

Portrayal of Women Protagonists in Bharati Mukherjee's Short Stories

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Paper Received on 14-02-2026, Accepted on 15-03-2026

Published on 16-03-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.01.657

Abstract:

The women protagonists in Bharati Mukherjee's short stories are portrayed as resilient, ambitious and transformative, often navigating the complexities of immigration, cultural displacement, and the search for identity in a world. Moving away from traditional submissive roles, these women are portrayed as assertive individuals who often revolt against patriarchal constraints, traditional taboos, and societal expectations and ultimately redefine their destinies. This paper seeks to explore the theme in three short stories of Bharati Mukherjee namely *The Lady from Lucknow*, *The Tenant*, and *A Wife's Story*.

Key Words: Women protagonists, immigration, cultural displacement, patriarchal constraints, traditional taboos, destinies.

Introduction:

The immigrant women in Mukherjee's short stories wish to find their true identity, live independently and experience full freedom and celebrate their present life in the new world. They try to adjust themselves to the new world and in the process of their adjustment, they are transformed. They shed their past habits, customs and traditions and begin a new life. Sometimes this transformation is essential for their survival and it is a part of expatriate experience. The breaking down of age-old traditions and customs and acquiring new modes of living by the women protagonists are reflected in some short stories of Bharati Mukherjee.

Bharati Mukherjee's short story **The Lady from Lucknow** deals with the experience of a passionate Muslim girl, Nafeesa who yearns for love, freedom and wishes to lead a life devoid of social inhibitions, customs and traditions. Nafeesa's

father, an Army doctor lived in Lucknow prior to partition. When she is four, she is shocked to hear about the death of a Muslim girl, Husseina who fell in love with a Hindu and was beaten to death by her father. But the toddler Nafeesa who was confused by the logic of love punishment-death of Husseina later on develops an adulterous relationship. Two months later, they move to Rawalpindi in Pakistan. Nafeesa says, "we were a family of soft voluptuous children, and my father wanted to protect us from the Hindus shameful lust"¹.

Nafeesa is similarly deprived of passion in her marriage. Her husband Iqbal who works for IBM and whom she followed from Pakistan to Lebanon, Brazil, Zambia, France and eventually to Atlanta, Georgia, feels very secure and comfortable unlike other exotic cities in which they lived. Although Nafeesa's marriage has been arranged for her when she was seventeen, she always yearns for the kind of passion and willingness to break taboos represented by the girl who has once lived next door to her. This girl although a Muslim like Nafeesa has the courage to fall in love with a Hindu.

Nafeesa has a daughter and a son aged seven and four respectively. On Sunday afternoons they sit together on the deck and enjoy gin and tonic. A gold haze comes off the golf course and settles on their bodies and their house. When she leans against the railing, her husband asks her to sit and says "You'll distract the golfers. Americans are crazy for sex, you know that." (Darkness, P. 24).

In America, Nafeesa tries for passion by taking a lover who is white and much older than she is. He is sixty-five having five daughters and two grandsons, the younger one aged four, a month older than her son. He is an immunologist and works at the centre for Disease Control. He visits her normally in the absence of Iqbal. Nafeesa likes international receptions because she hopes to meet someone new and fascinating. But Iqbal is not interested in this kind of reception. She tells: "Iqbal avoids these international receptions because he thinks of them as excuses for looking back when we should be looking forward". (Darkness, P.25).

Iqbal never comes home in the middle of the day even for his pills for blood pressure. She herself takes the bottles on couple of occasions whenever he forgets. She spends happily with James in her husband's absence. She likes the mocking blue

light in his eyes. James flatters her and makes her feel beautiful, exotic and responsive. She says, "I am a creature he has immunized of contamination. When he is with me, the world seems a happy enough place." (Darkness, p.25). Nafeesa finds it difficult when she fails to get his call for two weeks. Then she calls Amina for lunch whose husband works at the centre for Disease Control, as it gives comfort talking to persons connected with the centre. She sits on the deck eagerly waiting for his call. Despite being cold she pretends to read Barbara Pym novels. Her mind is engrossed with lines from Donne and Urdu verses about love.

James calls Nafeesa for lunch on Wednesday and Nafeesa who is deprived of passion in her marriage, felt all the warm, familiar signs of lust and remorse. After finishing lunch in a Dekalb County motel lounge, they walk through the parking lot to his car. When James put his arm around her shoulders, Nafeesa who has seen the world but has not gone through the American teenage rites of making out in parked and picnic grounds walks briskly out of his embrace. She is surprised by his behaviour, despite the fact Iqbal and she are sensual people, they are secretive. Nafeesa is a person who yearns for passion all through her life. She and James make romance after boarding the car. No sooner they move into her house, she does not talk about her neighbours, because of his respectable disposition. She says: "In his gray wool slacks and tweed jacket, he looked too old, too respectable, for any sordid dalliance with a not-quite's wife" (Darkness, p.30).

Not only is this an attempt to express her independence and individuality, but also gives her the illusion that by carrying on an illicit affair, she is somehow identifying with America, and living by its standards. She felt cherished when they were together. In his absence, she spends the afternoon with a Barbara Pym novel. She keeps the novels open at pages in which excellent British women recite lines from Marvell to themselves. She does not in fact read, instead she watches the golfers trudging over brown fair-ways which narrates: "I let the tiny golfer's clumsy mummings-tell me stories of ambitions unfulfilled. Golf carts lurched into the golden vista. I felt safe." (Darkness, p.30-31).

Nafeesa is thrilled to go to James' house in his wife's absence and feels at home despite albums of family photographs and the brutish metal vulvas slashed in the den. She looks at the family photographs. His daughters look honest and

marvellously ordinary. Nafeesa's fear and jealous is described in the following lines: "What would they say if they knew their father, at sixty-five. was in bed with a married woman from Lucknow? I feared and envied their jealousy more than any violence in my husband's heart." (Darkness, p.31).

Nafeesa evidently satisfies her lust for sensuality thinking that she is free from restrictions in the new world. When they are together Kate Beamish, her lover's wife arrives and they are surprised by her presence. But the confrontation does not prove explosive or dramatic. Instead, the wife turns the affair into something ridiculous and sordid. Kate Beamish however sees her merely as an exotic capable of provoking only a passing interest in her husband, and tells Nafeesa who has thought of her affair as separating her from the women of her culture and as breaking racial and sexual taboos. She does not take it seriously and Nafeesa is sent back to her beautiful house in a cab. she realises: "What had begun as an adventure had become shabby and complex, I was just another involvement of a white man in a pokey little out post" (Darkness, p.33).

It may be said that at the age of twenty-five, Nafeesa has lived in several different countries, but the kind of religious bigotry which has driven her as a child from Lucknow and denied her opportunity to control her sex bigotry follows her to America and in the form of racial bigotry has similar restricting effects on her as a woman. The message seems to be loud and clear: the cloistered virtue due to one's cultural conditioning is always vulnerable. The significance of the story therefore lies not in the theme of adultery, per se, but in the juxtaposition of repressive cultural orthodoxy and permissive cultural heterodoxy.

The other story **The Tenant** deals with the experience of Maya Sanyal whose wish is to live independently and experience full freedom in the new world. She is a Bengali Brahmin by birth, a Ph.D in comparative Literature teaching at the University of N.Iowa, She had arrived at N.Carolina at age of Nineteen. She strongly feels that a person has to leave home and 'try out wings' to live independently. The authorial comment on Maya is: "Maya's taken some big risks; made a break with her parents' ways. She's done things a woman from Ballygunge Park Road doesn't do even in fantasies"².

Fran Johnson who is Maya's good friend helps her in finding well furnished apartment to settle. She is on Hiring, Tenure and Re-appointment committee. She is a Swede and teaches Utopian Fiction and a course in women's studies. When her lover Vern leaves for San Francisco, Maya in her depressed state drinks her first bourbon sitting in the kitchen. Vern though a pharmacist also likes to learn making films at graduate school. Fran tells Maya that Indian men are more sensitive than American men. But Maya who had married an American think that all Indian men are wife beaters. John Hadwen had entered into her life as a graduate student at Duke. Maya, mistaking the brief breathlessness of sex for love had married John, lived together for two years and eventually divorced. Fran comes to know about Maya's broken marriage. However, Fran has no knowledge about Maya, her affairs with several men and her moral notoriety. She accordingly lost her moral sense, her judgement and her power to distinguish, "All men became John Hadwen, and John became all men" (The Middleman and Other Stories, p.106-7).

Maya's estrangement with John follows innumerable nefarious relations with several men. Ted Suminski, her new land lord, a big, thick, lonely man seems to have no family. She waves to him to make him less creepy. When she is back from the campus he throws darts or shooting baskets and when she is on phone, he catches her eye in the window to take aim at her shadow. She imagines that he has some interest in her.

Dr. Rabindra Chatterji who invites Maya home for tea has the expatriate characteristic of assuming moral and cultural superiority over the host country. She wants Mr.Chatterji's companionship lest people should not talk about her affairs in America. Maya's story-her relations with various men and her marriage and divorce to an American is known to Bengalis all over America. They also know scandals pertaining to her family-her aunt leaving her husband to take to films, her grandmother hauled up for tax evasion. Maya learns about Mrs. Chatterji's nephew Poltoo, an intelligent student doing his B.Sc from Presidency College in Iowa State. Poltoo falls in love with a Negro muslim and proposes to marry her. Maya sympathises with Poltoo and is disgusted with Chatterji's outrage: "Maya would like to finish Dr.Chatterji off quickly. He is pompous: he is reactionary, he wants to live and work in America but give back nothing except taxes. The confused world of the

immigrant-the lostness that Maya and Poltoo feel-that's what Dr.Chatterji wants to avoid. She hates him. But" (The Middleman and Other Stories, p.106).

Maya later realises that Dr.Chatterji's horror is genuine. If a person does not adhere to the rules, he will lose his moral sense and his world becomes monstrous and lawless. She quite remembers her affair with John Hadwen and several other men too, and how she is deprived of her moral sense, judgement and power to distinguish. She visits Chatterji's house the following day and considers it an asylum for home sick aliens. Her attempt to establish meaningful relationship with Dr.Chatterji also fails.

Thereafter, Maya goes through the matrimonial column to seek an alliance for her and chooses Ashok Mehta, a doctor, who wants a new emancipated Indo-American woman whose ethics are rooted in Indian tradition but who is quite comfortable in the U.S.A. After their immigrant courtship, Maya waits for Ashok Mehta to ring her up again. When Maya comes back to Cedar Falls, Ted Suminski gives her a notice to vacate the place since he is getting married: "Here the use of tenant as a symbol is highly significant her heart longs for a permanent lodging but since she is fundamentally rootless, she hops from one lodging to another. First it was John then the Chatterji family, then Ashok Mehta"³.

After a couple of months, Maya finds a new room, signs another lease. Her new landlord, Fred, has no arms, and they settle as companions. When Fred is at the back of the room, she gets a call from Ashok Mehta. Sen Gupta says, "Since the alienation is in her psyche, she is incapable of establishing a permanent relationship. Once a tenant, always a tenant"⁴. Maya realises that she is moving out of Fred's heart when she gets a call from Ashok Mehta. Maya's own predicament is like a "trapeze artist" having left the stability of a traditional culture and trying her best to rehabilitate herself.

Elizabeth Ward Writes in *The Tenant*, Maya Sanyal, a university writing teacher in Iowa, formerly of New Jersey, North Carolina and Calcutta experiences what is like "to be an American citizen. But." which is exactly the no-man's-land inhabited by so many of Bharati Mukherjee's characters. It is a state that Bharati Mukherjee, through her characters, experiences and in the end transcends-with

humour, grace and a disarmingly sharp-edged intelligence. Lumped together with other Indians or perceived outsiders by well-meaning American friends attempting to liven up her social life, Maya finds herself living with her armless landlord.

Elizabeth Ward continues, "In giving such an articulate voice to people who are lumped together in contemporary America as "ethnics" or "minorities", Bharati Mukherjee becomes, in *The Middleman and Other Stories*, herself the most valuable of middleman bridging disparate worlds"⁵.

A Wife's Story is a first person narrative by Panna Bhatt, a Gujarati traditionally married woman doing her Ph.D in Special Education in the U.S.A. She feels happy and proud of her broadened horizons as an immigrant who has had her share of dreariness, loneliness, confusion and anger in an effort to reshape her life in the land of opportunity. She is too 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.

Panna's grandmother had been illiterate and her mother had been beaten by her mother-in-law for registering for French lessons in Alliance Francaise. Panna is quite accustomed to American way of life. She is a woman who has left her husband temporarily to get a Ph.D in Special Education in New York, to break the cycle of age old customs and traditions and has done something a woman from their family cannot do even in fantasies: "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"⁶.

Panna has even gone so far as to befriend another lonely immigrant, a Hungarian by name Imre who also has spouse and family back home in the old country. Their friendship so necessary 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 Panna to survive assaults on her dignity and the hopelessness of not truly belonging. Imre comforts her after watching a David Mamet play in which Panna must endure terrible insulting lines about the Indians. She feels angry enough and strong enough to write, or at least to write it in her head. Her American friends would tell her that this kind of insult is a kind of acceptance: "No instant dignity here. "A play like this, back home, would cause riots. Communal, racist, and anti-social.

The actors wouldn't make it off stage. This play, and all these awful feelings, would be safely locked up" (The Middleman and Other Stories, p.26).

Panna, the Americanised but still an Indian wife surprises herself by literally breaking out like an unIndian in her behaviour by impulsively hugging Imre on the street, and this transformation perhaps is a part of her immigrant experience.

Even the life of Charity Chin, Panna's roommate reflects the experience of immigrant women in the new world. She is a Chinese American. She is estranged from her husband though she still loves him. When Panna first came to Charity, she was seeing an analyst and now she sees a nutritionist. She spends weekends with Phil, a flutist who teaches at a small College Upstate. Panna likes Phil, because he is the only musician she knows. She says: "Like many men in this country, he seems to me a displaced child, or even a woman, looking for something that passed him by, or something that he can never have (The Middle Man and Other Stories, P.30)".

Panna spends most of her time watching MTV in the apartment when Charity is away for the evening shift. When she is depressed, she thinks of Charity's uncle who is a humpbacked, awkward, terrified man who runs a gift store on Moltstreet. He is shot during Wuchang Uprising. She says, "If I hadn't left home, I'd never have heard of the Wuchang Uprising. I've broadened my horizons." (The Middleman and Other Stories, p.31).

Panna who could not find her true identity in India looks back on her past life. Her marriage was traditionally celebrated through a matrimonial broker. All she had to do was to know his taste in food. She had not even thought of honeymoon as she imagined that honeymoons are meant for highly fashionable people. Her husband who studied at Ahmedabad Institute of Management is a vice-president of a cotton mill. His education has taught him to overcome emotion, dejection and frustration. He calls her from Ahmedabad and informs her that one of their lorries was fire bombed resulting in the death of old Karamchand, their driver and his two sons. She tries to remember the driver, but cannot: "That part of my life is over, the way Charity Chin and her lurid love life have replaced inherited notions of marital duty". (The Middleman and Other Stories,p.32).

Panna's husband arrives for a visit to join his wife for a short holiday. When he says he misses her and he needs her, Panna is confused and wonders what it is she

feels for her husband, love or affection as she thinks it is difficult to tell the difference in a traditional marriage in which a wife does not call her husband by his first name. Panna, who had discarded Indian dress and Jewellery, goes to meet her husband at the airport dressed in Indian saree and jewellery. She wears the marriage necklace of mangalasutra, gold drop earrings, heavy gold bangles. Her husband strokes her fingers and asks about the ring which was given to her by her mother-in-law before she left for America. She is not even sure whether she is unhappy about it, though she can tell that her husband is disconcerted.

Charity leaves the apartment for two weeks for the couple to enjoy their privacy and to do things they were not used to in their country. Panna infact did not find her true identity in India and was not recognised as a person. Her life was restricted and she was like an ordinary Indian woman who is subservient to her husband and mother-in-law. But she learns many things about her husband in America: "I watch him dart into stores in his gleaming leather shoes Jockey shorts on sale in outdoor bins on Broadway entrance him. White tube socks with different bands of colour delight him. He looks for microcassettes for anything small and electronic and smuggleable" (The Middleman and Other stories, p.34).

The mentality of Panna's husband is revealed when they go out for sight-seeing tour. He is obviously suspicious of Goran, a Yugoslav when he helps his wife to take the photographs of her husband. He could not tolerate the friendliness of Lebanese who moves freely with his wife. He asks her not to wear the pants lest she may be treated with disrespect. He is unable to see his wife being watched by men and implores her to return home. But Panna tums down his plan that she should finish her course. As he is to leave the next day, she thinks she should make him happy and pretends as if nothing has changed.

Panna is an expatriate, dangling between two worlds, that is to say two value-systems and plays the expected roles smartly when her husband visits her at New York. The story ends on a note of felt freedom for the traditional educated Hindu wife in New York.

Bharati Mukherjee's immigrant women discover that the mere act of migration does not change the circumstances of their lives. In western countries

freedom of opportunity and expression for women is often merely illusory, and to come to America in pursuit of this illusion is to find oneself disconnected from the reality of the new society and at the same time cut off from the support of the old culture.

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How to Cite this article?

Sridevi Kumara. "Portrayal of Women Protagonists in Bharati Mukherjee's Short Stories." *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan.–Mar. 2026, Oray's Publications, doi:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.01.657.