REMAPPING THE RACIALIZED BODY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S "A WIFE'S STORY"

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant women writers have always emphasized the connection between their bodies, their immigrant experiences and identity formation. Panna, the protagonist in Bharati Mukherjee's 'A Wife's Story' is an example of this connection. The article proposes a different politics of the body in postcolonial women writers' texts and suggests a feminist post-structuralist approach to Bharati Mukherjee's 'A Wife's Story'. It explores the way in which Panna's body shapes her identity. As her body becomes a reflector of others' concept of beauty, her identity is influenced by this shift in perceptions. The reader witnesses the process by which Panna's body undergoes the necessary changes to fit the mainstream's perceptions and thus become a hybrid body. This hybrid female body, becomes, in the words of Mikkail Bakhtin, a "material bearer of meaning", in which souls can be reborn in the process of uprooting and rerooting (as is the case with immigrants). Thus Mukherjee's representation fights traditional stereotypes in relation to the female body and identity. She analyzes her character's body as a site of discrimination, on the one hand, and of knowledge, on the other hand. In the process of decolonizing her body from her upbringing, Panna realizes the body is a variable, always constructed and produced. While the paper does not try to answer all questions about Indian-American female identity, it does want to create an open space for discussion.

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MOTTO: “I find that I am totally thinking differently, and the cadences are different. I’m different, my whole facial muscles are different. *My body* moves differently when I’m speaking English versus Bengali” (Bharati Mukherjee, 20th c. South Asian American female writer)

Feminist Postructuralism. Multicultural and Bicultural Bodies

The article proposes a different politics of the body in postcolonial women writers’ texts and suggests a feminist post-structuralist approach to Bharati Mukherjee’s “A Wife’s Story”, included among the eleven stories of her volume entitled *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Stories have different functions and outcomes, depending on the purpose of telling; and the purpose of telling is never accidental, stories being sculpted by the context in which they are told, the native language and the customs that the writer inherited and/or shares at the time of writing.

A post-structuralist approach to discourses of identity in a literary text of an immigrant writer examines the historical, social, and cultural frameworks in which the story was created and hence contributed to its narrative meaning and conclusion.

The article attempts a feminist-poststructuralist approach of Mukherjee’s ‘A Wife’s Story”, starting from the assumption that terms like ‘woman’, ‘ethnic’, ‘racialized’, ‘minority’, ‘Other’, etc., historically seen as targets of oppression, are continuously undergoing transformation in specific social and cultural contexts.

Feminist postructuralism argues against fixed identities. One of the goals of this study is to demonstrate the supremacy of the bicultural body over the ethnic body. I will argue that concepts such as invisibility, gender, object/subject, identity, context and power, which are central to body theories, can have much to offer and can implicitly turn the invisible, monolithic, static, pre-given ethnic/racialized body into a visible, bicultural, fluid identity.

Feminist poststructuralist perspective challenges these assumptions of fixed identity found in some feminist literature. It is an approach to understanding and working against oppression of

females, of minorities, of 'The Other', in general, by using tools, not long ago, considered taboo, sinful or immoral.

The taboo word I am referring to with reference to women is 'the body'. So, another aim of my paper is to suggest a new politics of the body, i.e. to prove the role of the female body as catalyst in releasing the mind from oppression. Feminism inverted and converted the old metaphor of the body politic (the female body as biologically and hence socially inferior, a body marked by sexuality, sinfulness and oppression) to a new trope of meaning.

A shift took place after the 1960s, when feminism emerged, from the female object as a 'site' (Cf. Foucault) of sexual difference (i.e. in relation to man) to the female subject as a site of not only sexual difference, but also racial, economic, cultural, all together or conflicting with one another.

The new politics involves an active body that participates in the discursive structures to transform its identity. In other words, bodies are involved and consequently imprinted by economic, social, and political factors besides biological and domestic ones. These bodies, in feminist readings of texts, are experienced by women as subject of their desires and not as object of men's desires. The women carrying these bodies live according to their own terms. They are liberated from the shackles of the patriarchal system through their own bodies. I will show how Bharati Mukherjee, an Asian American female writer manages to overcome her double standard (a woman and an immigrant), by using these handicaps as weapons to fight against patriarchal domination.

Adapting to a new cultural environment does not imply getting a new, static identity, but a fluid one, in which each body is seen and constructed continuously through the others' eyes and gazes. These cultural experiences imprint the female body and turn it gradually, from an invisible, pre-given, body, into a visible, still female body, whose material and cultural construction juxtapose and contribute to empowerment, working towards a non-patriarchal expression of gender and the body. Another goal of the paper is to show how bodies function as spaces where various discourses conflict and result in hybrid bodies which, located in liminal spaces (Cf. Bakhtin), become acculturated, sites of both cultural preservation and change.

The feminist poststructuralist analysis is contextually based. How power relations are manifest in patriarchal (Indian) and non-patriarchal (American) cultures is an important point of debate. Shifting relations of power among people of different gender, race, class result in shifting,

fluid identities and hence cultural freedom of constraints, depending on the economic, social, political, and historical context. These are powerful instruments for analyzing the body possibilities for change.

'Who is powerful?', is the question M. Foucault addresses. For the French philosopher power is a relation not a possession or a capacity. That is to say, power is something you acquire through own potential and not through physical domination.

As subjects, we can, according to Foucault's body theory, to discipline our body to the point that we become our own masters. Through this disciplinary power we can overthrow patriarchal domination of our bodies and minds.

In Grosz's (1988) view, "patriarchy has to do with the underlying structures and processes that regulate and organize women and men in different locations and value systems" (qtd. in Luke 1992, 206)

The body, certainly since its discovery, has always been racialized. Moreover, Americans have been carrying race or ethnicity in their body politics since the first settlers set foot on the American land. Likewise, the racialized body has always been the object of white male gaze, while, additionally, 'western' identities have always depended on a dichotomous construction of racialized 'Others'.

Women have constantly been seen as closer to nature and more in touch with their bodies. Accordingly, women and racialized people find themselves on the same 'Other' side. And if we speak about racialized female bodies, we witness what I would dare to call 'the double Other'. Moreover, if we add the quality of being an immigrant, then we can coin the term 'the thrice Other'.

Minority selves, such as Asian Americans, are racialized and marked as different. However, Bharati Mukherjee's message is that it is through 'difference', and not 'sameness' that we can build new identities and self-controlled bodies. Colonial discourse and female identity claim authenticity to a woman colonized within her racial body.

According to Ralph Crane, identity, too, within American scenery, is constructed via difference rather than sameness; for instance, the Indians often define themselves, and are defined by others, by means of cultural markers (skin color, accent, saris, jewels, behavior, etc.) that highlight difference (linguistic, racial, etc.) from other ethnic groups that live in that space. "My point [he argues] is that identity is first and foremost psychological: *we begin to construct*

our identity only when we perceive difference, or when we perceive our identity to have been eroded or eluded in some way. Pure or essential identity does not exist because we begin to construct identity only when the process of erosion has begun, when 'pure' identity has already been adulterated in some way." (qtd. in Mohanram 2000, 4, emphasis added)

Bharati Mukherjee admitted that she had perceived 'difference' and racial discrimination in Canada. When she came to America, she also exposed her racialized body to the scrutiny of the white gaze but her experience was different. She felt at home ever since her arrival. 'Home' now equals both 'difference' and 'sameness', freedom of cultural constraints but also 'being at home' within one's body.

Post-colonial space transforms bodies. In this act of transformation, Bharati Mukherjee links the multicultural body - "a Canadian term for cultural and ethnic pluralism" - as Berdichewsky (2007, 67), to consequent marginalization, ethnicity, singular, racialized body, losing many of its older features; she favors the bicultural body which transcends the racialized body. It is her way of opposing stereotyping of racial bodies.

Her experience with different cultures made her a negotiator of cultures, a 'middleman', as the title of the volume *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1999) suggests. While in Canada, she experienced racism in a country that opposed cultural fusion. She moved with her husband to the USA, which welcomed her in a 'friendly' way, making her integration easy and in a short time.

If the two cultures are stereotypically fixed in time and space, change cannot take place in the present. Multiculturalism favors 'being' instead of 'becoming' which is the case of biculturalism. Characters can perform a fixed Indian or American culture, substituting one culture for the other.

Diasporic identities in the view of cultural theorists like Stuart Hall are thought not as already an accomplished fact, transcending history, place, time and culture; instead, it is viewed as a continuous process and always constituted within. Hall regards cultural identity "as a matter of *becoming* as well as of *being*. It belongs to the future as much to the past" (Hall qtd. in Dempsey 2010, 34, emphasis added)

Bodies and Cultural Biographies

Immigrant women writers have always emphasized the connection between their bodies, their immigrant experience and identity formation. It is also the case of Bharati Mukherjee, whose protagonists are close projections of herself, embodying her own struggle with identity first as an exile from India, then as an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as an immigrant in the USA. Born in Calcutta, India, from middle-class Hindu Brahmin parents; although she was raised in a traditional, hierarchical society and family, where "one's identity was fixed, derived from religion, caste, patrimony, and mother tongue" (Mukherjee 1997a, 35), she was encouraged by her mother, married at the age of sixteen, to attend college and seek a professional career.

Mukherjee voices in "The American Dreamer" (1997) her cultural experience of being first an exile, then an expatriate and, finally, an immigrant. She speaks about her efforts to preserve her indianness while living in Canada, a country that openly resisted cultural fusion. After finishing her B.A. and M.A. in English and Ancient Indian Culture in Calcutta, she continued her comparative cultural studies at the University of Iowa, USA. Impulsive by nature, and with a strong determination to escape the rules, the traditions, and the genealogy of India, she married the Canadian writer Clark Blaise only a few weeks after she met him, mostly because he, blue-eyed, was not Brahmanic in appearance.

Bharati Mukherjee and Postcolonial Bodies

In her fiction, Bharati Mukherjee handles western themes and settings as well as characters who are westernized or bicultural (Cf. Kumar 2001, 21). However, she is forced to admit that the very structure of imagination, and the techniques she uses, are essentially Hindu and moral. In a televised interview with Bill Moyers (1990), she acknowledges her love for America: "I feel very American … I knew the moment I landed as a student in 1961 … that this is where I belonged. It was an instant kind of love". However, her approach to life and its problems is deeply moored in her Indian upbringing.

Prior to her, most Indian immigrant writers took inspiration from India and wrote about living in perpetual exile and the impossibility of ever having a home. Unlike these writers, her immigrant experience is presented as a gain, and not as a loss: "I totally consider myself an American writer … writing … about the feeling of a new kind of pioneer here in America" (Meer 1989). Hence, her dissociation from the immigrant writers who use hyphenation when speaking

about their origin. By entitling herself an Asian American writer, she highlights the immigrant's binary imagination that remakes any immigrant when he/she comes to America.

The sentimental lament for a lost home or origin from postcolonial literature is replaced by the optimism of the immigrant experience with its losses and gains. As Myles states, Mukherjee sees herself as a "Patel of new territories, experiences and literatures" (2008, 108).

She left India by choice to settle in the USA, and thus she chose a dynamic destiny rather than a determinist destiny: "I view myself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island" (Mukherjee qtd. in Kumar 2001, 21)

Her characters, victims and survivors at the same time, escape the labeling of postcolonial characters; they are mobile, curious travelers and observers of a new liminal/neutral space in which they try to survive. They all go through a trauma of self-transformation on their way towards Americanization. "Given certain cards", they reinvent themselves constantly, and survive "by cancelling history … deleting yesterday … believing in dynamic fate and creative understanding" (Edwards 2009, 126)

The concepts of self-transformation and dynamic fate are based on the Indian Hindu faith in reincarnation: "I was born into a Hindu Bengali Brahmin family which means I have a different sense of the self, of existence, of mortality…". She believes that "… our souls can be reborn in another body …", so the perspective she has about a character's life is "… different from that of an American writer who believes that he has only one life". (Mukherjee qtd. in Carb 1988/1989, 651)

Bill Moyers in a televised interview with Bharati Mukherjee (1990) argues the necessity of immigrants to 'violently murder' their own selves upon coming to the USA. The characters of immigrant literature metamorphose from former traditional selves into new assertive ones by getting rid of their past life and experience.

This is not the case of Bharati Mukherjee. From an exile to an expatriate and then to an immigrant, she defines herself in constant reference to her past identity. Her characters go through a two-way transformation in which each culture retains its own unity, while they are mutually enriched. Stories of transformation, they present dialogic encounters between two cultures which do not result in mixing or merging. Mukherjee's protagonists neither enter the 'melting pot' of America nor are assimilated by it. Moreover, they reject Canadian multiculturalism with its emphasis on racial difference, dehumanization, discrimination, and

hence marginalization: "Multiculturalism, in a sense, is well intentioned, but it ends marginalizing the person" (Mukherjee qtd. in Moyers 1990).

The Indian American female writer Bharati Mukherjee sees salvation only as a fusion of cultural opposites. She distinguishes between biculturalism, which favors cultural interaction (the case of America), and multiculturalism, which favors cultural disjunction (the case of Canada). While biculturalism implies change by fusion of cultures, multiculturalism favors separation of cultures, fixed identities, suppresses the individual and highlights ethnicity. This emphasis on ethnicity favors cultural inheritance (the immigrant's identification with his past culture) which results in marginalization, isolation and alienation. No cultural hybridization is encouraged, the immigrant having to choose between the native and the American culture. Stereotyping is strongly propagated as well as idealized images of Indian or any other foreign culture, which, if not intensifies, at least maintains difference.

Politics of the Body. Old and New.

While in the early 1960s the body was relatively under-researched, in the late 1960s and later, due to the emergence of feminism and the assumption according to which female bodies are not simply material bodies, pre-given and stuck into their inferior biological and hence social role, there was a renewed interest in the body.

Feminist writing uses the body not as subordinate to mind, not as the Greek philosopher Plato wrongly assumed. Plato, and later the French philosopher Descartes as well, viewed the human being as either mind or body. Women's bodies were entirely associated, historically speaking, to oppression. These body theories and many more associate women to their bodies and men to their intellect or mind.

Grosz associates the concept of the material body with the Christian belief according to which the soul is divine and hence immortal, while the body is just "a mortal, sinful, and lustful carnality" (1994, 5). Linking body with sin, nakedness has become a symbol of sinfulness and feminine sexuality. The corporeal body is seen as secondary to mind, a trapped body in an escapist mind.

The new politics of the body views the female body as both a site of oppression and a site of knowledge. Bodies become, according to Bakhtin (1989), 'material bearers of meaning'. I will

use Bakhtin's terms of 'creative understanding' and 'dynamic destiny' to show the body as a form of cultural knowledge.

This new politics of the female body urges women to 'decolonize' their bodies. They expose their bodies, historically and culturally speaking, to the same white/male gaze. But this time the physical body is not seen as lustful and sinful, used for sexuality only. Immigrant women, such as Mukherjee, present characters who use their sexuality as a duty and not for pleasure. Sexuality becomes a trope for mental liberation. They use their bodies to resist patriarchal domination, imperialistic and cultural oppression. The naked body is a superior body, freed from stereotypes and constraints.

Feminist writing and interpretation analyzes bodies as variables, always constructed and produced. These shifting tropes turn bodies into fluid entities, which become women's primary sources of empowerment in the process of shaping an identity.

A cultural variable, this bicultural body both preserves and values what is gained from experience. It is a body that serves the dual purpose of both erasing and calling attention to the difference between the traditional, enculturated body, on the one hand, and the bicultural, acculturated body, in which the traditional and the new amalgamate in the process of identity formation, on the other hand.

Van Wyck Brooks in his *America's Coming of Age* (2010) coined a new term, that of a 'usable past' to distinguish it from an 'unusable past' of patriarchy. He compares male and female characters in Mukherjee's narratives and draws the conclusion that, while the male characters, as carriers of patriarchal constructs into America, tend to be stereotyped, her women characters, due to their upbringing and cultural conditioning, are more flexible and innovative in facing the pressure of constructing new identities.

This power to combine old and new is what makes females superior to men. Only female souls can be uprooted and rerooted in this process of endless transmutations. 'Trained to adapt', women act as bridges between cultures. In any traditional society, women are usually considered as caretakers and preservers of culture and tradition.

On the other hand, faced with a new cultural body, the female body can best explore ways to adapt to this new cultural environment and achieve a harmonious balance of the two. In an interview, Bharati Mukherjee expresses her preference for such characters: "The kinds of women who attract me, who intrigue me, are those who are adaptable. We've all been trained to please,

trained to be adaptable as wives, and that adaptability is working to the women's advantage when we come over as immigrants. *For an Indian woman to learn to drive, put on pants, cash cheques, is a big leap. They are exhilarated by that change*" (Mukherjee qtd. in Sushma 2007, 55, emphasis added).

One of the most important ways in which our bodies are socially constructed is through gender and race. How male and bodies become gendered and racialized, and how race interacts with gender in the social construction of bodies are therefore important in immigrant literature. Judith Butler's remarks on how patriarchy exercises its power through the gendered body and McClintock's arguments in favor of understanding the history of any previous colonial power by making reference to the ways in which the development of a national identity is bound to racialized bodies add to our feminist-postructuralist approach of Mukherjee's text.

A politics of the body involves layers and levels of ideological, sociocultural and religious influences that impose knowledge or ignorance of female bodies and construct women as gendered subjects or objects. As a woman writer, Bharati Mukherjee presents in "A Wife's Story" the struggle of her protagonist Panna to resist patriarchal domination and definition as wife. This definition (Bakhtin 1986, 9) restrains her to an ideological framework that controls her body, oppresses her through the economic, political, and cultural norms imposed on her by Hindu society. This is mostly visible in the case of postcolonial cultures that are gender specific. Indian women's cultural norms restrict a woman to a dependent self that cannot make a life outside the marital sphere. Trained to see her husband as God, the Indian woman is encouraged to keep silent before physical and emotional abuse. Culturally lower, Indian women have thus no courage to step out of their social and cultural conditioning. As an ex-colonial empire subject, Katrak (2006, 9) argues that the postcolonial female body itself is constructed as a figure of exile and self-alienation.

Bharati Mukherjee places her female characters constantly in non-routine situations where their ethnic bodies are exposed to endless transmutations making their own bodies curiously alien to themselves. She feels that psychic violence leaves a stronger impact on the mind than physical violence on the body. Therefore, her women characters make interesting psychological studies and her stories are rather about psychological transformation.

This process of the body feeling disconnected, estranged from itself, as though it does not belong to it, brings Mukherjee's female protagonists to a 'liminal state of consciousness', to use

Victor Turner's evocative concept, a new space that the female character needs to cope with, and thus transcend this 'internalized' circle (Cf. Katrak 2006, 2). By taking socio-cultural autonomy over her female body, Mukherjee's immigrant can end the patriarchal, ethnic, and colonial domination she has been submitted to. This means the end of acting as "middleman", a negotiator in a conflict between her social and individual body, a conflict she is not interested in solving. It is simply a space where the female immigrant can re-belong to her body, i.e. rebirth, not physically, but emotionally and psychologically.

Racialized and Hybrid Bodies in "A Wife's Story"

In "A Wife's Story", the first person narrator is Panna Bhatt, an Indian woman and wife who comes to New York for a PhD in education. Her husband, unnamed in the story, comes from Bombay, India, to visit her for ten days. There are two other characters in the story: Imre, a close friend of Panna's (an immigrant and political dissident from Budapest) and Charity Chin, Panna's roommate (a hand model from China).

It is significant to note that the gradual transformation that Panna undergoes, her emancipation and final assimilation, is mirrored in her choice of these two immigrant friends, who are themselves negotiating between cultures. It is also important to mention the fact that the conflict between Panna's life as a dutiful, married South Asian woman and the new life and identity she begins to fashion in New York in order to survive, is ironically present in the title of the short story, "A Wife's Story", but also in the choice of her name, Panna Bhatt, which, according to Oxford English Dictionary, emphasizes this cultural fusion (Panna = fish, against the mainstream/ wisdom, new/ acculturation; Bhatt = priest/tradition/enculturation).

Panna's Americanization or the gradual integration into the American society is through a 'trauma of self-transformation'. Mukherjee speaks about this experience in an interview taken by Bradley Edwards: "I find that I am totally thinking differently, and the cadences are different. I'm different, my whole facial muscles are different. *My body moves differently* when I'm speaking English versus Bengali" (2009, 126).

The reader witnesses the process by which Panna's body undergoes the necessary changes to fit the mainstream's perceptions and thus become a hybrid body. From an 'outsider' stage, her body starts being looked at and looking at the new world, during which her body reflects the conflict between her need to find herself in this new cultural context and the role of the good

Hindu wife she still needs to play. This conflictual cultural trauma to which her body is exposed is constructive, resulting in victory over her racialized body; the outcome is a new, hybrid, bicultural body, enriched by the two previously incompatible cultures.

Mukherjee's original belief in 'creative understanding' and 'dynamic destiny' places her protagonist, Panna, in a different cultural location, New York, where the shift in perceptions can take place. It is a 'limbo space' (Friedman 1998, 87), a neutral place, where immigrant characters are connected through a neutral language (English), and not through common colonial memories: "In order to understand a foreign culture, one must [be] located outside in time, space, culture … enter into it, forgetting one's own and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture … to become Other" (Bakhtin 1986, 6). As Bakhtin remarks, it is thus very important to be placed outside the object of one's 'creative understanding' – in time, space, and culture.

From 'Outsider' Racialized Body to 'Insider' Bicultural Body

Panna's struggle to resist patriarchal domination and definition as 'wife' makes her body both a site of discrimination and of knowledge. Her racialized body is seen as a changeable, a body affected by the transition from India to America, a body affected by the mainstream's insights on the body, different from those of home, a body ready to readjust to fit these mainstream's perceptions.

Entrapped in a dilemma of tensions between the American culture and society and the traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife, between a feminist desire to be assertive and independent, and the Indian need to be submissive and unassuming, Panna's ethnic body, which seems curiously alien to her due to endless transmutations, will finally be relocated into a new bicultural/hybrid body.

The trauma of self-transformation is outlined by David Spurr who perceives the native body under Western eyes in the following way: "the *material* value of the body as labor supply, its *aesthetic* value as object of artistic representation, its *ethical* value as a mark of innocence and degradation, its *scientific* value as evidence of racial difference or inferiority, its *humanitarian* value as the sign of suffering, its *erotic* value as the object of desire" (qtd. in Bahri 2003, 262)

The color of Panna's skin and the way she dresses become reminders of her home. A female Indian immigrant is always visible in a white society: "The theatre isn't so dark that they can't see me. In my red silk sari I'm conspicuous. Plump, gold paisleys sparkle on my chest"

(58). Gradually, Panna grows to understand that Indian perceptions of beauty and aesthetic values are different from American ones. In India she has been subjected to rigid codes of dress and behavior.

Here, in America, she finds in this new civilization the freedom she has never known at home, the escape from the traditional roles she has been raised to obey. She marks her dissent by rejecting Indian cultural markers: "I change out of the cotton pants … I don't wear them every day" (64), "I unpleat my silk sari – it no longer looks too showy" (62). Likewise, her dissent is visible in the way she refuses to wear the traditional Indian jewels every day. She doesn't want to be regarded as an outsider. The *mangalsutra*, the marriage necklace, the gold drop earrings, the heavy gold bangles are the traditional jewels of a married Indian woman. The *sari* is the traditional outfit she puts on only when she meets her husband at the airport. Before meeting her husband at the airport, she was wearing the American trousers. She also has a ring received from her mother-in-law that she does not wear when meeting her husband.

Though traditional, her family was ahead of the time, allowing her to continue her studies. When she steps on American land, she brings her own stereotypes: she loathes being immediately located as 'Indian', in her 'red sari' at the theatre, she is enraged at David Mamet's deprecating attitude towards immigrants in his play and the audience's laughing, etc.

Panna's conflictual attitudes raise her to a higher level. The very fact that she has decided to leave India for America is indicative of breaking the traditional roles of a Hindu marriage. She comes alone to New York: "I'm not finished. I can get back on the board. … I've made it. I'm making something of my life. I've left home, my husband, to get a PhD in special ed. I have a multiple-entry visa and a small scholarship for two years. After that, we'll see." (59; 61)

She starts comparing the two cultures, seeing their good and bad sides. Education helps her make an objective analysis of both societies. Although she dislikes wearing Indian cultural markers to oppose marginalization, she recalls old Indian beliefs and customs, which help her anchor into the new American way of life: "A play like this, back home, would cause riots" (59); "Why should I be ashamed? Television in India is so uplifting" (60).

The body in classic colonial discourse becomes the object of examination. "I told you not to wear pants. He thinks you are Puerto Rican. He thinks he can treat you with disrespect"; "I have seen how men watch you", her husband tells her (65; 68). From an 'Indian', by culturally mixing with Chinese, Hungarians, Russians, Muslims, Puerto Ricans, Jewish, Hawaian, Lebanese

people, she starts being assimilated more and more with the immigrant 'American' body: a Lebanese calls her a 'doll' (65) while the guide addresses her, "your highness… maharani" (66).

"I've been trained to *adapt*; what else can I say?" (66), she simply argues her behavior. Knowing how both sides feel, she starts comparing, while her vocabulary includes frequent uses of such words: 'mix', 'float', 'adapt', 'free', 'strong', 'reckless', 'I/We've made it': "In the back of the cab, without even trying, I feel light, almost *free*. Memories of Indian destitutes *mix* with 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 …" (61); "I keep my eyes closed. That way I can feel *the floaters* better. … I feel strong, reckless. *We've made it*….(61). She feels as if she really sees her husband and Imre for the first time: "I feel I am just getting to know him" (65). She makes pancakes out of a '*mix*' (65). "I am back from *perfect, floating* memories" (68) (all emphasis added).

She is not the domestic, submissive anymore. Education makes her reevaluate these roles and react dissentfully to them. She does not admit to be told what to see and what to read even by Imre, her Hungarian friend. Sharing a flat with a Chinese American model (Charity), and dating a Hungarian political refugee (Imre), Panna is also fast becoming part of the multiethnic background of New York, which contributes to her fast change.

The more familiar Panna becomes with the new cultural environment, the more estranged she becomes from her husband. She has changed, he has not changed. She is a survivor, while he is the defeated one. She is conscious of her education, of gaining experience from this cultural exchange. The words she addresses her neighbor at the theatre, staring mean and cool at the man's elbow, "You're exploiting my space", is a refusal of accepting cultural marginalization both as a woman and as an immigrant. By the time he's ready with come-backs, Panna has turned her back on him as a sign of defiance.

When Panna meets her husband at the airport he asks why she does not wear his mother's gold and ruby ring. She explains that it is not safe to do so. He looks disconcerted: "He's used to a different role. He's the knowing, suspicious one in the family". (64) Now, he sees a different woman, a woman in full control of herself who "pats his hand protectively" (66). When he implores her to go back with him, because he cannot live without her, she answers simply: "I can't go back" (68).

The end of the story still presents a wife, but a bicultural-bodied wife who's waiting for her husband "to make up to him for [her] years away, the gutted trucks, the degree [she]'ll never use in India." She wants "to pretend that nothing has changed". (69). But the image she sees in the mirror, while waiting for her husband, shows a new wife, whose bicultural body is enriched by the immigrant experience: "I watch my body turn, the breasts, the thighs glow. The body's beauty amazes. I stand there shameless, in ways he has never seen me. I am *free, afloat*, watching somebody else." (69, emphasis added). She is not restrained by conventions anymore; she becomes a subject in the true sense of the word.

The cultural blending Panna achieves is regarded as a successful act: "I've broadened my horizons" (62), "I'm not to worry about foreign exchange" (63); "I know enough to get by" (68). She and her husband have exchanged roles: she takes the decisions, she guides her husband, she is self-reliant and self-possessed, etc. She buys the tickets, handles the money, and does many other male jobs, all of which she is not sure whether they make her unhappy. He is the weak one, begging her to go back with him to India because he needs her so much. Obviously, unlike India where she was geared towards repressing her individual personality, here, in America, making her own decisions means the patriarch has lost control.

At the end of the story, Panna confronts herself naked in the mirror, a person singularly transformed by her experience as a foreigner and temporary immigrant in the USA. Her old life is really gone, and she recognizes this fact, not with regret or remorse, but with an exhilarating sense of metamorphosis.

From Cultural Collision to Cultural Creation through Racialized Body

Panna is in neither culture. Her bicultural body, '*floating*' in the air places her above both cultures. She is not apologetic about either culture. In her role of negotiator, she reaches in the end that subtle understanding that comes from having to survive in a totally foreign culture. Paradoxically, unlike characters in traditional South Asian American female writing, her racialized body becomes the catalyst of her individual freedom, that which will liberate her mind as well. By her transcendence, she is superior to both cultures because she understands both and learns from both. Her body is beautiful, as liberty is, freed/ *naked* from all stereotypes or cultural constraints. She brings her own stereotypes from India but also sets up her own stereotypes about America. She enjoys and marvels at the beauty of her '*nakedness*': a body clothed in neither

Indian or American clothes, devoid of all stereotypes, and free from all gender or cultural constraints; a material body of a knowledgeable woman who has perfect control over both her body and mind.

While Asian culture regards the body as subordinate to mind, Mukherjee ennobles it by making it a catalyst, a prime agent of change in the process of freeing the mind. Sex is not seen as a pleasure, but as a duty. Locating 'home' in a liminal space, the ethnic body, exposed to the others' gaze, becomes a reflector of their concepts of beauty. Reshaping of Panna's self implies adjustment; training to adapt implies a body that both erases and highlights oppression and knowledge through a cultural dialogue with herself and the multiethnic people around her, who help her discover her body, which she uses as a trope for sexual and then mental liberation. The collision of cultures ends in the creation of a new culture, reflected in Panna's bicultural body.

In her effort to situate her texts within the context of feminism, her female characters give voice to their dissent with Indian patriarchal expectations and attitudes in an endeavor to show the necessity of enculturation and acculturation as bidimensional or bicultural constructs. Exposed to cultural differences, her aim is to build from differences. The dual condition of being an Indian expatriate and an American immigrant in a hybrid space as America has always been requires interaction with the Other, so that categories like 'dominant' and 'peripheral' lose their basic meaning or/and are integrated into one single entity: "in the front row, but at the margin" (58).

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