Mukherjee’s Early Short Fiction

In a career spanning more than fifty years, Bharati Mukherjee (1940–2017), a pioneering Indian American writer, published an œuvre that included eight novels, two long works of nonfiction, and many essays and reviews. Born in Kolkata into a privileged Bengali Brahmin family, Mukherjee emigrated to the United States as a graduate student at the prestigious Iowa Writers’ Workshop before moving to Canada to take up an academic position at McGill University in Montreal in 1966. After painful experiences of white racism in Canada, she returned to the United States with her husband, the white Canadian writer Clark Blaise, and their two sons in 1980.

The first South Asian American writer to receive real critical and popular acclaim, her fiction invited younger writers, especially Asian American women, to see themselves reflected on the page (Jacob 2019) and inspired them to produce their own novels (Hajratwala 2017). Particularly influential in this regard was *Jasmine*, a coming-to-America novel published in 1989 that has since been widely taught and researched. Mukherjee’s long teaching career at a host of North American colleges and universities—including her distinguished professorship at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1989 to 2013—also empowered later generations of writers from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Kamali 2019; McCormick 2020; Tenorio 2020). Her work was driven by her thematic preoccupation with the browning of America via new Americans from untraditional regions—Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South Amer-
ica and the Caribbean—who arrived after the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed in 1965. When Mukherjee died, her life’s work was celebrated by such leading U.S. and Canadian writers as Joyce Carol Oates, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Ann Beattie, and Amy Tan (McMurtrie 2017; Leith 2017).

Despite this undoubted success and influence, Mukherjee occupied a vexed position vis-à-vis Asian American literary studies, especially in relation to issues of assimilation, for much of her career. Her views on India and the United States—often expressed in impassioned, even opinionated, fashion—sometimes proved unpopular and contentious, especially among other Indian American critics and scholars who perceived her fiction and nonfiction as politically reactionary. An exemplary text in this regard is *Jasmine*, which, as a kind of love letter to American possibility, must apparently reject a benighted India in order to celebrate its protagonist’s exceptionalism as a new American. Mukherjee’s ideas about South Asia shifted in her later writing, however, and she set her final novel, *Miss New India* (2011), solely within this excitingly fast-paced, rapidly globalizing region.

In her long and prolific working life, Mukherjee wrote many short stories. Yet scholars have often overlooked this rich area of her literary production. To gain entry to the M.F.A. program at Iowa in the early 1960s, she sent in “six handwritten stories” (Mukherjee 2005)1 and, as a new student there, short fiction was the form through which she learned her craft. The five stories that compose her M.F.A. thesis, *The Shattered Mirror*, submitted in 1963 and published here for the first time,2 draw on the sense of place and epiphanies to be found within James Joyce’s 1914 *Dubliners* stories (see Mukherjee n.d., 50). Each tale focuses on Indian and other Asian immigrants in the American Midwest and New York. As Mukherjee later recalled,

I became increasingly fascinated by foreign-student life around me. I soon found myself writing rapidly, feverishly, of the world of Indians, Chinese, Taiwanese, Singaporeans, Indonesians, Bulgarians, Sudanese. . . . We were graduate students, post-docs, student wives, refugees adrift in the U.S. Anecdotes overheard fused with imagined lives. Stories of uprooted lives became the focus of my M.F.A. thesis. From those years I evolved a credo: make the familiar exotic (Americans won’t recognize their country when I get finished with it) and make the exotic—the India of elephants and arranged marriages—familiar (Mukherjee 2005).
Four of the five *Shattered Mirror* stories—“A Weekend,” “The Transplanted,” “The End of the Road,” and “A Twilight World”—form a kind of short story cycle, since each is narrated through the same, usually third-person perspective: that of Tara, a world-weary Bengali graduate student navigating existential questions and states of ennui and depression as she finds her way at a midwestern university—most likely the University of Iowa—in the early 1960s. Protagonists called Tara reappear in Mukherjee’s novels, *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1971), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), and *The Tree Bride* (2004), and often operate as an authorial alter ego; the Tara of these early stories establishes that precedent.

“A Weekend” and “The Transplanted” recount Tara’s ambivalence toward white Americans, who routinely fail to show any nuanced knowledge of India, and toward her fellow South Asian Americans. “The End of the Road” relates her ill-fated romantic relationship with Andrew Wong, a staid and much older Chinese academic at her university, a relationship that seems particularly doomed during the story’s long restaurant scene in which, in a moment of double consciousness, Tara sees the couple through the eyes of the white waiting staff and other diners. In “A Twilight World,” Tara reads to Al, a blind Latvian student, in a story about different forms of vision. “Bless This Day,” the final story in Mukherjee’s M.F.A. collection, is a more ambitious and experimental text in which the vexations of Naren—a young married Indian student, also resident in the Midwest, and father to a small son—are told through a shifting narrative voice of unspoken thoughts and interior monologue versus the conventions and niceties of spoken conversation. As Mukherjee later put it, “the writing rule that I was exposed to as an M.F.A. student and which I love to break is constancy to a consistent point-of-view. I want to capture the whole world in any novel or short story I might write, and the world speaks in many (delightfully confusing) voices” (quoted in “Writing Rules” 2011, 83).

Beyond the protean voice of “Bless This Day,” Mukherjee punctuates the story with many run-on words: “starkstaring,” “failurewhipped” and “browfurrowing” (Mukherjee 1963, 111, 112) are just a few examples. They continue in the tradition of such earlier American writers as John Dos Passos and E. E. Cummings, while anticipating the neologisms of Cormac McCarthy’s much later novel *The Road* (2006). In defamiliarizing such words, Mukherjee invites her reader to understand the fresh, confused reality of Naren’s life in the United States. Mukherjee’s next short story, “Debate on a Rainy Afternoon,” became her first American publication, appearing in *The Massachusetts Review* in 1966. It takes place entirely in Kolkata and focuses on the frustrations and loneliness of Miss Ghose, a spinsterly schoolteacher.
“Debate” and the *Shattered Mirror* stories reveal a young, inexperienced writer honing her literary techniques. It was not until Mukherjee returned to short fiction in the late 1970s that her stories took on a new level of Chekhovian sophistication and assurance. Although she did not then consider herself as a short story writer (Hertz and Martin 2018, 304), this was the period in which she wrote such tightly constructed, compelling, and haunting tales as “The World According to Hsü” and “Isolated Incidents,” the semi-autobiographical story “Hindus,” and the ekphrastic thought experiment “Courtly Vision,” her bid to capture a Mughal miniature painting in fictional prose. “Hsü” and “Isolated Incidents” appeared in North American literary journals and magazines, as did four other stories in the 1980s: “Angela,” “The Lady from Lucknow,” “Tamurlane,” and “Saints.” Yet Mukherjee initially struggled to publish these tales in book form. The same was true of a further four works of short fiction: “A Father,” “Nostalgia,” “Visitors,” and “The Imaginary Assassin.” Eventually all twelve stories were anthologized in her first collection, *Darkness*, published by Penguin Canada in 1985 and then for many years out of print. They remain underresearched by Mukherjee scholars, who have generally focused on *Jasmine* at the expense of much of her other writing.

The *Darkness* stories can be divided into tales of white racism toward South Asian Canadians—“Isolated Incidents,” “Hsü,” and “Tamurlane”—three of Mukherjee’s most visceral and painful short stories—and U.S.-based tales about new immigrants from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—“Angela,” “The Lady from Lucknow,” “A Father,” “Nostalgia,” “Hindus,” and “Visitors”—and their children: “The Imaginary Assassin” and “Saints.” For reasons of space, I will focus specifically on three *Darkness* stories here—“Saints,” “Visitors,” and “The Imaginary Assassin”—tales whose complex vision of twentieth-century U.S. life warrants further critical attention and analysis.

“Saints” takes up the point of view of Shawn Patel, the fifteen-year-old son of Manny, a successful Indian immigrant psychiatrist, whom we first met in the earlier *Darkness* story “Nostalgia.” Told through the intimate, first-person voice of Shawn’s thoughts, “Saints” uses a religious language that straddles India and the United States. Its title is taken from an Indian book sent to Shawn by his father “about a Hindu saint who had visions” (Mukherjee 1985, 153). By contrast, America is depicted as a predominantly Christian country with the protagonist speaking of his “state of grace” (146, 156). That sense of freedom links to Shawn’s intermediate status: as an adolescent, he is “too old to be a pawn” between his separated parents yet “too young to get caught in problems
of my own” (146). At the story’s conclusion, his liminal status relates to his cross-dressing as he wanders after nightfall in his upstate New York college town, heavily made up and dressed in his mother’s clothes, becoming “somebody else’s son . . . a potentate in battledress” (156, 158). This semimedieval image recalls “Tamurlane,” one of the Canadian-themed stories in Darkness, and Manny’s own impulse to reinvent himself and perform an alternative identity in “Nostalgia.”

Shawn’s sense of self is also indeterminate because he is biracial, the son of an Indian father and a white American mother. He occupies a position alternative to either of them, although Mukherjee chooses not to explore this racialized identity in the story. Instead it is cross-dressing that becomes Shawn’s means of self-expression: simultaneously covert, since he does it after dark, and attention-seeking, because he revels in the special sense that he is a “visionary” whom his mother is “really looking at . . . Finally” (158). In this way, the story also thematizes the acts of seeing and looking. The question of Shawn’s sexuality is left unspoken, although his most significant relationship in the story is with Tran, a Vietnamese American boy in his class, and just before Tran asks Shawn whether he can “sleep over in my room” (155), same-sex love is explicitly raised in relation to the Hindu saint from the book Manny sent Shawn. But unlike a later character, Rabi, who comes out as gay in Mukherjee’s novel, Desirable Daughters, the idea of sexual difference is not properly developed.

Rather, Shawn is navigating his life as one of “the children of 1965” (Song 2013). Through an image of the school chess club, whose members have “names like Sato, Chin, Duoc, Cho and Prasad” (Mukherjee 1985, 151), and echoing the earlier “pawn” image, Mukherjee demonstrates the intellectual dominance of young, so-called model-minority Asian North Americans. This idea is repeated when Shawn spies on a “junior high kid,” the son of Dr. Batliwalla, who, “wanting good grades . . . studies into the night” (156–157). What is notable here is how Mukherjee also unsettles the notion of Asian American ascendancy. In part, she suggests this idea through Shawn’s transgressive status and his embarrassed response to what he perceives as the vulgarity of his father’s flashy, ostentatious immigrant success. The story also questions the power of young Asian Americans through Shawn’s bald statement that Farelli, presumably an Italian American, is “the only real American in the [chess] club” (151; emphasis added). In historical terms, this claim is of course debatable, since some Americans of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean descent (possibly with names like the story’s Sato, Chin, Cho) can trace their U.S. roots as far back as the early twentieth and even nineteenth century. But in a sociocultural sense, Mukherjee’s message is clear: Asian American teenagers in the 1980s are—like Nafeesaa and Iqbal, a wealthy and glamorous Pakistani couple based in Atlanta, in
another *Darkness* story, “The Lady from Lucknow”—“not-quite[s]” (25, 30; and compare Dlaska 1999, 86): provisional Americans who must employ their academic excellence as cultural and economic capital to secure their place in the nation.

“Visitors” also explores the differences between Indian immigrants and a post-1965, American-raised generation. Narrated in a present-tense, third-person singular voice, it reflects the idea that the protagonist Vinita’s life in the United States is an unfolding story with an uncertain outcome. Her ancestral India is not so easily forgotten, however. As with Angela in her eponymous story in *Darkness*, the South Asian homeland is remembered through terrifying flashbacks, this time to the Naxalite era, which saw the violent aftermath of a peasant uprising in spring 1967 in Naxalbari in the northern part of West Bengal. Thus, Vinita recalls the moment when she witnessed “a fresh, male corpse in a monsoon muddy gutter” and “undernourished child-rebels” with guns making their way onto her parents’ lawn in Kolkata (Mukherjee 1985, 164). Mukherjee is on accustomed territory that—like her early novel *The Tiger’s Daughter*, her memoir *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977, cowritten with Blaise), and “Hindus,” another *Darkness* story—recalls her own life and those of her Bengali friends: Vinita even attended Loreto College in Kolkata, the author’s alma mater. As several critics have observed, the story also echoes Mukherjee’s second novel, *Wife* (1975), in its concern with the life of a young Bengali woman who has moved to America after an arranged marriage (see Nazareth 1986, 188, and Dlaska 1999, 78). Unlike Dimple Basu in *Wife*, however, Vinita is beautiful and privileged; she has married an affluent Indian executive, Sailen Kumar, a glittering example of the model-minority South Asian American; and she is living in an expensive condominium in Guttenberg, New Jersey, rather than being reduced to the transience of housesitting in New York City, as Dimple is.

As so often happens in Mukherjee’s 1980s fiction, “Visitors” dramatizes the perils and excitements of “a new country with no rules” (Mukherjee 1985, 167), where the future threat of “betrayal” (163) and “disaster” (168, 176) haunt the present and Vinita must reconcile an American belief in “causality” (163) with her traditionally Indian sense of fate. She views with suspicion the idea that one can shape one’s destiny because of the hubris this implies. When she encounters Rajiv Khanna, a handsome young graduate student at Columbia, who left Kolkata as an infant, her old-world “deshi” (168) customs clash with an unknown American social system. But this disjunction only leads to misunderstanding as Rajiv, infatuated with Vinita, interprets her willingness to entertain a man she barely knows as proof that she reciprocates his feelings. Vinita’s response is surprise because “she had assumed [Rajiv] . . . was the looter
of American culture, not hers. And she had envied the looting. Her own transition was slow and wheezing. . . . This is America, she insists. . . . We are both a new breed, testing new feelings in new battlegrounds” (172). Her language is reminiscent of other Darkness stories: that is, the imagery of medieval and early modern battle and conquest implicit in “Tamurlane” and “Saints,” imagery that is also figured through the leitmotif of Mughal painting in the collection, as seen in “The Lady from Lucknow,” “Hindus,” “Saints,” and “Courtly Vision” (compare Gabriel 2005). This imagery also recalls another Indian-born protagonist—Leela in “Hindus”—who sees herself as a “blind and groping conquistador” in the United States (Mukherjee 1985, 141), since Vinita’s metaphor of “looting” indicates the bold claiming of a nonancestral culture. But that dynamism is undermined by an overwhelming sense of confusion, and even illness, as suggested by a “transition . . . slow and wheezing” (172). “Visitors” ends with the clear message that Vinita’s socially impeccable marriage is dull to its core and that the realization of this fact will lead her into untold dangers. Like Dimple, she questions the match when her husband is asleep, picturing his “fleshy lips [that] . . . flap like rubber tires” (176): an image that recalls, in a recursive sense, her confrontation with Rajiv and the “high-pitched angry words undulating from his fleshy lips” (172). The repetition of this pejoratively physical image suggests that neither man can provide Vinita with the excitement or sense of purpose she requires from her new American life. Mukherjee implies—in feminist terms reminiscent of Wife and the failed affair between Dimple and Milt Glasser, a young Jewish American man—that sexual attention is not the basis for an immigrant woman’s self-realization.

In “The Imaginary Assassin,” Mukherjee returns to second-generation Indian Americans and their feelings of pressure to succeed, but—reflecting South Asian American heterogeneity—she does so through a rather different ethnoreligious and U.S. regional lens than in “Saints.” Like much of Mukherjee’s later fiction, this is a California story. What distinguishes it from the later fiction and from the rest of Darkness is that it is about working-class Sikhs, the oldest South Asian community in America. Set in the late 1960s, the environment of “The Imaginary Assassin” is far removed from that of the Bengali Brahmin “new Americans” of “Visitors” or “Hindus.” Indeed, as in “Tamurlane” and a later, Middleman story, “Jasmine,” it reflects Mukherjee’s bid to represent working-class subjects and subjectivity.

Assuming a first-person male voice as she does in “Tamurlane” and “Saints,” Mukherjee depicts Gurcharan, the story’s U.S.-born protagonist, as a backward-looking figure adrift in America. Rather than embracing contemporary realities, he clings to his grandfather’s stories of India—especially a mythologized, counterhistorical account of assassinating Mahatma Gandhi—as pro-
tection against a mainstream culture of “rock stars and . . . movie stars” (190). Despite the decades-long history of Sikh settlement on the West Coast, Gurcharan does not feel connected to the world around him.

To an even greater extent than Shawn in “Saints,” the protagonist rejects model-minority expectations and “the shabby diligence of [his parents’] . . . immigrant lives in Yuba City” (180). Specifically, Gurcharan has no interest in his father’s dream for him to win a scholarship to study aerospace engineering at Caltech, following the success of a string of Asian American laureates: “Yee, Wang, Yamamota” (181). In line with his grandfather’s bold, subversive story-within-a-story, Gurcharan is more comfortable with imagined violence, harboring “a secret fascination with a different kind of immigrant, Sirhan B. Sirhan” (181). This reference offers a revealing link to a fellow non-European immigrant, one who never became a U.S. citizen and was famously convicted of Robert F. Kennedy’s assassination. It bridges the acts of political murder in the United States and India while gesturing more broadly toward those individuals who seek to overthrow regimes and must then face the consequences: specifically, Gurcharan’s grandfather, whose anti-imperialism led to his imprisonment in 1926 after spitting at a British captain.

Formed by his boyhood experience of listening to his grandfather’s tales, Gurcharan remains more connected to this inner life than to the outside world, appearing either unwilling or unable to disentangle the real from the imagined. When the story concludes with the ironic revelation that his family’s unnamed houseguest is later arrested by Yuba City police on suspicion of being an actual assassin, Gurcharan has no interest in finding out the details. In a metafictional sense, “The Imaginary Assassin” is about the power of stories to confer a greater emotional truth than the banalities of everyday life. For Carole Stone, it even exposes “the poverty of imagination in American culture . . . and the loss of the old culture’s storytelling as an impoverishment” (1993, 223). I would argue that the “truth” the story reveals is the desire to shape Indian history felt by Gurcharan’s grandfather and the wish of his grandson to feel connected to his Indian heritage through the weight of that history. Mukherjee meanwhile asserts her own right to reimagine one of the most crucial moments—and figures—in modern Indian history (see Nyman 1999; and Maxey 2019b, 114n63).

Mukherjee’s Critical Breakthrough:

The Middleman and Other Stories

After her struggles to publish the Darkness collection, Mukherjee believed that there was little appetite for her tales of new Canadians and Americans. Just three years later, in 1988, her second short fiction collection, The Middle-
man and Other Stories, was released in the United States by Grove Press. It was later published in Britain by Virago, but—like Darkness—remained out of print for many years and was only reprinted by Grove in late 2020. In contrast to Darkness, however, The Middleman won the National Book Critics’ Circle Award for Fiction, with Mukherjee becoming the first naturalized U.S. citizen ever to achieve this accolade. Such recognition put her writing on the international literary map in unprecedented ways. And it is worth noting that she garnered this acclaim through a short fiction collection rather than a novel.


In “Fighting for the Rebound,” Mukherjee explores an Asian-white relationship through the eyes of Griff, a “low-level money manager” (Mukherjee 1989b, 80), who describes himself as “a solid, decent guy” (80) and feels both bewildered and blasé about Blanquita, his beautiful Filipina immigrant girlfriend. Her existence proved to be a landmark for some readers, even inspiring later literary depictions of Filipino Americans. Thus, Lysley Tenorio, an American writer of Filipino descent, Mukherjee’s former student at Berkeley, and author of the afterword to this volume, recalls:

it was . . . the first time that I encountered a Filipino character in contemporary fiction . . . and seeing her made me realize what I’d been missing in my own reading: the presence of Filipino characters . . . there weren’t nearly enough, and though I didn’t think of myself as someone who might actually contribute to that literary conversation, the stories in The Middleman made me want to try (2020, n.p.).

Returning to the story’s white narrator, Griff’s reliability is clearly at stake—as ever with first-person voices in fiction—and it is also difficult to warm to this
narcissistic character and to accept his apparently self-deprecating, yet actually self-valorizing, descriptions. As Susan Koshy (2004) has argued, Mukherjee problematizes certain U.S. interracial unions to a greater extent than others, often betraying more ambivalence toward alliances between white men and women of color than those involving a white woman and, for instance, a South Asian man (141). For Griff, Blanquita’s physical perfection inspires poetic imagery, but his interior monologue also reveals his cynicism and emotional detachment from their relationship. His blend of desire and condescension aptly illustrates the interracial dynamic anatomized by Koshy. Yet it also replicates the fraught and contradictory position of Rindy, the white American female protagonist of “Orbiting,” another Middleman story, toward her Afghan immigrant boyfriend, Ro. Just like Ro, Blanquita is spoken for in narrative terms, suggesting the enduring strength of white privilege and a neocolonial, infantilizing attitude toward people of color.

As with “Loose Ends,” another white-focalizing story in The Middleman, there is a tension in “Fighting for the Rebound” between white male dominance and Mukherjee’s implication that Asian immigrants are superior to native-born Americans. Hence, Blanquita is described as a “Third World aristocrat, a hothouse orchid you worship but don’t dare touch” (Mukherjee 1989b, 83). Like Panna in “A Wife’s Story,” another Middleman tale, she speaks with an “eerily well-bred, Asian convent-schooled voice” (85). Dazzlingly multilingual, Blanquita grew up enjoying the benefits of her influential family in Manila. That past remains vague, however, and Griff takes her reluctance to discuss it with him as proof of her need to feel “less foreign” (81). Of course, she may also sense that her white Atlantan boyfriend would simply not grasp the complicated cultural context of her earlier life. She may resent her family’s downward mobility in America, too: another recurring idea about new immigrants across Mukherjee’s short fiction and one that challenges model-minority myths. The currently debased status of Blanquita’s parents is in fact a bone of contention when Griff openly gloats about it. At the same time, the story reveals nothing at all about his own ethnic or family history, as though to make him a generic representative of white American manhood, a status with apparently no need to explain itself in cultural terms. But this withholding of information may also suggest that he has something to hide.

Like his fellow white southerner Jeb in “Loose Ends,” Griff dislikes the feeling of mediocrity that new immigrants evoke in him and he tries to play down any cultural ascendancy Blanquita might enjoy. Thus, he focuses on the failures of her parents and on his girlfriend’s flamboyance and glamor at the expense of her intellect, portraying her as manipulative, ill-informed, and emotionally dependent. He is quite capable of using language that recalls Jeb’s:
“aliens” to refer to foreign medical staff in Atlanta (92) and the statement that “it’s okay for a nation of pioneers to bully the rest of the world as long as the cause is just” (85). Yet Griff shows a subtlety beyond anything that Jeb, a brutish figure, can muster. In Griff’s hands, the word “pioneer” is subject to semantic variation, as he celebrates the ethnic diversity of the Atlanta Farmers’ Market: “just wheel your shopping cart through aisles of bok choy and . . . Jamaican spices . . . and you’ll see that the US of A is still a pioneer country” (81). As distinct from Jeb’s sexual violence toward Asian American women, Griff sees Blanquita as his sparring partner. The story even ends with what appears to be his choice of her over a series of white American women. Like “Orbiting”—and such other Middleman stories as “Fathering,” “Jasmine,” and “Danny’s Girls”—his response suggests the preeminence of “new” over “old” Americans.

The couple’s verbal jousting also relates to sporting metaphors. Griff and Blanquita are playing a game with one another, as they have with previous lovers, but Mukherjee is also rightly recognizing the centrality of sport within American life. “Fighting for the Rebound”—like “Orbiting”—is full of references to U.S. teams: football, baseball, and basketball. Mukherjee uses such shorthand as “Dolphins” (70) for the Miami Dolphins football team to display her knowledge of U.S. culture and to prove her American authenticity. Indeed, she asserts the right of an insider—historically a white male nativist like Griff—to produce fiction about national obsessions. Sport is also a distancing device as Griff bemoans Blanquita’s complete lack of interest in watching U.S. sport on television, just as Rindy experiences awkwardness in “Orbiting” when Ro fails to follow the sporting references of her white brother-in-law Brent or her Italian American father Mr. deMarco.

In “Fathering,” Mukherjee adopts a very different white male voice to explore an alternative kind of Asian-white encounter by examining the attempt by Jason, a white Vietnam veteran, to raise Eng, the young Amerasian daughter he has successfully traced and brought to the United States.5 The story is exophoric, reflecting the American Homecoming Act that enabled the immigration of Vietnamese children of U.S. fathers: the act was passed in 1988, the year in which Mukherjee’s Middleman collection was published. Jason is a very different kind of Vietnam vet than Jeb in “Loose Ends.” Whereas Jeb boasts that, during his tour of duty, he was “the Pit Bull—even the Marines backed off. I was Jesse James hunched tight in the gunship” (45), Jason is deeply traumatized by the experiences he has tried to repress and cannot fully name. Thus, he states simply that “Vietnam didn’t happen . . . Until Eng popped up in my life, I really believed it didn’t happen” (117–118). Yet “it” has ruined his subsequent life and Eng did not exactly “pop up.” Jason reveals that “I was track-
ing my kid” (118), although the presentist focus of the story—typical of much of Mukherjee’s 1980s short fiction—elides the circumstances of this search and recovery. Like the traumatic flashbacks Eng experiences in her delirium or the actual details of Jason’s combat duty, these circumstances may not bear too much remembering. Eng is nonetheless a physical reminder of the U.S. war in Vietnam, the “return of the repressed” for Jason (see Drake 1999, 78). Indeed, the young girl embodies the need for the United States to face up to the aftermath of its military conflicts overseas. As Mukherjee later put it in a 1997 interview, “the national mythology . . . my imagination is driven to create, through fiction, is that of the post-Vietnam United States” (quoted in Chen and Goudie 1997).

Whereas Jeb refuses the responsibilities of fatherhood in “Loose Ends,” Jason welcomes them. But this position is complicated by the presence of twins by his ex-wife, whom he claims to have “brought up” in their early years (Mukherjee 1989b, 117) yet now feels little love for. The sex of Jason’s other children is not even specified and they remain unnamed in the story. By contrast, Mukherjee’s spotlight is resolutely Asian American with Eng and her right to a new life in the United States dominating the story. For Jason, Eng is “my baby . . . my kid” (118, 124): a point made repeatedly, as though he needs to remind himself of this new reality as he atones for his wartime guilt. His need to remember that Eng is his biological daughter may also arise from their many differences. Jason’s knowledge of Eng’s cultural and personal history appears almost as patchy and limited as the sporadic glimpses of it afforded the reader. And at an obvious racial level, she is—like Shawn with his parents in “Saints”—quite physically distinct from her biological father. He even observes that “I can’t help wondering if maybe Asian skin bruises differently from ours, even though I want to say skin is skin; especially hers is skin like mine” (121). At the same time, her skin is clearly not like his, with Mukherjee exploring an issue that directly shaped her own life: being the parent of mixed-race children (compare Maxey 2012, 146–147). The language that Jason employs to discuss Eng suggests that he is actually much more disoriented by their differences than he cares to admit. Hence, she is described unattractively as having a “wild, grieving pygmy face” (123), she is a “frightened, foreign kid” (119), and the double meaning of “alien” is used. Having read a science fiction novel to his feverish daughter about “aliens [who] have taken over small towns all over the country. Idaho, Nebraska: no state is safe from aliens” (121), Jason later admits that “I can’t pull my alien child down, I can’t comfort her” (123). It is not clear that he is even aware of this slippage. “Alien,” which legally means “a person who is not a [U.S.] citizen”—and is often regarded as a derogatory term (Maxey 2019a, 44n44)—is being used by a white American character
troubled and baffled by the foreignness of a new immigrant, even when she is his own flesh and blood.6 That said, the story ends in a spirit of hopefulness as Jason leaves home with Eng. Thus, his Asian American child triumphs over Jason’s white partner, Sharon—now rendered a “wicked stepmother” figure—through this “dissolution of heterosexual coupling” (Drake 1999, 77).

Conclusion

After The Middleman, Mukherjee went on to produce some six stories at intervals from the late 1990s until a few years before her death. Her published stories from this period are “Happiness” (1997), “Homes” (2008)—which reappeared in a slightly different form as “The Laws of Chance” in 2011—and “The Going-Back Party” (2012); her unpublished later tales are “A Summer Story” (c. 2008, most likely unfinished) and “The House on Circular Street” (c. 2008). These tales have yet to be anthologized. Indeed, Mukherjee told interviewers in 2010 that her agent was “uninterested in floating a book of stories” (quoted in Field and Ticen 2010, 250).

In her late-career short fiction, Mukherjee returned quite explicitly to her ethnocultural roots, focusing on Bengali American lives and particularly those of women, sometimes left unnamed, as in “Happiness,” “Homes,” and “The Laws of Chance.” Recalling her early novel Wife, these late stories imagine unfulfilling relationships in which a Bengali woman travels to the United States to marry a successful Bengali American man, only for the marriage to end in abandonment or death. But unlike the detached, third-person narrator of Wife, Mukherjee uses the immediacy of a first-person voice in stories of immigrant women boldly asserting their right to be in the new nation.

In “A Summer Story,” “The House on Circular Street,” and “The Going-Back Party,” Mukherjee reveals the marital and familial tensions that lurk just beneath the surface of apparently comfortable and affluent Bengali American lives. Like “Saints” and Desirable Daughters, they show Mukherjee’s interest in a younger U.S.-born generation achieving its place in America free from inherited cultural expectations. This terrain is familiar to readers of Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction, for instance, her Pulitzer Prize–winning first collection Interpreter of Maladies (1999) and her 2003 novel, The Namesake. But Mukherjee—the older Bengali American writer—puts her own distinctive mark on this material through well-paced, sometimes ethnographic stories, largely told in the present tense, that sometimes conclude with a twist—especially “The House on Circular Street” and “The Going-Back Party”—in otherwise open endings.

The Collected Short Stories of Bharati Mukherjee finally brings together in one place her thirty-five short stories, introducing readers to her lesser-known
short fiction and, for the first time, to her seven unpublished tales. There is a political need for anthologies of this kind, since short story collections in English are still too often the preserve of white male writers. It is therefore all the more important, necessary, and overdue that writers of color—especially women writers of color—should be recognized for their short fiction. And, after her tumultuous move back to the United States from Canada in 1980, Mukherjee was empowered to continue writing fiction by a book of collected stories. Clark Blaise has recalled that in 1983 “our friend and mentor Bernard Malamud sent his new book of Collected Stories. Bharati sat down to read it and suddenly saw that his characters were hers, his themes were hers” (Blaise 1999, 163). This pivotal encounter, anticipating her own impact on a younger literary generation, inspired her to produce eight new stories that later formed the bulk of Darkness.

Charles E. May (2017) has hailed Mukherjee as a “Writer of Perfectly Constructed Short Stories,” and it is no surprise that many of her stories have been anthologized across a wide range of collections (see Maxey 2019a, 35). It is also no accident that, in his tribute to the writer after her death, May chose to discuss her most reprinted story, “The Management of Grief.” This tale, which concludes the Middleman collection, is Mukherjee’s best-known story: a beautifully constructed narrative of an Indian Canadian woman struggling with unimaginable loss. It has reappeared in at least sixteen anthologies since the late 1980s, touching readers and provoking them to learn about a real-life tragedy that, according to Mukherjee, was hidden for many years under the weight of white Canadian racism: the terrorist attack on an Air India flight from Canada to India in June 1985 in which 329 people, mainly Indian Canadians, lost their lives. Throughout her fiction, Mukherjee often gave voice to the voiceless, challenging readers to learn about the lives of others and, for a U.S.-born audience, to discard any nativist complacency they might harbor toward new immigrants: hence the implicit critique of mainstream America contained within her white-focalizing tales. This urgent need to speak for so-called “shadow” people or undocumented migrants (Mukherjee 1989a, 100) also confirms the ongoing political relevance of Mukherjee’s short fiction in a world of rising ethnonationalism and xenophobia (compare Hebbar 2021, 269). “The Management of Grief,” an unnerving and unforgettable story, fully achieves her educative, heuristic mission. On the basis of this work alone, she deserves to be honored for her vital contribution to the short story. But readers will find themselves provoked and moved by many other stories in this volume.

For instructors, The Collected Short Stories of Bharati Mukherjee can be productively used in a wide range of university courses from introductory to a more advanced level. Such courses might include contemporary fiction; post-
colonial literature; world Anglophone writing; twentieth- and twenty-first-century American literature; Asian American literature and culture; the U.S. short story; immigrant, ethnic, and multicultural literature; and creative writing. The sheer multiplicity of these courses demonstrates the contemporary significance and reach of Mukherjee’s short fiction and the many pedagogical opportunities it allows.

The formal complexity and sophisticated intertextuality of her stories will offer students abundant possibilities for interpretive comparison and close textual analysis. They will present instructors with exciting opportunities to pursue many theoretical and discursive approaches. The thematic richness of Mukherjee’s short fiction and the provocative, often prescient, political questions it raises—about migration, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationhood, language, class, religious belief, coming of age, the workplace, and multiple histories and legacies (U.S., South Asian, colonial, postimperial, postconflict, terrorist)—will invite critical thinking through wide-ranging classroom discussions. As an invaluable literary resource, then, Mukherjee’s \textit{Collected Short Stories} should elicit lively interest from readers, writers, instructors, students, and scholars.

\textbf{NOTES}

1. Unfortunately, these stories have not turned up in any of my searches, including the Bharati Mukherjee archive in the Special Collections at the University of Calgary.

2. The final story in this collection, “Bless This Day,” was—according to Mukherjee—“published in Kolkata’s leading avant-garde magazine” (Mukherjee 2005). But the story has never reached a wider audience, and the provenance of its original publication is now unclear. The reasons that Mukherjee’s other \textit{Shattered Mirror} stories have never been published before now, either together or individually, are also uncertain.

3. Compare Blaise and Mukherjee 1987, 108; and for discussions of chess in Asian American writing, see Fickle 2014, 71–72, 80, and Ninh 2015, 123. On more recent Asian American dominance of the game, see Guillermo 2015.

4. Compare the use of the present tense in “Angela” and “Saints,” and see Stone 1993, 217: “the present tense . . . suggest[s] the desire of [Mukherjee’s] . . . characters to eradicate past lives and adopt new ones.”

5. For a critique of artistic representations of this particular white-savior fantasy, see Houston 1997.


\textbf{REFERENCES}


