in these stories Mukherjee "seems to be even going out of her way to draw on characters from relatively peripheral areas who have had diasporic experiences. Also, she appears in this volume to delight in putting her protagonists in extreme situations."

Tone

The tone of the narrator of this story includes a delightfully rich mixture of cynicism, humor, irony, and nostalgia. Alfie expresses nostalgia for his childhood experiences in and memories of Baghdad, Iraq. This tone of nostalgia is in keeping with Mukherjee's

concern with the sense of loss of traditional culture experienced by immigrants who become integrated into American culture. Alfie's tones of irony and cynicism that permeate the story express his assessment of life in the world of American capitalism; he has accepted a world and a life in which every human interaction is a business transaction and a power game in which financial gain and self-preservation ("survival") are the only goals. Alfie, who feels loyalty or allegiance to no person, culture, nation, political cause, or morality, is understandably cynical, accepting even his "lovemaking" with Maria as a business transaction in which he provided her with sex in exchange for her decision to spare his life. Finally, the irony and cynicism of this story are rife with humor. A minor example is when the narrator refers to his newly-acquired ability to open a bottle of beer without an opener as a "New World skill." This phrase captures Alfie's sense of the triviality and meaninglessness of American culture, in which the ability to open a bottle of beer with one's teeth, for instance, achieves the status of a "skill."

Historical Context

Colonization and Independence in India

Mukherjee was born in Calcutta, India, just seven years before India became an independent nation. India had been a colony of the British empire for almost a century, from 1858 to 1947. The history of India during this period, therefore, is one of expansion of British power in conflict with organizations, protests, rebellion, and terrorist activism among the peoples of India. Before 1848, India had been colonized and ruled by the East India Company, but power was transferred to the British crown in 1858. Rebellion on the part of the Indians against European colonization was waged off and on throughout India's history of colonization. However, the first nationally organized Indian effort at achieving independence was formed in 1885, with the first meeting of the Indian National Congress. Nevertheless, Britain continued to expand its region of power in the area. In the years between World War I and World War II, Indian resistance to British rule continued, with the Indian National Congress inspired by the leadership of Gandhi. In 1947, when the British Parliament voted in the Indian Independence Act, British rule was finally ceded to Indian self-rule.

Modern Iraq

While many Americans are familiar with Iraq primarily in relation to the Gulf War of 1991 and its aftermath, this story was written several years before the Gulf War, and so a brief overview of Iraqi history is helpful in placing Mukherjee's character in a broader cultural context. In 1918, just after the end of World War I, Great Britain, which occupied Iraq, consolidated the three separate provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra into one nation, under British rule. Nationalist revolt of the Iraqi people against British rule began soon after, in 1920, and in 1921 Faysal was made king of Iraq under conditions of British parliamentary rule. In 1925, Iraq adopted a constitution while maintaining a monarchy. However, Iraq did not achieve full national independence from Britain until 1932. In 1958, the monarchy was toppled in a revolution and a republic was declared. In 1968, another revolution took place, during which Saddam Hussein was a leader in the revolt, and after which he was a top government official. In 1979, Hussein became president of Iraq. A border war between Iran and Iraq, referred to as the Iran-Iraq War, lasted from 1980 to 1988; the U.S. supported Iraq. It was not until August of 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, that the U.S. came into conflict with Iraq, sending military troops to the area beginning in August of that year, an action that erupted into a brief but decisive armed conflict early in 1991, referred to as the Gulf War.

Asian and Asian-American Women Writers

Bharati Mukherjee was born in India, became a Canadian citizen after marrying a Canadian man and living in Canada, and eventually settled in the United States, where

she became a citizen in 1988. Mukherjee can thus be classified as an Indian writer, a Canadian writer, and an Indian-American or Asian-American writer. Other notable contemporary Indian and Asian-American women writers include Maxine Hong Kingston, best known for her autobiographical novel, *The Woman Warrior*; Amy Tan, best known for her novel (originally presented as a collection of short stories) *The Joy Luck Club* ; and Anita Desai, an Indian-born novelist and short story writer.

Literary Heritage

Though not particularly interested in being known as an Indian writer, Mukherjee has placed herself in the long tradition of immigrant writers such as V. S. Naipaul and Bernard Malamud. She claims to have learned much from their fiction. She dedicated *Darkness* to her friend Malamud and even named one of her sons after him.

The predominant mode of American fiction in the 1980s was a minimalism exemplified by such writers as Raymond Carver. Minimalism used short sentences, understatement, and very little elaboration. Mukherjee positioned herself against this style, preferring instead a more elaborate one that allowed her to explore the layers of meaning and signifi- cance in the layered lives of her immigrant characters. She believes that a writer's status as immigrant gives her a great subject about which to write, and the subject deserves a great style.

Critical Overview

"The Middle Man" was first published in 1988 as part of Mukherjee's second collection of short fiction, *The Middle Man and Other Stories*, which won the 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award for best fiction. *The Middleman* was, according to Fakrul Alam, "both a commercial and a critical success." "The Middleman" has also been anthologized in the 1997 collection *High Infidelity: 24 Great Stories About Adultery by Some of Our Best Contemporary Authors* (1997), edited by John McNally.

A central theme that runs through all of Mukherjee's fiction is that of the immigrant experience in America. Critics noted that this collection, comprised of stories written mostly after her move to America and published shortly after she became a U.S. citizen, is more optimistic in its view of the immigrant experience. In addition, Mukherjee maintains that immigrants from Third World cultures are not only changed by living in America, but also affect a change in American culture as a whole. According to Andrea Dlaska, "*The Middleman* thus not only emphasizes the extent and variety of Third World immigration to the United States, but above all charts the emergence of an America unsettled by the inevitable demographic changes of the late twentieth century." Dlaska further explains, "The emphasis is on change as gain, not as loss. Uprooting oneself from the cultural registers of gender, class, and ethnicity is shown to be liberating for both old and new Americans... One clear advantage Mukherjee sees on the immigrant side is the newcomers' freedom to create new roles and futures for themselves." Dlaska points to "The Middleman" as one of the stories in the collection which "highlight characters who by choice or necessity have no ties of family or tradition to root them in any society." Dlaska remarks that, particularly in "The Middleman," "this freedom is shown to be transformed into the will to survive, an energy that is a gain and a match to the American pioneering spirit." The character of Alfie Judah, particularly, "has no dreams beyond financial gain, no cause or country to die for. The resulting lack of unassailable values and missionary zeal Mukherjee describes with amusing sarcasm."

Alam notes that the stories in this collection "represent a distinctive phase in Mukherjee's literary career... Mukherjee moves decisively away from the 'darkness' phase of her writing, where she dealt with expatriates trying to preserve their identities in a hostile world, to immigrants striving to transform their identities and stake out their claims to America." He states that, "Although her theme remains migrant lives, the angle of vision has changed radically... Her characters now are seen to be emerging from shadowy or marginal lives and putting out feelers to root themselves in a brave new world." Thus, Alam notes, "Mukherjee's theme in this phase of her literary career has become 'the making of new Americans.'"

Commenting on Mukherjee's use of language in *The Middleman and Other Stories*, S. K. Tikoo notes, "The writer's use of language is unconventional. The spoken language of the characters corresponds to their actual thinking process. Their speech is interspersed with words that may be familiar to the American ear but which must appear as slang to the non-American ear." Carol Ascher describes the effect of Mukherjee's use of language in these stories, noting that Mukherjee "writes with a rushed, rootless,

naively cynical voice of Third World newcomers and those who get involved with them." Alam adds, "The writing is altogether more flexible, the idiom distinctively American, the tone no longer ironic or bitter." According to Alam, "Reviewers were almost unanimous in their praise of Mukherjee's handling of her subject matter and her skillful use of the American language."

Finally, Dlaska concludes that, through her characters in this set of stories, Mukherjee "impressively emphasizes" that "America's new immigrants are not a faceless, huddled mass to be pitied or feared but a diverse group of individuals who will share and shape the future of the nation." Tikoo summarizes the overall effect of the stories in this collection: "One gets the impression that the United States is bursting with life of all sorts." Furthermore, Mukherjee's stories "ultimately present a fascinating picture of what constitutes modern America and modern experience. The American society is multicultural and multiracial." Ascher summarizes the composite picture of America suggested by these stories in stating that, "Although Mukherjee's characters only participate in public life to advance their narrow private interests, in total they *are* the great social transformation affecting North America." Ascher concludes, "Finishing the collection, one senses that the strategy of these short stories has served her well... There is no other writer documenting these largely unseen immigrants." Alam concludes, "Indeed, it is not too much to say that with the publication of *The Middleman* Mukherjee had registered her claim to be considered one of the leading authors of contemporary America."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture with a specialty in film studies from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses references to historically real people in Mukherjee's story "The Middleman."

Throughout Mukherjee's short story "The Middleman," the narrator, Alfie Judah, a "middleman" in the illegal arms trade, makes reference to several historical and media personalities, including Ted Turner, Che Guevara, and Miguel de Cervantes. In the following essay, I discuss each of these three historically real figures and their significance to the central themes of the story.

Alfie, the narrator, mentions several times throughout the story that most of the men in Clovis Ransome's employ wear Ted Turner baseball caps. Ted Turner (1938-) rose to power in the late twentieth century as a media mogul who pioneered the marketing of cable broadcasting. Turner purchased the UHF television station Channel 17 (broadcasting out of Atlanta) in 1970, and turned it into a profitable independent station within three years. Turner was among the first to broadcast via satellite to cable television subscribers. Channel 17 was eventually renamed the Turner Broadcasting System (TBS). Turner then launched the new cable broadcasting stations Cable News Network (CNN) in 1980 and Turner Network Television (TNT) in 1988 (the year in which Mukherjee's story was published). Turner also became the owner of sports teams, including the professional baseball team the Atlanta Braves in 1976 and the professional basketball team the Atlanta Hawks in 1977. Turner also caused controversy when, in 1986, he bought the MGM/UA Entertainment Company, which included the film studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and its library of over 4,000 classic films; Turner met with protests from various artists, intellectuals, and members of the entertainment industry when he began to colorize many of the classic black-and-white films included in this library. In addition, Turner is a yachtsman who won the 1977 America's Cup yacht race. Many of these details are significant to Mukherjee's story as referred to in the narrator's discussion of Clovis Ransome's admiration for Ted Turner:

> He's a Braves man. Bud ships him cassettes of all the Braves games... It isn't love of the game, he told me last week. It's love of Ted Turner, man. His teams. His stations. His America's cup, his yachts, his network. If he could clone himself after anyone in the world, he'd choose Ted Turner.Then he leaned close and told me his wife, Maria... told him she'd put out all night if he looked like Ted Turner.

This mention of Ted Turner is significant to several central themes of the story. Clovis Ransome is a successful capitalist entrepreneur of the illegal underworld economy. Ted Turner is a consummate capitalist success story. Clovis's worship of Ted Turner indicates his business aspirations, according to which Turner would certainly be an

impressive role model. Alfie, the narrator of the story, lives in a world in which every interaction is a business negotiation, and every thing□including another human being□is a commodity or unit of exchange. For instance, Maria, Ransome's wife, has been exchanged between men throughout her life as a commodity in the course of their business negotiations. Ted Turner as model entrepreneur and Maria as prime capital are thematically related in Alfie's interjection to the reader, during this exchange with Ransome, that he himself could not possibly "miss her charms, or underestimate their prices in a seller's market." So Ransome's admission that Maria would "put out all night" if he looked like Ted Turner suggests Maria's sense of herself as a unit of exchange and her sexuality as a bargaining chip; if Ted Turner is a successful business mogul, Maria would "put out all night" for him as a sound financial investment.

At one point in the story, Alfie, the narrator, takes note of the contents of the bedroom of Eduardo, Ransome's "houseboy," who turns out to be in league with the guerilla rebel fighters who eventually kill Ransome. Along with the "icons of saints" hanging on the walls, Alfie notices "posters of stars I'd never have heard of if I hadn't been forced to drop out." Along with many posters of women, Alfie comments that "the men have greater range. Some are young versions of Fernando Lamas, some are in fatigues and boots, striking Robin Hood poses. The handsomest is dressed as a guerilla with all the right accessories: beret, black boots, bandolier. Maybe he'd played Che Guevara in some Bbudget Argentine melodrama." Alfie later notices that Maria's lover, the guerilla rebel fighter Andreas, is the man in this poster. Che Guevara (1928-1967) was a revolutionary thinker and leader in the Cuban revolution as well as in several other political struggles in South American and Central American countries. Guevara, who was born in Argentina, finished a medical degree in 1953. During his holidays from school, he spent time traveling in Latin America, and the poverty he witnessed strengthened his political convictions as a socialist. Guevara met the Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro and fought with Castro's guerilla rebels to effect the overthrow of the Batista government in Cuba in 1959. Castro established a Marxist government in Cuba, with Guevara occupying various top government positions. Guevara was also committed to Marxist revolution and opposed to imperialism in nations throughout the world. Guevara was killed in 1967 while fighting with guerilla rebels in Bolivia. Guevara wrote the influential books *Guerilla Warfare* (first published in Spanish in 1960; translated into English in 1961), a manual for guerilla fighters, and *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War* (first published in Spanish in 1963; translated into English in 1968).

The mention of Che Guevara is significant to Mukherjee's story in its reference to a Marxist revolutionary leader and guerilla fighter in Latin America. This story takes place in an unspecified Latin American country, in which guerilla rebel fighters and American traders in illegal goods negotiate business deals, vie for power, and betray and murder one another. The political, social, and national commitment of the guerilla rebels and their willingness to die for a cause are contrasted with Alfie, the narrator, who owes allegiance to no nation, cause, or political convictions. As a "middleman" in an economy of capitalist enterprise and exchange, Alfie represents the greed, selfishness, and a-morality of American-style capitalism. The degree to which Alfie functions as a free agent in the underworld is a measure of the extent to which he has become

"Americanized" and drained of nearly all cultural ties. Throughout the story, Alfie contrasts his own valueless approach to life with the commitment of the rebels. As Alfie and Maria are leaving the rebel headquarters, Andreas says, "Viva la revolucion, eh?" to which the narrator replies, "I have no feeling for revolution, only for outfitting the participants." Alfie even figures his desire for Maria in terms of "margins"□how much it will "cost" him□again contrasting his own approach to life with that of a "hero" such as the rebel fighter Andreas (or Che Guevara): "I'm no hero, I calculate margins. I could not calculate the cost of a night with Maria, a month with Maria, though for the first time in my life it was a cost I might have borne." Again, in the final scene of the story, as Maria points the gun at Ransome, the narrator comments, "I know I am no hero. I know none of this is worth suffering for, let alone dying for." Alfie's insight, that Maria has decided to spare his life because "She had made love to me three times that night," again reinforces Alfie's perception that every human interaction is a business interaction. He finds that, "Never has a truth been burned so deeply in me, what I owe my life to, how simple the rules of survival are." Even his sexual encounter with Maria turns out to be a business transaction: he "owes" for sex, Maria has granted him the opportunity to live. Finally, even human "troubles" to Alfie are a potential commodity, an opportunity for financial gain; he concludes, "There must be something worth trading in the troubles I have seen." The passing mention of a committed revolutionary like Che Guevara functions to highlight Alfie's lack of commitment to anything or anyone but his own "survival" and financial gain.

In an exchange between Maria and Eduardo, the "houseboy" who works for Ransome, Alfie struggles to follow their dialogue in a dialect of Spanish:

He spits out, "He kills everything." At least, that's
the drift. The language of Cervantes does not stretch
around the world without a few skips in transmission.
Eduardo's litany includes crabs, the chemicals, the
sulfurous pool, the dead birds and snakes and lizards.

Alfie here refers to the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616). Cervantes is world renowned for having written the prototype for the European novel, *Don Quixote* (1605), and is considered by many to be the most important figure in Spanish literature. Furthermore, "owing to their widespread representation in art, drama, and film, the figures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are probably familiar visually to more people than any other fictitious characters in world literature." In the context of the above passage from Mukherjee's story, the reference to "the language of Cervantes" represents a highly respected form of the Spanish language, against which the narrator contrasts the local dialogue of Eduardo and Maria. Mukherjee's concern with cultural diversity throughout the Americas is expressed here through the implication that the (fictional) setting of this story is immersed in its own culturally specific dialect. The tone of the narrator's comment here is meant to be ironic in a slightly humorous way□suggesting that the local dialect represents a kind of butchering of the Spanish language proper□but, given Mukherjee's broader concerns with cultural specificity, it

ultimately functions to make note of the broad range of cultural pockets within the Americas.

In conclusion, Mukherjee's story includes references to a broad range of historically real people, spanning current American mass culture (Ted Turner), Latin American history (Che Guevara), and world literature (Miguel de Cervantes). Knowledge of the significance of these references affords the reader a deeper appreciation of Mukherjee's central themes and a sense of the rich, dense, multi-layered texture of multicultural influences on the American landscape.

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the themes of identity, ethnicity, and foreignness in "The Middleman".

Bharati Mukherjee's collection of short stories *The Middleman and Other Stories* centers on the immigrant experience of new Americans coming from around the world□Asia, Africa, the West Indies. These immigrants, according to Fakrul Alam writing in his study *Bharati Mukherjee*, "are seen to be emerging from shadowy or marginal lives and putting out feelers to root themselves in a brave new world." In two essays that she wrote in the late 1980s, Mukherjee expressed the shift in her literary themes from the exploration of expatriates trying to preserve their identities to "the making of new Americans." Mukherjee writes of both of these experiences from a personal perspective. Born in Calcutta, she moved to Canada but she disliked that country's policy of multiculturalism, and she relocated to the United States in 1980, eventually becoming an American citizen.

The immigrant character in "The Middleman," Alfie Judah, is a Jew originally from Iraq, but he has also lived, at the very least, in India and New York City. Recently arrived in an unidentified Central American country ruled by corrupt officials, Judah has not left the United States by choice. "A modest provident fund I'd been maintaining for New Jersey judges was discovered," he explains. "My fresh new citizenship is always in jeopardy. My dealings can't stand too much investigation." Alfie, currently working as a middleman in arms-trading deals, has found himself in the company of like-minded colleagues: Clovis T. Ransome, a Texan who fled to Central America "with fifteen million in petty cash hours ahead of a posse from the SEC," and Bud Wilkins, another Texan and former CIA agent who was "forced into public life and made to go semipublic with his arms and transfer fees" and is now "entrenched" in the region.

These three men, all immigrants to Central America, maintain many characteristics inherent to the United States, both in actions they take and ways they look at the world. Ransome, though "he's spent his adult life in tropical paradises playing God," swills Jack Daniels whiskey, wears his Atlanta Braves baseball cap, watches all the Braves' games on tape, and would like nothing more than to emulate the Braves' owner, Ted Turner. Alfie notes this uniquely American love of baseball□"There are aspects of American life I came too late for and will never understand"□ even though Ransome tells Alfie that "it isn't love of the game... It's love of Ted Turner, the man" and "his teams. His stations. His America's Cup, his yachts, his network." Turner's millions and the game of baseball are both pervasive American icons. The baseball team is yet another symbol of Turner's power in America, power that Ransome longs for.

Ransome, however, has little to bargain with. As Alfie reminds the reader at the beginning of the story, $15 million "doesn't buy much down here, a few thousand acres, residency papers, and the right to swim with the sharks a few feet off the bottom." Ransome must work his schemes, and work them hard, in order to become powerful

and wealthy. The country's corrupt President Gutierrez is also involved with Ransome's schemes. A political whore, Gutierrez is "on retainer from men like Ransome, from the *contras*, maybe from the Sandinistas as well." Yet, the flexible nature of the president's allegiance—which aptly reflects the allegiance of the central characters in the story—is underscored by the fact that Maria, prior to becoming Ransome's wife, was Gutierrez's mistress. "Ransome partially bought and partially seduced [Maria] away from Gutierrez, so he's never sure if the president owes him one, or wants to kill him." Men without power in this Central America are vulnerable. Yet, men with power are not immune either; Gutierrez, ostensibly the top man in the country, "has enemies, right and left." In the high-stakes world of arms dealing and crime, no one is safe. The murders of Wilkins and Ransome will prove this truth before the story closes.

In lieu of higher chips, Ransome bargains with the beautiful Maria, prostituting his wife to Bud as incentive to the other man to let Ransome in on shady business dealings. Maria later reveals to Alfie other stories of "loaning her out, dangling her on a leash like a cheetah, then the beatings for what he suspects." Maria, however, is much more than a pawn in this game of power and munitions; she is also a guerrilla commander. She has Alfie drive Bud's truck to Santa Simona, a guerilla camp in the jungle. This is her birthplace, Maria tells Alfie. "'*This* is my house, Alfie,'" she says. The signifi- cance of this exchange relies on the disclosure that Maria is an immigrant to Ransome's world. Earlier, Alfie had equated Maria, though "dark, native," and clearly of Indian ancestry, as akin to the other women in Central America. As a physical representation of Latin America, Maria was not as desirable as "those European women" with "pale, thin, pink flesh" and "curly blond hair" whom he had desired when he was a boy in Iraq. Originally, Alfie had overlooked Maria—she was "in the background" and he deemed her unworthy of his attention, much as were the low-class prostitutes he had visited in Iraq, the "swamp Arabs from Basra and black girls from Baluchistan." As the days pass, however, Alfie comes to appreciate Maria's "lustrous browns, purple blacks." These imagistic details, especially their emphasis on color, again serve to underscore the theme of difference and foreignness, reminding the reader of the unique position a foreigner occupies in society and of the choices he or she must accordingly make.

One of the underlying truths about this Central American, crime-ridden world is no one can be trusted because no one truly belongs. Maria, a native, was betrayed at the age of 14 when Gutierrez came to her school and took her away and claimed her for his own, though she was engaged to another. The Indians who work for Ransome "hate gringos" and constantly recite a "litany of presidents' names, Hollywood names, Detroit names—Carter, *chop*, Reagan, *slash*, Buick, *thump*". Yet, all the while they busily hack away at their native landscape, "the virgin forests," to clear the land for Ransome; they wear his Atlanta Braves caps and demonstrate gestures learned from watching Ransome's baseball tapes: "*we're Number One*." The guerrillas who come to kill Ransome also wear Braves hats, implying that the men in Ransome's employ are actually in his wife's employ. No one, the story says, is part of one group. Even animal imagery throughout the story highlights this prevailing theme of alienation. Ransome's servant Eduardo beats crabs as they frantically "try to get by us to the beach where they can hear the waves." Alfie recognizes the extreme foreignness they present: "How do mating crabs scuttle their way into Clovis T. Ransome's kitchen?" he wonders. The bird

that Alfie sees in the camp is "cramped and tortured" in its cage, and it is doomed to a life of entrapment, for "that boy broke its wings." No characters, not even animals, in the story are free to leave the life that has been created around them.

Alfie, as well, essentially has been an outsider wherever he goes, as the narration succinctly demonstrates. He lives in the "dog-eat-dog" world of crime, but according to his first wife, he is "a beagle." As a child, a family servant took him to see the stoning of a young Iraqi woman for committing adultery. "I realize I am one of the very few Americans who knows the sound of rocks cutting through flesh and striking bone," he says. Now in Central America, he wears sunscreen so he "won't turn black," that is, darken to the color of the native Indians. His skin color, however, saves him from the Indians' ire, for his "darkness exempts" him from classification as a gringo. When the guerrillas attack the Ransome ranch, the Indians ask if he is an *Americano* or a gringo. Maria answers that he is Jewish and that he comes from Israel. Although Alfie is Jewish, he comes from Iraq, a country in the Middle East that is predominantly Muslim, and as such is an inherent enemy of the Jews. Still, with this scene Alfie takes on yet another ethnic identity.

These themes of the inherent meaning of ethnicity and identity are at the heart of "The Middleman" and the other stories in the collection. Writes Amal, "Seen in the perspective of Mukherjee's literary career till this point, "The Middleman" is an unusual story for her to write, but as the first and titular story of the collection, it announces clearly her determination to venture as far away as possible from her milieu to write about all sorts of people caught up in a global diaspora." Mukherjee herself explained in a 1988 interview that she came to write the story of Alfie Judah "because he was a cynical person and a hustler, as many immigrant survivors have to be." Indeed, the end of the story affirms Alfie's character as he realizes that he has survived the attack on Ransome because of his affair with Maria. "Never has a truth burned so deeply in me, what I owe my life to, how simple the rules of survival are." The last paragraph of the story sums up Alfie's mindset and the way he gets through this world: "In the next few days when I run out of food, I will walk down the muddy road to San Vicente, to the German bar with the pay phone: I'll wear Clovis's Braves cap and I'll salute the Indians... Someone in the capital will be happy to know about Santa Simona, about Bud, Clovis. There must be something worth trading in the troubles I have seen."

Source: Rena Korb, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

*In the following essay on Bharati Mukherjee's writings (*The Middleman and Other Stories, The Wife's Story, *and* Jasmine*, authors Sant-Wade and Radell examine Mukherjee's process of fashioning a literary identity for a female protagonist in alien cultures.*

The female protagonist in one of Bharati Mukherjee's prize-winning short stories, from the collection titled *The Middleman and Other Stories,* is shocked when her landlord lover refers to the two of them as "two wounded people," and thinks to herself that "She knows she is strange, and lonely, but being Indian is not the same, she would have thought, as being a freak." The Indian woman, Maya Sanyal, who is the central figure of the story, "The Tenant," recognizes her strangeness in America and her appalling loneliness, but she resists being recognized as a "freak." No doubt this term occurs to her when her current lover, Fred, a man without arms, refers to them both as wounded. She does not see herself as being as freakish as Fred, as bereft as Fred, though certainly the story makes clear that she has been wounded emotionally and spiritually by the struggle to come to terms with her new life in America. In one sense, Fred's assessment is accurate, for as the author indicates in all the stories in this collection, it is impossible to adapt to life in the New World without sustaining some kind of wound to one's spirit.

It is apparently a deeper wound for the women of the Third World, who are engaged in the struggle to fashion a new identity for themselves in an alien culture. Perhaps this struggle results from their sudden freedom from the bonds of superstition and chauvinism that held them fast in their old, familiar cultures, freedom that seems to leave them floating, unbalanced, in the complex, sometimes treacherous air of this new and unfamiliar culture. The irony is that this refashioning of the self is both painful and exhilarating; hence, the terrible ambivalence of the women toward their own freedom□the freedom to *become* □an ambivalence expressed by these women in the midst of arduous change, in the powerful act of rejecting the past and moving energetically toward an unknown future.

In a *Massachusetts Review* interview, Mukherjee asserts that

> we immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries which are plagued by civil and religious conflicts. We have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived. When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable, often heroic.

Mukherjee goes on to say that she attempts to

illustrate this remarkable, often heroic quality in her novels and short stories. Her characters, she asserts, "are filled with a hustlerish kind of energy" and, more importantly, they take risks they wouldn't have taken in their old, comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are reborn.

Mukherjee's choice of metaphor is especially apt with reference to the women in her fiction, for the act of rebirth, like birth itself, is both painful, and, after a certain point, inevitable. It is both terrible and wonderful, and an act or process impossible to judge while one is in the midst of it. So the women in Mukherjee's stories are seen deep in this process of being reborn, of refashioning themselves, so deep that they can neither extricate themselves nor reverse the process, nor, once it has begun, would they wish to. There is a part of themselves, however, that is able to stand back a little and observe their own reaction to the process, their own ambivalence. We know this because Mukherjee weaves contradiction into the very fabric of the stories: positive assertions in interior monologues are undermined by negative visual images; the liberation of change is undermined by confusion or loss of identity; beauty is undermined by sadness.

A close look at three stories from *The Middleman and Other Stories*, each with a female protagonist from the Third World, illustrates the author's technique and her success in conveying this theme of rebirth or refashioning of the self by immigrant women. The stories are "The Tenant," "Jasmine," and "A Wife's Story," and in each of them, we encounter a different woman at a different stage in the subtle, complex, and traumatic process of becoming a new woman, one who is at home in the sometimes terrifying freedom of the new American culture. In each story, the exhilarating sense of possibility clashes with the debilitating sense of loss, yet the exuberant determination of the women attracts us to them and denies the power of pity.

Perhaps this attraction without pity derives from the women's avoidance of self-pity. In "The Tenant," we first meet the protagonist, Maya, sitting over a glass of bourbon (the first one of her life) with a new colleague from her new job in the English Department at the University of Northern Iowa. The American colleague, Fran, is on the Hiring, Tenure, and Reappointment Committee, and is partly responsible for bringing Maya to the school. While Fran chats about her own life and gossips a little about Maya's landlord, Maya contemplates the immensity of her isolation and loneliness. And although she longs to be able to confide in someone, Fran even, she realizes that Fran is unable to receive these confidences because Fran cannot see that Maya is a woman caught in the mingled web of two very different cultures. To Fran, "a utopian and feminist." Maya is a bold adventurer who has made a clean break with her Indian past, but Maya understands, as the reader does, that there is no such thing as a "clean" break.

When Maya is invited to Sunday afternoon tea by another Bengali, Dr. Rabindra Chatterji, a professor of physics at her new university, she accepts with somewhat mixed feelings but dresses carefully in one of her best and loveliest saris. Once inside the Chatterji's house, in a raw suburban development that seems full of other Third

World nationalities, Maya allows the familiar sights and smells of Indian high tea to take her back to that other world of "Brahminness":

> The coffee table is already laid with platters of mutton croquettes, fish chops, onion pakoras, ghugni with puris, samosas, chutneys. Mrs. Chatterji has gone to too much trouble. Maya counts four kinds of sweetmeats in Corning casseroles on an end table. She looks into a see-through lid; spongy, white dumplings float in rosewater syrup. Planets contained, mysteries made visible.

Maya's hostess begins to ask questions about Maya's distinguished family in Calcutta, and Maya thinks to herself that "nothing in Calcutta is ever lost." She worries that the husband and wife may retreat to the kitchen, leaving her alone, so that they may exchange "whispered conferences about their guest's misadventures in America." Apparently the story of her "indiscretions" (99) with various men, her marriage and divorce to an American, is known to the entire Bengali community in North America, which may be one of the reasons Dr. Chatterji both speaks and acts suggestively (he has one hand in his jockey shorts) when he drives her home that evening. Maya has been marked as a "loose" woman and as a divorcée, and therefore cannot ever hope to remarry respectably in the Indian (at least not the Brahmin) community: she is both in it and out of it, forever.

She occupies the same ambiguous position in the American community; although she has become an American citizen, she does not fully belong there either. She longs for a real sense of belonging, for the true companionship and love she dares to want, and eventually brings herself to answer an ad in the matrimonial column of *India Abroad*, the newspaper for expatriates. She answers the ad that declares:

> Hello! Hi! Yes, you *are* the one I'm looking for. You are the new emancipated Indo-American woman. You have a zest for life. You are at ease in USA and yet your ethics are rooted in Indian tradition. ... I adore idealism, poetry, beauty. I abhor smugness, passivity, caste system. Write with recent photo. Better still, call!!!

Maya does call the man who placed the ad, Ashoke Mehta, and arranges a meeting at Chicago's O'Hare airport, "a neutral zone" (109) they both prefer for this emotionally risky encounter. Until she meets Mehta, another immigrant who lives a life that bridges two worlds, she feels she lives in a "dead space" that she cannot articulate properly, even to herself. At the end of the story, after their courtship has entered its final phase, and she has decided to go to Connecticut to be with him, we know she will finally be able to repudiate her own accusations that her life is grim and perverse, that "she has changed her citizenship, but she hasn't broken through into the light, the vigor, the

bustle of the New World." At the end, she does bustle off to meet the man who will make her whole again (and whom she will make whole) in this new life.

The next story, "Jasmine," also explores some of the more appalling, perhaps even "violent and grotesque aspects of [the] cultural collisions" Mukherjee writes about (Rustomji-Kerns). In this story, the protagonist is a young Trinidadian woman named Jasmine who has been smuggled illegally into the US, all paid for by her father ("Girl, is opportunity come only once"), and goes to work first in the motel of the Indian family who helped her get there, and later as a "mother's helper ... Americans were good with words to cover their shame" for an American family. When her new American employers ask about her family and her home, Jasmine recognizes the need to deceive them:

> There was nothing to tell about her hometown that wouldn't shame her in front of nice white American folk like the Moffitts. The place was shabby, the people were grasping and cheating and lying and life was full of despair and drink and wanting. But by the time she finished, the island sounded romantic.

Jasmine must construct a suitable, tolerable narrative of her past and her roots, in the same way that she is attempting to construct a positive narrative of her life in the New World. She seems precariously balanced between what she once was and what she hopes to become. She is like other Mukherjee characters, who

> remind one of circus performers, a combination of tightrope walkers and trapeze artists, as they search for secure, even familiar, places they can claim as their home. ... They try to transcend the isolation of being a foreigner not only in another country but also in their own cultures. (Rustomji-Kerns)

Jasmine tries hard to cut all ties with "anything too islandy" as she struggles to refashion herself in America. Though she cleans, cooks, and irons for the Moffitts, she never stops giving thanks for having found such "a small, clean, friendly family ... to build her new life around." She is constantly thanking Jesus for her good luck. The irony is that through all the exuberance and energy we see how terribly she is exploited by the Moffitts, and how unaware she often is of this exploitation, though it is not something she could recognize, even if it were pointed out.

At Christmas time, Jasmine is taken by Bill Moffitt to see her only "relatives" in the country, the Daboos, the Indian family she had originally worked for. In her original interview, she had told Bill and Lara Moffitt that Mr. Daboo was her mother's first cousin because

> she had thought it shameful in those days to have no papers, no family, no roots. Now Loretta and Viola in tight, bright pants seemed trashy like girls at Two-

Johnny Bissoondath's Bar back home. She was stuck with the story of the Daboos being family. Village bumpkins, ha! She would break out. Soon.
We never do get to see Jasmine "break out," but the sense that she is a survivor emanates from the story even when she weeps with homesickness on Christmas Day. However, Mukherjee undercuts Jasmine's enthralled sense of unlimited possibility with a poignant moment of epiphany at the end of the story. In the last scene, she is half-willingly seduced by Bill Moffitt:
She felt so good she was dizzy. She'd never felt this good on the island where men did this all the time, and girls went along with it always for favors. You couldn't feel really good in a nothing place. ... She was a bright, pretty girl with no visa, no papers, and no birth certificate. No, nothing other than what she wanted to invent and tell. She was a girl rushing wildly into the future. ... it [the love-making] felt so good, so right that she forgot all the dreariness of her new life and gave herself up to it.

In "A Wife's Story," another immigrant woman has had her share of dreariness, loneliness, confusion, and anger in the effort to reshape her life in the land of opportunity. She too is weighed down by the burdens of two cultures and the hardship of trying to balance parts of her old life with the best of the new. The wife is a woman who has left her husband temporarily to pursue a graduate degree in New York, to break the cycle begun hundreds of years before. The narration is first person this time:

Memories of Indian destitutes mix with the hordes of New York street people, and they float free, like astronauts, inside my head. 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. My mother was beaten by her mother-in-law, my grandmother, when she registered for French lessons at the Alliance Française. My grandmother, the eldest daughter of a rich zamindar, was illiterate.

This woman has even gone so far as to befriend another lonely immigrant, a Hungarian named Imre, who also has a spouse and family back home in the old country. Their friendship, so necessary to her survival in New York, would be unthinkable in her own country; in India, married women are not friends with men married to someone else. But Imre helps her to survive assaults on her dignity and the hopelessness of not truly belonging. He comforts her after a David Mamet play (*Glengarry Glen Ross*) in which she must endure terrible lines about Indians, such as, "Their women ... they look like

they've just been f□□ed by a dead cat." She feels angry enough and strong enough to write a letter of protest to the playwright, or at least to write it in her head.

The Americanized but still Indian wife surprises herself occasionally by literally breaking out in very un-Indian behavior (like the time she impulsively hugs Imre on the street), and when her husband arrives for a visit, she realizes how many of the changes in her own behavior she now takes for granted. She dresses in a beautiful sari and her heavy, ornate wedding jewelry to greet him at JFK Airport, but underneath the familiar costume she is not the same woman at all. She is not even sure whether she is unhappy about it, though she can tell her husband is disconcerted

The end of the story encapsulates both the strength of her spirited struggle to refashion herself and the difficulty of achieving wholeness when one is stretched between two cultures. On her way to bed with her husband, she stops to look at herself:

> In the mirror that hangs on the bathroom door, I watch my naked body turn, the breasts, the thighs glow. The body's beauty amazes. I stand here shameless, in ways he has never seen me. I am free, afloat, watching somebody else.

This sense of floating is the key to the immigrant woman's experience, whether it is the English professor in "The Tenant," the Indian girl from the Carribean in "Jasmine," or the PhD candidate in "A Wife's Story." Like Bernard Malamud, with whom Mukherjee compares herself in *The Massachusetts Review* interview, and other American writers of immigrant experiences, Mukherjee writes powerfully "about a minority community which escapes the ghetto and adapts itself to the patterns of the dominant American culture," and in her own words, her work "seems to find quite naturally a moral center." This moral center she speaks of comes quite naturally to her because she is attempting the nearly sacred task of making mysteries visible, to paraphrase an expression from "The Tenant."

Source: Arvindra Sant-Wade and Karen Margeurite Radell, "Refashioning the Self: Immigrant Women in Bharati Mukherjee's New World," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 29, No. 1, Winter, 1992, pp. 11-17.

Topics for Further Study

All of Mukherjee's fiction focuses on the theme of immigrant identity and the immigrant experience in America. Read another one of her short stories. In what ways does it address themes similar to those of "The Middleman" in terms of the immigrant experience? In what ways does it address different themes?

Mukherjee was born in India in 1940, less than a decade before India achieved national independence and self-rule. Learn more about the history of India before and after independence. What differences do you think Mukherjee saw during her childhood?

Mukherjee's fiction focuses on immigrants to America from a variety of Asian and Middle Eastern regions. Learn more about past and current immigration patterns to the U.S. of one particular nationality of immigrant groups (such as Indian, Vietnamese, etc.). What is the history of immigration patterns and the immigrant experience of people to America from this particular region? What current issues face immigrants from this region?

The main character of this story is a dealer in the sale of illegal firearms from the U.S. While the situation depicted in the story is fictional, what can you learn about such illegal trade practices in recent history?

What Do I Read Next?

The Middleman and Other Stories (1988) by Bharati Mukherjee. Mukherjee's second collection of short fiction and winner of the 1988 Book Critics Circle Award for best fiction.

Jasmine (1989) by Bharati Mukherjee. Mukherjee's third novel, based on the short story "Jasmine," which originally appeared in *The Middleman.*

Mukherjee's fourth novel, *The Holder of the World* (1993), traces the lives of two women living in different centuries whose fates meet over a famous diamond called the Tear Drop.

Leave It to Me (1997), Mukherjee's fifth and most recent novel to date, is about a woman's search for identity.

Days and Nights in Calcutta (1977) by Bharati Mukherjee and Clark Blaise, traces Mukherjee and her husband's differing perspectives during a visit to India in 1973.

Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction (1993), edited by Jessica Hagedorn with an introduction by Hagedorn and a preface by Elaine Kim, is a collection of short stories by contemporary Asian- American writers and includes "A Father" by Mukherjee.

Imagining America: Stories from the Promised Land (1991), edited by Wesley Brown and Amy Ling, is a collection of short fiction on the theme of immigration and the immigrant experience in America. It includes "A Wife's Story" by Mukherjee.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Asian-American Women Writers*, Chelsea House Publishers, 1997.

A collection of excerpts from critical responses to a range of Asian-American women writers, including Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Bharati Mukherjee.

Dhawan, R. K., ed., *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A Critical Symposium*, Prestige, 1996.

A collection of critical essays on the novels and short stories of Mukherjee.

Dlaska, Andrea, *The Making of New Americans in the Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee*, Braumiller, 1999.

Discusses Mukherjee's major fictional works in terms of the immigrant experience in America.

Nelson, Emmanuel S., ed., *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, Garland, 1993.

A collection of critical essays on the writings of Mukherjee on a variety of themes and from a wide range of perspectives.

Bibliography

Alam, Fakrul, *Bharati Mukherjee*, Twayne, 1996, pp. 78-81, 86-87, 99.

Ascher, Carol, "After the Raj," in *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. VI, No. 12, September, 1989, p. 17.

Dlaska, Andrea, *The Making of New Americans in the Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee*, Braumiller, 1999, pp. 95-96, 117, 120-22.

Tikoo, S. K., "The American Dream: Immigration and Transformation Theme in *The Middleman and Other Stories*," in *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A Critical Symposium*, edited by R. K. Dhawan, Prestige, 1996, pp. 145-46.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Literature of Developing Nations for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535