Cultural Difference in Intimate Space – Immigrant Romances in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories*

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Pro gradu -tutkielmassani tarkastelen Bharati Mukherjeen novellikokoelmaa *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) keskittyen tarinoiden romansseihin. Intialaissyntyinen Mukherjee on kiistelty hahmo amerikkalaisessa nykykirjallisuudessa ja tutkimuskysymykseni liittyy ristiriitoihin, joita hänen vastaanotossaan on ilmennyt. Kysyn, kuinka Mukherjee käyttää romanttisia konventioita etnisen, kansallisen ja sukupuoli-identiteetin käsittelyyn. Osoitan, että romantiikan lajipiirteitä uudelleenkirjoittamalla Mukherjee haastaa käsitystä identiteetistä muuttumattomana.

Työn teoreettinen viitekehys on feministisessä ja jälkikolonialistisessa kirjallisuudentutkimuksessa. Lähden liikkeelle orientalismin käsitteestä, jota on aasialais-amerikkalaisessa tutkimuksessa sovellettu amerikkalaiseen kontekstiin. Tarkastelen yhtymäkohtia sukupuolen, seksuaalisuuden, etnisyyden ja kansallisen identiteetin rakentumisessa. Huomioin, kuinka etniset stereotypiat ovat usein seksuaalisesti sävyttyneitä, ja kansallisuus ja identiteetti rakentuvat suhteessa ihntiimiyttä koskeviin sääntöihin ja instituutioihin, joista keskeisin on perhe.

Teorialuvun toisessa osassa käsittelen romanttista kirjallisuutta. Liitän romanssin lajityyppinä romanttisen rakkauden käsitteeseen, joka puolestaan yhdistyy länsimaiseen avioliittoinstituutioon. Hyödynnän feminististä tutkimusta osoittaakseni, että romanssit ylläpitävät sukupuolinormeja ja -rooleja asettamalla henkilöhahmojen päämääräksi avioliiton. Etnisyys taas liittyy romansseihin assimilaation ja eksoottisuuden käsitteiden kautta.

Analyysin ensimmäisessä osassa tarkastelen romansseja aasialaisten ja valkoisten amerikkalaisten välillä ja toisesa osassa romansseja vieraalla maalla. Osoitan, että romanssi on kehys, jonka sisällä Mukherjee käsittelee aasialaisten asemaa Amerikassa. Analyysin perusteella totean, että Mukherjeen luoma kuva Amerikasta ei ole yksiselitteisesti ihannoiva.

Amerikkalaisissa romansseissa aasialaiset on perinteisesti rakennettu ”toisiksi” stereotypioiden kautta ja romanttinen rakkaus on esitetty irrallisena sosiaalisesta todellisuudesta. Pohjimmiltaan romanssiessa on vahvistettu käsitystä ihanneperheestä. Mukherjee puolestaan kyseenalaistaa novellikokoelmansa tarinoissa aasialaisiin liitettyjä, sukupuolittuneita stereotypioita, värittää romansseja ironialla ja poliittisilla viittauksilla, ja kirjoittaa vaihtoehtoja perinteiselle amerikkalaiselle perheelle. Nämä kerronnan keinot ovat ristiriidassa konventionaalisten romanssien kanssa.

Avainsanat: romanssi, amerikkalaisuus, perhe, maahanmuutto

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

The Middleman and Other Stories is the second collection of short stories by Bharati Mukherjee, an American author of Indian origin. Published in 1988, it was written after the author's immigration to the United States, where she moved from Canada, disappointed with the country's mosaic-model of multicultural politics. Many studies which focus on Mukherjee's career as a whole see this as an important factor in reading the collection. Alam calls the period of writing of *The Middleman and Other Stories* and *Jasmine* (1989) "the exuberance of immigration" (78), Tandon sees the author's own Americanization as a relevant subtext for reading her later works (170) and Kumar situates the collection in "the phase of transition" on a continuum from expatriate to immigrant (61). In short, the collection is often interpreted as reflecting Mukherjee's affection for America. *The Middleman and Other Stories* is also an award winning book which made its author famous. The book's critical success among American audiences in contrast to its downright rejection among many of the South Asian critics makes it an important book for an analysis on the uses of culture and ethnicity.

In this thesis, I will not contextualize *The Middleman and Other Stories* in relation to Mukherjee's other writings, but concentrate on a theme the stories of this collection share. The aim of the thesis is to read the stories as romances, trying to determine the role cultural difference and ethnicity play in the arena of the private and intimate. The research question is: how does Mukherjee use the conventions of romance to explore questions of ethnicity, national belonging and sexuality. Is romance a way to write an American identity for the immigrant characters? Another question is, how are the cultural norms on intimacy questioned in romance narratives told by immigrants?

In the theoretical framework, I will approach the questions from a postcolonial, feminist point of view. I begin by discussing ethnicity as a constructed, variable category, built and upheld in

contrast to ethnic “Others”. I use Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as a starting point, and refer to scholars who have applied his arguments in Asian American contexts (Marchetti, Koshy, Li, Lee and Lowe). Since romances are stories of intimate relationships, in their most conventional forms between men and women, gender and sexuality are important elements in analyzing them. Similarly to ethnicity, gender is also approached as a constructed category, appearing as natural because of repeated performances (Butler). The main argument of the theory-section is an approach combining the aforementioned views on ethnicity, gender and sexuality. I am using Joane Nagel's concept of ethnosexual frontiers, which refers to the intersections of ethnic borders and sexual norms. The interconnectedness is visible in ethnosexual stereotypes and the cultural institutions on intimacy.

In the second part of the theory chapter, I will discuss romance as a literary genre explicitly handling ethnosexual matters. After presenting an outline of what the ingredients of the “classic romance” are, I will focus on scholars who analyze conventional romances with the aim of revealing how they uphold binary constructions of gender, nation and ethnicity. As will be argued, romance has remained popular despite the transformations taking place in real-life intimate relationships. I will read Mukherjee's stories as rewritings of the conventions, asking if her romances resist the dominant scripts of gender, nation and ethnicity. There are four distinct strategies I will pay attention to: irony towards romantic conventions, confrontation of ethnosexual stereotypes, references to social contexts or histories and reformulations of the American family. The strategies are connected, often parallel and appear throughout the collection.

The analysis is divided into two chapters: firstly, I will deal with stories of interethnic romance, treating them as narratives of crossing the ethnosexual boundary. Mukherjee’s fiction has been criticized by scholars who see her as celebrating assimilation and Americanization. Assimilation is also a common ingredient in popular interethnic romances, which employ the

rhetoric of romantic love to explain the “ethnic” character's consent to Americanize.

The second analysis chapter focuses on stories with no white characters in positions of romantic heroes or heroines. Thus, the romances are either intraethnic, among members of the same ethnic group, or interethnic across members of different minorities. As a connecting factor, I have termed the stories “immigrant romances”, which has two distinct meanings: the white-Asian interethnic or “interracial” ones analyzed in chapter 3 and the romances taking place on foreign ground, in contexts where the cultural specificity of intimate norms becomes visible (chapter 4).

1.1. Short Stories on Love Across Borders

The Middleman and Other Stories consists of eleven short stories, each with a different narrator, characters and setting. The title story “The Middleman” is a story of the civil war in Costa Rica, and it draws parallels between political rebellion and the short romance of the narrator and a trophy-woman, Maria. The second, “A Wife’s Story”, features a protagonist typical for Mukherjee: an Indian woman redefining herself in America. “Loose Ends” is one of the stories to focus on white Americans, it is a Vietnam War veteran’s angry and hostile reaction to the increasing number of immigrants he sees around him. Also “Orbiting” and “Fighting for the Rebound” have white narrators. Both stories have an interethnic couple at their focus, the former employing a rarer pairing of a white woman with an Asian man and the latter an Asian woman with a white man. “The Tenant” again centers around an Indo-American woman looking for stability amidst short, meaningless relationships. In “Fathering” and “Jasmine”, Mukherjee writes of the institution of family, bringing ethnic diversity home in the form of the half-Vietnamese Eng who is adopted to America by her veteran father, and in the story of a Trinidad domestic taking the place of the white mother. The next two stories depict love in contexts where intimacy is mostly a practicality: “Danny’s Girls” is narrated by an Indian teenager falling in love with a mail-order bride and “Buried Lives” shows Mr. Venkatesan, a Sri Lankan undocumented immigrant, being saved from

the authorities by a promise of marriage. The last story, “The Management of Grief”, is located in Canada, with an Indo-Canadian woman facing her new life after losing her family in a plane crash.

In all their versatility, the stories share some common themes, the most important one for this thesis being that of intimate relationships or encounters. Robert M. Luscher uses the term “short story sequence” to describe a collection of individual stories by the same author which are organized into a sequence. The sequential nature refers to the repetition and gradual development of themes and motifs, providing a “continuity of the reading experience” (149). Luscher argues that a carefully collected and organized set of short stories can have a harmonious effect resembling the reading experience of a novel (151) and seeks to bring the two narrative forms closer to each other, seeing them on a continuum from the traditional novel to a miscellaneous collection of individual stories. The primary feature Luscher gives for the sequence is that it has to be dynamic, with the thematic currents and patterns developing a larger theme in the readers mind instead of merely binding the stories together mechanically (163-4).

The continuity and dynamism between seemingly disparate pieces is an element that characterizes an art form Mukherjee has openly adored: Moghul miniatures.[1] In her analyses of Mukherjee's immigrant narratives, Jennifer Drake stresses the importance of Moghul miniatures in forming the aesthetic behind the short stories. The Moghul miniature painting tradition was brought to India by Islamic invaders. Thus, the 16th- and 17th- century art form is marked by cultural contact and exchange. Moghul miniatures differ from Western art forms of the time, not least in their focalization. Whereas the European Medieval and Renaissance painting expressed the world from the point of view of a single viewer, Moghul miniatures “gather stories together to create a multifocal field of vision, even as the tableaux within each painting compete with each other for the viewer's attention” (Drake 68). The individual miniatures or scenes are grouped in the same

[1]Mukherjee’s first short story collection, *Darkness* (1985), ends with an ekphrasis, a story describing a Moghul miniature painting.

painting, they form an entity. The relations between the paintings offer new landscapes for understanding the art form. Drake quotes Mukherjee's essay "Four-Hundred-Year-Old-Woman":

> My image of artistic structure and artistic excellence is Moghul miniature painting, with its crazy foreshortening of vanishing point, its insistence that everything happens simultaneously, bound only by shape and color. In the miniature paintings of India, there are dozen separate foci, the most complicated stories can be rendered on a grain of rice, the corners are as elaborated as the centers. There is a sense of the interpenetration of all things (27-28, quoted in Drake, 68).

Through these comparisons – short story sequence and Moghul paintings – the point coming across is that the surrounding stories with their multiple points of view can add to the reading experience of individual stories and this is the reason I found it fruitful to study the collection as a whole.

1.2. "Just as mainstream as anyone else" - Mukherjee's Controversial Reception

The versatility of the narrators and points of view in *The Middleman and Other Stories* has not been celebrated by all: some critics have noted it with annoyance and questioned Mukherjee's legitimacy as a representative of these radically different subject positions (for example Knippling). In the following paragraphs, I will introduce the main currents in the reception of Bharati Mukherjee. Her reception has been divided, and I identify the source of conflict in her position as one of the first Indo-American voices being listened to in America.

In an interview with Sneja Gunew, Gayatri Spivak discusses the position of a "Third World person" in a multicultural setting. She makes the distinction between two meanings of speaking as someone: a person can generalize herself, choose to represent her community, speak as an individual of a certain group. However, the problems arise if and when the (hegemonic) audience views the person as an unproblematic representative, ignoring the fact that the subject position taken by the speaker is a conscious choice, not the one and only identity valid for all members of that group. This process is known as tokenism and Spivak further argues: "when you are perceived as a token, you are also silenced in a certain way because … if you are brought there it has been

covered, they needn't worry about it anymore" (61).

Another danger Spivak connects to one representing many lies in forgetting the privilege of the speaker. Spivak's examples deal with privileged Third World intellectuals representing their disenfranchised groups of origin, which contains the danger of glossing over the differences among the communities represented. However, Spivak does not see the solution as a demand for more "authentic" voices, but seeks to problematize the whole notion of authenticity (63). The key point is that the problem of representation cannot be solved by hearing more "authentic" voices. Instead, Spivak shifts the focus from the producing end to the receiving end: "For me, the question 'Who should speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?'" (59). She argues that a representative of a given ethnic group should not be viewed as a token and listened to just for the sake of her ethnicity, but listened to properly for what she has to say (60).

Tokenism, representation and authenticity are relevant concepts in unraveling the scholarly debate around Bharati Mukherjee. She has often been criticized for embracing assimilation and the American way of life both in her fiction and in her non-fictional writing. Large part of that criticism deals with the novel *Jasmine,* its identity-politics and representation of South Asians. For example, in their anthology on South Asian American women writers *Our Feet Walk the Sky* (2008)*,* the authors have included Inderpal Grewal's article on Mukherjee among fictional works by other writers of similar descent. Grewal compares Mukherjee's *Jasmine* with Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road* (1991) and clearly prefers the latter: "Alexander's work is, unfortunately, not as well known as Mukherjee's. Its complexity prevents it from functioning as a representative text describing 'the Indian woman' or 'the South Asian immigrant experience', as does *Jasmine*. Perhaps it is for this reason, unfortunately, that it will not be a bestseller in the U.S." (235). The debate goes on around the short stories, as well. Knippling approaches *The Middleman and Other Stories* with Spivak's notions of the subaltern and concludes that Mukherjee fails to

represent the subaltern from her privileged, upper-class position. Fred Pfeil uses Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of solidarity, reading the collection as an ironically distanced account, indifferent to solidarity and the actual lives and sufferings of the people represented by the characters.

Mukherjee has passionately responded to the criticisms directed at her fiction and the resulting discussion has been described as “considerable drama” (Nelson 1993 ix). In an interview with Patricia Gabriel Mukherjee states: “I take issue with scholars who need for someone who looks like me – I’m talking about skin color and particular accent in English – to write about 'postcolonial' issues” (2003, 127). Instead, she has insisted on positioning herself in the mainstream, not margin, of the American society:

> I am an integrationist and, to use a deliberately ugly word, a mongrelizer... Mongrels lose a lot of prestige and pedigree in their travels, they're not as classically proportioned or predictably behaved as purebreeds, and, more to the point, their presence creates a third, unpredictable, sometimes undesirable, and often untrainable mutt. Because I am here, I am changed totally by you and by my commitment to this country and its problems, but so are you. You are now implicated in my life; you probably entrust your health, or aspects of it, to Indian doctors or dentists, you can now eat my food in nearly any town, run India-designed software on your India-designed computer. I'm just as mainstream as anyone else. I am also a proud India-born, Bengali-speaking Hindu. These positions need not be antithetical (219).

The three important ideas of the quotation are: change on both parties, the co-existence of two supposedly distinct sets cultural values in one person and the mainstreaming of Indian presence in the United States.

However, it can be argued that the problem lies more in her supposed reception than in the content of her stories as such. One view into what the debate circling her work is about is offered by Singh:

> What most people find disturbing about Mukherjee in view of her use of Indian themes and Indianness is her refusal to be considered an Indian or even an Asian American writer. However, her novels are consistently inserted and taught in academe in multicultural undergraduate classes as representing the Indian or the Asian American experience and are then read as “authentic” due to the author’s background (248).

This argument makes the situation seem harsh - a favorite representative of an “Indian” is one who refuses to identify as such – but it is valid for only one kind of reading. As demonstrated by the large amount of studies on Mukherjee's fiction, representation is not the only aspect of her work.

From the point of view of romance in *The Middleman and Other Stories*, there are a number of relevant secondary sources on Mukherjee. Pati (1993) notes on the importance of the cultural paradigms of love in the self-fashioning of the Indian immigrants, while Nyman (2010) sees ethnosexual encounters crucial for the identity-formation of the characters. Drake’s (1999) article on immigrant narratives told from the point of view of white protagonists shows how Mukherjee’s stories de-familiarize whiteness. Sant-Wade and Radell’s (1992) analysis of the female immigrant characters and Dlaska’s (1999) study of assimilation, belonging and gender highlight the fact that women have a special role in connection to cultural traditions and norms on intimacy. Koshy (2004) links two of Mukherjee’s novels to a wider tradition of miscegenation narratives in the Asian American context and coins the terms sexual model minority and sexual capital to describe the status of Asian women in America. Li (1998) reads *Jasmine* as a quintessential American romance.

However, previous studies on the short stories tend to focus on the novels or individual stories picked among the two collections. There are some accounts of the collection as a whole, but they are mainly chapters on biographically oriented studies on Mukherjee (Alam, Nakendra, Kumar and Dlaska). Also Pfeil's article approaches the collection in its entirety, but his focus lies on politics and the author. Romance as a set of conventions and the ideological baggage the conventions carry have not been the object of a detailed analysis in relation to *The Middleman and Other Stories*.

2. Ethnosexuality and Romance Narratives

My theoretical framework is a combination of postcolonial and feminist theory. I begin with a definition of ethnicity. The underlying theoretical mindset is that of social constructionism, meaning that ethnicity is approached as a constructed category, not an innate, primordial one. In particular, I am drawing from sources which see ethnic identity as a category constructed in contrast to ethnic others. I start from Edward Said's arguments on Orientalism, moving on to discuss how they have been applied to and extended in the Asian American context. Next, I will refer to the feminist criticisms of Orientalism and paraphrase some key arguments of feminist theory, where a similarly deconstructive turn happened to gender in the 1980s and 1990s. I do all this – refer to the theories which emphasize the non-natural, even performative aspect of identity – in order to explain the theoretical foundation of Nagel, whose concept of ethnosexual frontiers is an important element of the theoretical frame. She argues that ethnicity is often defined with the help of sexuality, which becomes evident in ethnosexual stereotypes and cultural norms on intimacy. Ethnosexual stereotypes will be discussed in connection to Asian Americans and the norms on intimacy I will address are family and the discourse of romantic love.

The second part of the theory chapter moves to discuss romance as a literary genre tied to the discourse of romantic love. I refer to scholars who argue that conventional romances uphold existing ideologies of gender, ethnicity and nation. I discuss two things: cultural differences in the norms on intimacy and romances crossing the ethnosexual borders.

The choice of terminology, whether the analytic category is race, ethnicity, nationalism or culture, reflects the particularities of the cases studied. As part of her explanation for preferring the term "culture", Anne Phillips discusses the implications and histories of each category. The term

"race" has been proven to be a misnomer and a tool exploited in racist practices, with the result that many scholars use it only inside quotation marks to emphasize their distance from theories which saw "races" as real and essential, with intellectual qualities corresponding to "racial" differences (17). However, the term is still used, for instance by such African American scholars as Collins and hooks, who insist that despite being a construction, "race" is still an issue in the American society, affecting people's lives together with class and gender. In Asian American studies, the creation of racial categories comes across in the history of immigration laws: Asians were racialized as others in order to defend American nationality as white against the perceived threat of Asian invasion (Lowe 12). Thus, there is a difference between supposing that races exist as ways of defining people and the acknowledgment that certain groups have been racialized as others in history. One way to differentiate between "race" and "ethnicity" is that generally, "race" is used to refer to visible, physical distinctions, whereas ethnicity can also refer to linguistic, cultural, religious or regional differences (Nagel 110). Since my analysis deals with stories of immigrants from different countries, I am using the term ethnicity in order to include race, culture, religion and nationality as potential bases for ethnic identity. [2]

The material to be analyzed in the chapters that follow includes characters of diverse origins, such as Indian, Iraqi, Filipino, Vietnamese, Sri Lankan, Afghan, Italian, Swedish, Chinese, Nepalese and Trinidad, and a thorough discussion on the socio-historical realities of each ethnic group would be outside the scope of the theoretical framework. However, in the analysis sections, I will pay attention to the references to social histories as they surface in the stories. Since India features in many of the stories, as it has done throughout the author's career, the place of South Asians within the definition of Asian American is worth problematizing.

The place of South Asian Americans under the umbrella term Asian American is not

[2] Although the theoretical framework of this thesis views all the above categories as constructed and non-natural, I have chosen not to use quotation marks at each mention of them for the sake of readability.

straightforward. The earliest works on Asian American studies tended to focus on Far East Asian immigrants; Grewal argues that the category "Asian American" even excluded Indian identity and experience (91). Examples of Asian American studies focusing on Far East Asian Americans include Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature* (1982), a pioneering study calling for the recognition of Asian American social history in literature and Robert Lee's *Orientals* (1999), which explains the formation of Asian American stereotypes contextually. However, both of these studies mention South Asians very briefly, if at all. Lowe points out that historical conditions, especially British colonialism, explain the need to differentiate South Asian Americans from other Asian immigrants (200 n15). Tapping notes on the role of colonialism in Indo-American writing; to begin with, the choice of the English language is a direct consequence of British imperialism. Furthermore, South Asian diasporic writing is often discussed in a postcolonial context, with criticism centering around the two famous authors, Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul (35). Grewal comments on colonialism, as well, arguing that South Asian and Indian-American writing is often approached under the heading "post-colonial" in the academy, but criticizes the concept for its lack of specificity (93). In Grewal's words, it is "necessary to emphasize the specificity of Indian-American identity, while recognizing the importance of coalitional terms such as 'South Asian' and 'Asian-American'" (*ibid*.). Similarly, Lowe notes that the grouping "Asian American" is not a natural and stable category, but a socially constructed entity, a position taken for political reasons. Lowe uses Gayatri Spivak's term "strategic essentialism" to refer to the use of "specific signifiers of racialized ethnic identity, such as 'Asian American,' for the purpose of contesting and disrupting the discourses that exclude Asian Americans" (82). However, strategic essentialism risks being misunderstood, with the essentialisms "reproduced and proliferated by the very apparatuses" questioned. According to Lowe, showing the internal contradictions in the definitions is the key to a strategic essentialism that shows identity as a positioning rather than an essence (82-3).

Recently, the links between South and other Asians have been forged, which shows for instance in the inclusion of South Asian American authors in anthologies. South Asian American writing has also been anthologized on its own, for instance in *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (1993). In terms of literary criticism, there are studies focusing exclusively on South Asian material: for example edited works by Nelson (1992, 1993 and 2000) and studies by Banerjee (2002) and Kuortti (2007), as well as instances of South Asian inclusion in books on Asian American studies. Examples include Cheung's *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (1997) (For a more detailed list, see Grewal 92).

2.1. Ethnosexual Borders and Frontiers

The problems in the definition of Asian American referred to in the previous paragraphs touch on questions of ethnic identity formation. Ethnicity is not an immutable fact, but one that depends on location (Nagel 40). The change in ethnicity can be exemplified by a comment of Bharati Mukherjee: "I am an immigrant, and to achieve that honor, I gave up status that I'll never be able to achieve in the New World. I became this thing new to U.S. history, someone who had never existed before me and hundreds of thousands like me: an Indo-American" ("Imagining Homelands", 220-1). In India, her ethnicity had been based on caste, region and religion (Bengali Brahmin), but in America, it is based on provenance (Indo-American/Asian American). In addition to location, ethnic definition implies power to be articulated and needs interaction to become meaningful. Although a person might consider themself to be of a certain ethnicity, others can categorize them differently (Nagel 42). In Mukherjee's case, her insistence on being an American author instead of Asian American, while being perceived as the latter, can be seen as an example of the conflict between an insider and an outsider definition of ethnicity.[3] Nagel calls ethnicity a

[3]Mukherjee's identification is also a polemic move to resist marginalization and question the whiteness of unhyphenated Americans, as evident in her essay, "The American Dreamer": "Why is it that hyphenation is imposed only on nonwhite Americans? Rejecting hyphenation is my refusal to categorize the cultural landscape into a center and its peripheries; it is to demand that the American nation deliver the promises of its dream and its Constitution to all its citizens equally".

"negotiated social fact" (*ibid*.), which captures the two main points: firstly, a person's ethnicity is a combination of self-definition and the perception by others. Secondly, although ethnicity is an unnatural, mutable construction, it is considered a fact in quotidian life as well as official classifications.

The questions of othering, self-definition and factuality of identity-categories are explored by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Said sees Orientalism as a mode of Western domination of the East. It is a discourse, enabling Westerners "to manage – and even produce – the Orient" (3). Orientalist works are based on a perceived fundamental distinction between East and West, which not only produces the Orient, but also the Occident: "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3). Thus, Orientalism has more to do with the West's definition of self than with an attempt at a genuine understanding of other cultures.

Although its object is a creation, the discourse of Orientalism is "a cultural and a political fact" (13), having long-term effects: Said detects the Orientalist discourse in the academic tradition of studying the Orient and in a large mass of other literary works. He argues that our conventional ways of approaching the Orient might be based more on the tradition of Orientalism than on the cultures themselves. For example, Said criticizes the situation in the American academy during the writing of *Orientalism* by locating four principle dogmas in operation: stressing the absolute differences between East and West, preferring old texts about the Orient to contemporary, direct evidence, treating the Orient as uniform and incapable of defining or representing itself and approaching it with fear or the will to dominate (300-1).

Said's examples are primarily from Europe, the Anglo-French constructions of Arab and Islamic cultures, but his ideas of the West projecting its unwanted qualities onto other cultures do not lose their relevance when applied to other contexts. In America, Asian immigrants have been

defined as others, as argued by Lowe: “the project of imagining the nation as homogeneous requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come as fundamentally 'foreign' origins antipathetic to the modern American society that 'discovers,' 'welcomes,' and 'domesticates' them (5). This othering is visible in the history of immigration and citizenship laws. Li divides American Orientalism into two main periods. The first was the era of “Oriental alienation”, meaning the time when Asians were legally defined as aliens, non-citizens. The second phase “Asian abjection”, starts after the changes in immigration laws in 1943 or 1965. Abjection refers to the fact that although Asian Americans were legally given citizenship rights, they remained foreigners in the common understanding, an opposition strengthened by popular representations, public speeches and so forth. A nation is composed not only of the institutional, official definitions of citizenship, but also the imaginative, cultural definitions. The two definitions – legal and cultural - of Asian American identity were conflicting after the legislative changes: “The law […] began to undermine the dominant cultural argument” (Li 7). Similarly to Said, who argues that the Orientalist discourse has far-reaching effects, Lowe notes that “the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the 'foreigner-within'” (Lowe 5).

So far, I have discussed the constructedness of ethnicity, noting it to be formed in opposition to ethnic “others”. In the following paragraphs, I will refer to scholars who argue for the importance of gender and sexuality in this process. Said makes occasional references to the gender politics of Orientalism, calling it “an exclusively male province”, with women as “creatures of a male power-fantasy” (207). Metaphors of the Orient as feminine are also frequent and tell of the gendered nature of the discourse. Sexuality, on the other hand, is intrinsic in the stereotypes of Orientals as mysterious, sensuous and licentious. *Orientalism* has, however, been the target of feminist criticism and appropriations. For example Anne McClintock (1995) and Ania Loomba (1996) argue for the importance of sexuality in colonial discourse and Mrinalini Sinha’s (2006) study

sheds light to the complexities of gendered and indigenous responses to an Orientalist text. In the following paragraphs, I will introduce some key ideas of feminist theory and refer to scholars who focus on the interconnectedness of ethnicity and sexuality.

In feminist theory, the essentialist binary between male and female became the target of redefinition in the 1980s and 1990s. Judith Butler started to question the correlation between sex and gender, where sex is seen as the biological aspect and gender as its cultural expressions. Her criticism is that despite drawing attention to the varied ways of expressing gender, seeing biological sex as the foundation upholds the frames of "masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality" (180). One way to sum up her argument is to see it in terms of cause and effect; the cultural expressions of gender, such as "words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core… on the surface of the body" (173). The gendered surfaces of bodies appear as effects of the preexisting identity at the core, as ways of performing the internal. But Butler argues vice versa: the signs are not only expressive, but performative, creating what they claim to reveal. Thus, one of Butler's ways to define gender is "a construction that regularly conceals it genesis" (178), which refers to the fact that when repeated enough, the gendered performances are taken for granted, they naturalize the binary system of gender. The normative expressions of gender, such as heterosexual desire, are part of the hegemonic culture (Butler 177). Performing one's gender according to the culturally dominant scripts humanizes individuals, whereas the deviants are punished (178).

The idea of the performativity of gender identity is used by Nagel, who combines the constructionist views on ethnicity and sexuality. In her book, she provides examples to support her claim that ethnic statements often contain sexual subtexts. Nagel is among the many scholars to combine constructionist models of ethnicity and sexuality, but I find her vocabulary of ethnosexual frontiers and borders fitting for an analysis on Mukherjee's stories, because of the border-crossing

nature of the intimate encounters in her fiction. Nagel coins the term ethnosexual frontiers to denote the “territories that lie at the intersections of racial, ethnic, or national boundaries”. They are “surveilled and supervised, patrolled and policed, regulated and restricted”, but “constantly penetrated by individuals forging sexual links with ethnic Others across ethnic borders” (14). The two main methods she gives for the surveillance of the ethnosexual borders are ethnosexual stereotypes and cultural norms on intimacy.

Nagel gives American masculinity as an example of ethnosexual stereotypes; white, middle-class masculinity is treated as the norm, black and Latino men are cast as “hypersexual”, oversexed and excessively masculine, and Asian men as “hyposexual”, undersexed and not masculine enough (10). The stereotypes are discussed in more detail by scholars of American Orientalism, who point out that the stereotypes are formulated in particular historical contexts, with Asians becoming a “site on which the manifold anxieties of the U.S. nation-state have been figured” (Lowe 4). Lee links the construction of Asian men as effeminate to the shift from idealizing male homosocial culture of the frontier to the ideal of the Victorian family in the mid-19th century. The myth of the anti-familial, anti-establishment Western hero was replaced by the “cult of domesticity”, a term given by historians to the ideology of family as a private haven (Lee 86-7). The ideal family was implied to be white and middle-class, with strict division of labor for men and women. Asians served as a point of comparison for the chaste, domestic women and the masculine men in the public sphere. Since sexuality inside the family was supposed to be only for reproduction, public sexuality flourished among white men and prostitutes, many of them Chinese, which created a sexualized image of Asian women (88). Asian men, on the other hand, destabilized the binary construction of gender by doing “women's work” inside white families as servants (89). In order to lessen the disturbance these two groups brought for the binary construction of gender, Asian women were represented as docile commodities and Asian men as effeminate, child-like figures.

Koshy focuses on Asian American women, treating the 1965 Immigration Act and other contemporary social changes as a turning point in the history of Asian American women's sexual agency. She maps the change in the image and status of Asian American women from sexual commodities into possessors or sexual capital. “Sexual capital” means “the aggregate of attributes that index desirability within the field of romantic or marital relationships in a given culture and thereby influence the life-changes and opportunities of an individual” (15). The 1965 Immigration Act reopened the gates to Asian immigrants, while the social boundaries of race and gender were contested through civil right struggles and the women's movement. As a result, Asian American femininity received new meanings. Firstly, the valorization of multiculturalism and the professional status of Asian immigrants created the myth of model minority. Secondly, the women's movement centered on white women and their aspirations for equality between (white) men and women, making the women of other cultures seem more “traditionally” feminine in comparison (16). Thus, the social context of the late 1970s recast and domesticated the sexuality of the Asian American woman. The figure became marriageably feminine, opposing the previous discourse on interracial desire as extramarital. The figure moves from outside marriage within marriage, becoming an emblem of American family values. The term Koshy uses to describe this status is sexual model minority (137).

Sexual model minority is an elaboration on the stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority. Lee argues that although the stereotype is often seen as originating from the 1965 Immigration act, its ideological core lies in the racial milieu of the Cold War. The model minority myth is a narrative of successful Americanization and it served to soothe American fears of communism, internal race struggles and the threat of homosexuality (Lee 146). Asian American success could be presented as evidence of America’s liberalism, the logic being that it was not racism that kept other minorities down in society. Whereas African Americans voiced demands for

economic equity and political rights, Asian Americans were a politically silent minority (151). Importantly, family cohesion was presented as a reason for Asian American success, whereas African American poverty could be explained by the pathology of black families (150).

As noted earlier, ethnosexual stereotypes are one of the ways of policing the ethnosexual frontiers. Another is the norms and regulations on intimacy (Nagel 4). Family is often invoked as a metaphor of the nation (Lee 7, Collins 159, Loomba 217) and it is also an "ideological apparatus" (Lee 7) through which the state manages conflicts in the social structure. The traditional family ideal naturalizes the hierarchies of gender, age and sexuality (Collins 159), which means that the adult father is regarded as the head of the family, and this legitimizes masculinity, heterosexual, married parents and seniority as sources of authority. Within the social unit of family, an individual becomes a member of the community.

Many critics question the strict division between private and public on which the cult of domesticity was based, pointing out that families, the would-be private havens, are regulated by public discourse: the state enters the family via marriage, divorce, adoption and other laws concerning family life (Lee 8). Similar observations are made by Coontz, who argues that "the traditional family" evaporates when examined critically. She shows that Americans who long for a return to family values tend to base their idea of what a traditional family is on fictional representations, combining their favorite aspects of families from different historical periods. The model never existed, but is a nostalgic construction serving as a point of comparison for the contemporary family in decline (8). Douglas reviews criticism on the postmodern American family and finds an underlying argument shared by many who lament the family's decline: "the contemporary family is subverted by an ideology of personal fulfillment" (5). This subversion is tied to social changes, such as the altered role of women who seek work outside the home and discard the identity of a housewife/mother.

Although some lament on the decline of the nuclear family, the rhetoric of traditional family values has not vanished. The rhetoric of the traditional nuclear family as the unit in which family values are maintained became a widely used tool in neo-conservative politics in the 1980s. Appealing to the decline of the family values as a result of the diversification of family arrangements could be used to combat for example gay rights movements, gender equality demands and even anti-poverty campaigns, which encouraged non-normative parenting by giving money to poor, single parent households (McCarthy 11-2). Family values and traditions have also been used as a form of anticolonial resistance: "The family is both used as metaphor for the nation, and as an institution, cast as the antithesis of the nation" (Loomba 217). With these examples, it becomes evident that family plays an important role in the negotiation of national identity.

So far, I have discussed the racialization of Asian Americans as the "foreigners-within" (Lowe 5) in America. Although the legal definition of Asian immigrants as "aliens" no longer persists, the common understanding of Asians as not Americans continues. There are various stereotypes and myths, which, as is the argument found in the scholarship on American Orientalism, have been born in specific historical circumstances to define American nationality as white. Furthermore, the Orientalist stereotypes are gendered, casting Asians as deviants from gender norms. The sexualized nature of ethnic stereotypes, such as the Orientalist constructions of Asians, is an example of the interconnectedness of ethnicity and sexuality. The metaphor Nagel uses for this connection is that ethnic borders are surrounded by ethnosexual frontiers, which are surveilled by maintaining the cultural norms on intimacy and by defending them against ethnic others. I have discussed family as the primary metaphor of the nation, which makes it a crucial institution of the intimate. As was pointed out in the description of the traditional, "ideal" family, the most normative foundation of that institute is a heterosexual, married couple adhering to the binary gender roles. In the following chapter, I will discuss romances as narratives which represent the formation of that couple.

2.2. Romances Across Borders

In this chapter, I will discuss the genre of romance, first in general terms, then with a focus on interethnic romances. Stacey and Pearce characterize romantic discourse as the fictional representation of romantic love (14) and this chapter begins by a definition and criticisms of "the classic romance", and a glimpse at the history of romantic love. As will be argued, romantic love is associated with consent and free will. Furthermore, it is linked to America and the West in many of its fictional representations, as is argued by Sollors, Li, Koshy and Marchetti, among others. I will clarify this point with examples where the American, "free" love is presented in opposition to the Eastern, arranged marriage. In light of the previous section, I approach romantic love and its role in the formation of families as an intimate institution. As Sollors puts it, "the belief in romantic love as a basis for marriage is clearly a cultural norm in America" (114).

Another issue of this chapter is interethnic romance. I distinguish two main facets, which have made popular interethnic romances in America a target of criticism. The romance tales are often assimilationist, vivifying the discourse of romantic love as an impetus for the non-white lover to transform. Interethnic romances also touch on exotic otherness with their closeness to the taboo of interracial desire. The bottom line is that despite their seeming asocialness, romance narratives are frameworks for discussing political issues, such as the place of Asians within the United States (Koshy 20). At the end of the chapter, I will present previous scholarship on romance in Mukherjee's works, linking my work to the studies by Nyman, Koshy, Li and Tikoo.

Stacey and Pearce rightly ask if "the classic romance" ever existed, but point out that romance is known to us through a set of conventions (14). The classic romance could be characterized as a "quest for love", a story of a potential heterosexual union, formed after defeating a series of barriers (15). The moral message delivered by the classic or archetypal romance is that of love triumphing over all obstacles, and more often than not, the main character of romance is female.

Formulaic romance plots involve the Cinderella-story of love overcoming class, the Pamela-formula of a promiscuous heroine finding happiness in marriage and stories of career girls, who learn to value love over work (Cawelti 42). Feminist criticism on romance emphasizes the gender ideology behind the conventions: by positing a woman's greatest happiness in love and marriage, the stories reinforce traditional gender roles of female passivity and male dominance (Stacey and Pearce 13). Romance[4] remains commercially popular despite the transformation taking place in intimate relationships: "Against all the odds (social, political, intellectual) the *desire* for romance has survived" (Stacey and Pearce 11). The writers assume the survival is due to the genre's ability to change: the numerous rewritings and revisions of the generic features keep the romantic discourse alive (12).

Feminist criticisms of romance and romantic love have a long history: first were voiced in the early 20th century, for instance by Alexander Kollontai and Emma Goldman. In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir paved the way for the formulations of the second wave feminists of the 1970s. The result was that love became figured as "the bait in the marriage trap" (Jackson 50), with emphasis on how romance literature "brainwashed" women to their subservient role. Following the developments of feminist theory, perspectives on romance have become more varied. For example, women's reading practices and the pleasure they derive from the romantic love stories has been examined by Janice Radway (1984), whose ideas have been applied in diverse contexts, for instance in analyzing Indian women's responses to American romances (Parameswaran 2002). The possibilities of gay and lesbian rewriting of the inherently heterosexual genre have also been questioned. Since this thesis is concerned with aspects of race, ethnicity and culture in connection to romance, I refer to scholars who address these issues, such as hooks, Marchetti, Li and Koshy. In many cases, race or ethnicity enter the discussion from the point of view of black-white-

[4]By "romance", Stacey and Pearce mean not only popular romantic fiction and films, but also institutions such as love songs, white weddings and Valentine's day (11).

relationships. For example, the “across the tracks” –section of Stacey’s and Pearce’s collection on romance feature four essays on what the writers term “the interracial romance”, which exclusively refers to romances between whites and blacks. Also Weisser’s collection of scholarly essays on women and romance includes inquiries into the whiteness of the genre, again from the black point of view. Although the topic of this thesis is Asian American romance, I will take into account some black feminist criticism. This is not to homogenize every non-white position and gloss over the differences in the construction, history and status of blackness and Asianness, but to point out the relevance of black feminist thought for the development of intersectional criticism on romance.

As noted earlier, romance could be characterized as the fictional representation of romantic love. Sollors argues that romantic love is often associated with America, although the idea of romantic love as a courting system dates back to the chivalric, medieval times of the 12th century (110). The key terms of his argument are descent and consent, the former referring to family ties as inherited, the latter to families formed because of love. Until the eighteenth century, love was not considered a prerequisite for marriage in the Anglo-American world, but rather “the two were considered incompatible” (111). In the eighteenth century, love became the basis for the white, middleclass, Anglo-American marriage (Sollors 111, Giddens 40). Romantic love sanctioned sex inside marriage: the couple no longer had to be innocent, if they had the emotional bond of love (Giddens 38). Furthermore, Sollors argues: “American allegiance, the very concept of citizenship developed in the revolutionary period, was — like love — based on consent, not on descent, which further blended the rhetoric of America with the language of love and the concept of romantic love with American identity” (112).

The discourse on romantic love has mystical elements in it: often, love is described with the metaphor of falling and being “in love” is seen as different from other forms of love, “a dramatic, deeply felt inner transformation” (Jackson 53). Jackson sees fundamental contradictions between

the passionate love we fall in and the long-term, affectionate love thought to follow the fall. Being "in love" means emotional turmoil, and the excitement of love derives from the obstacles on its way. The long-term relationship supposedly following the initial period of insecurity routinizes the passion and it is before this turn where the romantic narratives end (53-4). Giddens notes that passionate love is nowhere considered a basis for marriage, and because of its tendency to uproot the individuals from their social duties, it is often trajectory to it. Thus, romantic love has potentially disturbing qualities because of its linkage to the uprooting, passionate love, but other social changes of the nineteenth century held the subversion back (Giddens 46). As argued earlier, the mid-nineteenth century also saw the growing importance given to the nuclear family, and romantic love inserted itself into the rising cult of domesticity.

Gupta's article on ethnographic interviews among South Asian Americans exemplifies the cultural specificity of romantic love and its link to marriage. In India, there is a long tradition of arranging marriages. The parents screen the potential candidates for family background, class, religion, region and caste compatibility and more recently, education (Gupta 120). The absence of self-selection of partner enables the prohibiting male-female contact among the young. This system is in contrast to the mainstream American model which encourages dating and contact. Among the most conflicting institutions of the intimate are dating and divorce, both of which are accepted in the American mainstream culture but prohibited or otherwise problematic in the Indian communities. Despite starting from a setting where the two generations face conflict because of cultural difference generated by different relation to the mainstream culture, Gupta's article highlights the resources the immigrants have for negotiating between the models. Gupta also notices the constructedness of the tradition as it is upheld by the parents: they are "existing in a 'time capsule'" (122), which means that the values the advocate are those of the India of their childhood. This perceived conflict between cultural norms is an example of their importance for

ethnic identity. [5]

Lowe notes that intergenerational conflict is a typical theme read into Asian American cultural expressions (art, literature, films). This is exemplified by narratives of cultural conflict between first-generation immigrant parents and their American-born children.[6] Lowe argues that positioning the two cultures - that of the original motherland and the new homeland – as mutually incompatible in these narratives contributes to the imperial, orientalist logic: "orientalism seeks to consolidate the coherence of the West as subject precisely through the representation of "oriental" objects as homogenous, fixed" (67). The vertical model of cultural variation makes cultures seem like coherent entities which can be passed on from one generation to another (64). Another criticism is that reading Asian American texts as privatized, generational conflicts obscures the differences in the racialization of Asians (67). Instead, Lowe emphasizes the heterogeneity, hybridity and multiplicity[7] of "Asian American culture", meaning that the umbrella term covers variation in gender, class, religion, national origin, sexuality and ethnicity (*ibid*.). Thus, variation exists not only vertically, between the generations, but also horizontally, among outwardly similar group-members.

So far, I have discussed romantic love as a cultural norm in America and as an integral part of romantic literature. I have also introduced the system of arranged marriage, which dismisses the rhetoric of romantic love as the basis of marriage, and examined the opposition built between the two systems. In the following paragraphs, I will approach cultural differences in intimate space from the point of view of interethnic romances. First, I will refer to interethnic romances which have received a mythic status is America, arguing that these narratives employ the rhetoric of romantic love as the impetus for the non-white character's assimilation. Secondly, I will approach

[5]Koshy's analysis on Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975) touches on this opposition between Indian, arranged marriage and American love as consent.

[6]Lowe makes reference to Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) and ways of reading Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975) and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989).

[7]Heterogeneity refers to the differences among Asian Americans, hybridity to the formation of cultural practices and multiplicity to the several axis of power which locate the subjects (67).

interethnic romance from the point of view of interracial desire and the taboos associated with it.

There are salient myths of interethnic romance in American culture. Lee, among others, notes that the legend of Pocahontas has assumed the status of a myth or national origins during its life span of three centuries[8]. The Pocahontas narrative is a love story between a native princess and a white hero who conquers her land. Her love for the white man makes her realize the superiority of Christianity and transforms her into a "true woman", a candidate for mothering the new nation (Lee 171). The more tragic variant of the interethnic romance is the Madame Butterfly -story.[9] Butterfly stories are romances between a white man and a non-white woman (Long's butterfly, Cho-Cho San, is Japanese). The narratives portray the distant culture of the butterfly as a site where the moral norms of the white man's homeland can be abandoned. They touch on the double standard of sexual conduct, enabling the Western man to enjoy his sexual license overseas. The narrative is also a reference to the discourse of miscegenation between white men and Asian women, which has its roots in extraterritorial and illicit relationships (Koshy 13). However, Cho-Cho-San is inserted into the nation through her love for the white hero and through the child she gives birth to. She falls in love with the man, in Marchetti's words, she embraces "the Western religion of love" with such a passion that it ultimately destroys her (84). The butterfly waits for the hero, while he returns home and many re-tellings of the tale feast on her passiveness and feminine endurance in the prolonged waiting scene (Marchetti 87). Her tragedy is that the man marries another, a white woman. At the end, the white couple adopts the child and the butterfly is sacrificed. The butterfly represents the passion of romantic love, while the white wife embodies the safe, socially sanctioned marriage (Marchetti 87). Both of these narratives cast the non-white women as mothers of the new nation, but it is implied that whiteness will remain the norm: the

[8] The Pocahontas-legend is founded on a real, native American woman, but her story has become well-known and altered in a series of fictional renderings, the latest from 2005 (*The New World* by Terrence Malick).

[9]The name derives from John Luther Long's short story "Madame Butterfly" (1898), which was based on Pierre Loti's travelogue *Madame Chrysanthemum* (1887), adapted into a play and later, made famous by a number of filmations and the opera by Giacomo Puccini (1904-6) (Marchetti 80-81).

"ethnic" heroines of the stories assimilate or die, they change those aspects of themselves that would disturb the American mainstream. Pocahontas and Madame Butterfly both exhibit a selfless, sacrificial love for their brave heroes, and willingness to abandon their old communities for them.

Pocahontas and Madame Butterfly are among the many narrative patterns for treating the theme of miscegenation in, for instance, Hollywood cinema. Starting with the early 20th century films, the fear of Asians has often been voiced as the fear of sexual contact between the "races". These popular fantasies involve lascivious, Asian women seducing white men but also villainous, Asian men threatening pure, white women and metaphorically, the Western culture (Marchetti 3). Marchetti finds several recurring conventions, and I will refer to them in the analysis section at appropriate points. Her analysis shows that Hollywood tends to uphold racial divisions and the Orientalist constructions of Asians as America's others in order to maintain the existing (white and male) hegemony (8).

In reality, Asian sexuality was strictly guarded and interracial liaisons were sanctioned during the time the earliest popular representations were produced. The first prohibitions on miscegenation in the United States (dating back to 1661) were directed at white-black relationships, and they were aimed at safeguarding the boundary between slave and free. On the other hand, intermarriages between whites and Native Americans or Hispanics were socially more accepted in the period of white settlement. Sometimes, they were even encouraged, for they eased the settlement, and the offspring of these unions could claim a white identity (Koshy 4-5). Immigration laws had shaped the Asian American community to consist mainly of male workers and the anti-miscegenation laws directed at Asians tried to control the primarily male labor force. White-Asian intermarriage was criminalized in the early 20th century and the prohibition culminated in the Expatriation Act of 1907, which denaturalized white women if they married foreigners (Koshy 7). The anti-miscegenation laws were particularly repressive for Asian

Americans, who could not form intraracial families, either. The skewed gender-ratio of the communities resulted in forced bachelorhood, oppositions to the laws, or intermarriages among different non-white groups (7-10).

While shaping the Asian American community, the laws also ended up producing a discourse on interracial desire and romance. The discourse was developed further by romance literature on white-Asian relationships, a genre which was highly popular compared to the restricted number of real-life relationships.[10] Often, the romance narratives have been studied for their Orientalist tropes and stereotypical representations of Asians, but Koshy emphasizes the cultural work they perform: an interracial romance plot offers a site for discussing tense political issues and symbolically resolving questions concerning the American nationality and the place of Asians in it. In addition to racial issues, the interracial romance narratives brought forth questions of class and gender (19-20). "Fundamentally, these narratives marshaled an emotional logic to test the political logic of social boundaries" (20). What this means is that by depicting love between individuals of different races, the narratives imaginarily stepped over the social boundaries and offered sentimental positions of sympathy for the readers through "universal" ideals like love. Furthermore, in the Western context, love and sexual desire are linked to autonomy, choice and freedom and their uses as narrative tropes offered a framework for discussing national membership on a seemingly transpolitical level of emotions (21-2).

The political implications of interracial desire, of transgressing the racial border on the sexual terrain, are discussed by hooks, who argues that in contemporary America, Otherness has been commodified and ethnicity become spice to "liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21). She describes a phenomenon called "shopping for sexual partners", a practice where people collect sexual partners basing their choice on the other's skin color or ethnicity. The critique

[10]Marchetti finds several reasons for Hollywood's fascination with taboo sexualities, but notes that white-Asian pairings have been surprisingly popular compared to the size of the Asian population in the United States. In fact, Marchetti argues that Asians were used as signifiers of racial otherness in order to avoid the more immediate racial tensions between whites and blacks, Native Americans or Hispanics (5-6).

is that by desiring the racial/ethnic Other and openly discussing their desire for "colored girls" (24), white boys believe they have moved past racism, into an era of tolerance. However, living in a society which has not moved past racism means being linked to "collective white racist domination" but being unable to see it (*ibid*.). A willingness to seek contact with the Other without the will to dominate seems progressive compared to the historical facts of slavery and colonial encounters. However, desiring somebody solely on the basis of their Otherness, the boys turn the encounter into a transformative act for themselves; they dare and transgress the racial boundary on the sexual terrain (24-5). Moreover, the objectification of the perceived Other's body as a sexual commodity further enhances the historical discourse on primitivity, "the fantasy of Otherness" (27).

Conclusively, the genre of romance is the fictional representation of the ideal of romantic love, which is a cultural norm, associated with marriage and the white, middleclass family in West. However, ethnic others have featured prominently in popular romances, as evident in romances which begin with a travel to a distant land and in interethnic romances. Popular romances were discussed as narratives which seem innocent, but actually offer possibilities to transmit values, enforce prevailing notions of gender, race and national belonging. Marchetti is among the scholars who make an explicit connection between Orientalism and romances: "They create a mythic image of Asia that empowers the West and rationalizes Euroamerican authority over the Asian other" (6).

Mukherjee's use of conventions and themes from the genre of romance has been noticed by a number of scholars, but more thorough analyses of the stories are few. Tikoo criticizes Mukherjee's "mechanic" use of the romance device: the characters fall in love "without first developing an appropriate emotional or sentimental matrix out of which the desire for a matrimonial or love-relationship might genuinely result" (141). He even argues that the overtly sexual nature of the stories leans "towards the pornographic" (143).

Interestingly, Tikoo seems to oppose especially the promiscuous behavior of Mukherjee's female characters when he notes that "In many stories of Bharati Mukherjee, the protagonists are women who are married or divorced and have an inclination to form relationships which terminate in sexual misadventure" (142) Furthermore, he sees their behavior as leading to trouble on the level of society:

> This [frequency of casual sex] could give serious readers an impression that in the story-world created by the writer, the moral norms do not exist at all, or that sexual promiscuity is a socially recognized fact. The world then appears so ordained as to give both man and woman equal dignity and equal freedom. It would then appear to be a world in which neither of them is seriously restrained or bound by obligations towards the children or to the collective family life. (143)

Tikoo notes the role the romantic encounters play for the characters' ethnic identities: the immigrant women transform and adopt ways of hegemonic Americanness through the encounters. Tikoo's article is built on a logic of stressing the differences between non-Western and Western cultures and he sees Mukherjee's stories as clearly resulting in Americanization, not "mongrelization" as the author has argued in her interviews. Another important logic behind his argument is that he treats women questioning their roles and family duties as something to be discouraged because it leads to a world void of morality.

Li offers a similarly critical, but theoretically more solid reading of romance in the novel *Jasmine*. He sees Jasmine as an "ardent" example of American romance. Jasmine finds her mature identity through her encounters with various men. Her transformations happen because of love, which is a common narrative trait in romances (Li 97, Stacey and Pearce 17). Li analyzes *Jasmine* as part of an Asian American literary strategy of "claiming America", of appropriating its myths and demanding inclusion. He shares the view of many critics, who note that the narrative of Jasmine, a rural village girl from Punjab turning into Jane, the emancipated wife of a liberal university professor, is an "incredible saga" (92). Li concludes that the incredibility of Jasmine's

story with its out-of-character nature of the cultural references she makes tells of the abject nature of Asian Americans: in theory, Mukherjee's *Jasmine* would be a quintessential American romance, but it is unrealistic when performed by an Indian immigrant not sharing the author's privilege.

Koshy reads two of Mukherjee's novels, *Jasmine* and *Wife* (1975), with attention to the role of romance for the female protagonist. The stories cast "interracial heterosexuality as a mode of empowerment" for the Indian women (149). The Indian women displace the white women, especially Jasmine in her many incarnations. Koshy detects a curious logic in the act of displacement: Jasmine pleases the men in order to gain independence and autonomy. Thus, her actions would be antithetical to a feminist rhetoric, yet they result in the criteria established by it. Eventually, she outperforms the white, American feminists by possessing the desired qualities of control, career and money (147).

Nyman, on the other hand, contrasts Mukherjee's romances to the earlier immigrant narratives and sees a shift from idolizing hegemonic Americanness to eroticising a hybrid, fluid and autonomous female identity. In romance narratives, the transformation of the individual is typically rewarded with a fixed, socially recognized identity of a wife or a husband. In immigrant narratives, the romance device has been used for writing an American identity for the immigrant characters and Nyman notes this to be a convention particularly among early 20th century female writers like Ann R. Shapiro, Edith Maude Eaton, Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska (153). As noted, there are critics who see the transformation of Mukherjee's characters as assimilation into hegemonic Americanness, but also others who see the change as a more empowering one. In either case, the significant transformation often happens "in the context of ethnosexuality" (Nyman 158). Nyman sees Mukherjee's narratives as resisting the scripts of nationhood because they celebrate female autonomy instead of rewarding the heroines with a fixed identity of a wife.

I identified my research question as: how does Mukherjee use the conventions of romance to

explore questions of ethnicity, national belonging and sexuality. Is romance a way to write an American identity for the immigrant characters? And, how are the cultural norms on intimacy questioned in romance narratives told by immigrants? As many of the sources argue, it is relevant to take into account the social histories referred to in literature, rather than read the stories as isolated, private narratives. Thus, in the analysis section, I will discuss if and how Mukherjee addresses the historical contexts and specificities of her characters. Are her stories of romantic or sexual encounters generic, other-worldly romances, or do they contain references to the historical and social contexts leading to ethnic differentiation? I will also pay attention to Mukherjee's rewriting of ethnosexual stereotypes, the direct references to romantic conventions she makes and the way this combines into a rewriting of a traditional understanding of family.

3. Interethnic Relationships

There are five stories in *The Middleman and Other Stories* dealing with intimate relationships between white Americans and Asian Americans. First, I will analyze three stories addressing interethnic romances in America and the second sub-chapter looks at two stories narrated by Vietnam War veterans. The stories differ greatly in terms of their narrative points of view. Four out of five are told in the first person and thus, the reader is introduced to only one side of the events. The variety of limited perspectives on interethnic relationships is one of the notable features of this collection and by grouping these voices together, the versatility inside the category of Asian American becomes evident.

3.1. Interethnic Couples in America

I begin my analysis with three stories that focus on an interethnic romance in America; "Jasmine", "Fighting for the Rebound" and "Orbiting". After presenting an outline of the stories and describing the progress of the romantic relationships in each, I will draw parallels and conclusions. In each story, the romance crosses cultural and ethnic borders, it happens between an immigrant or refugee character and a settled American. The analysis views the stories as explorations into different facets of interethnic romances. The immigrant characters of the stories – Jasmine, Blanquita and Roashan – come from Trinidad, the Philippines and Afghanistan, respectively. I define the characters as Asian American, which is based on geography in the case of Philippines and Afghanistan and on a more fluid sense of identity regarding the Trinidad-Indian Jasmine.

Chua makes references to several motifs or scenes from *The Middleman and Other Stories* which are repeated in the critically controversial novel *Jasmine* (1989). The whole novel can be seen as an elaboration on the short story "Jasmine", whose protagonist "wouldn't die from the author's imagination, demanding to be reincarnated in a lengthier genre" (Chua 57). Knippling

notes on the reincarnation with criticism: Jasmine of the short story is from Trinidad, a product of Indian diaspora, whereas the Jasmine of the novel is from India, a move which the critic sees as homogenizing cultural differences (144). Mukherjee has commented on the meaning of Trinidad in her interviews: “I wanted that kind of fluid society of the Americas, where your heritage has been so changed and distorted that being Indian doesn’t mean what it means to me” (quoted in Dlaska 110). Furthermore, Trinidad is V.S. Naipaul’s birthplace, and by making him share it with Jasmine, Mukherjee wanted to resist his claim of “tragedy being geographical”: the ambitious protagonist challenges the notion of geography as destiny (Dlaska 110, Alam 90).

The short story is told by a third-person narrator, focusing on an illegal immigrant from Trinidad finding her new life in Detroit. Jasmine arrives through Canada, hidden inside a mattress van. First, she lives with and works for the Daboos, Trinidad Indians who own a motel and run a marriage service between illegal and legal immigrants. The importance of marriage is immediately noted by Jasmine: “The smartest move she could make would be to put down a payment on a husband” (128). For this heroine, marriage is not a culmination of a romance, but a practical way to secure her position in the new country.

The description of Jasmine’s start in America is marked by her observations on her surroundings, her “learning about Detroit, every side of it” (129). Her job is to check credit card validity and verify other information given by the Daboo’s clients, and reading the profiles makes her aware of the desirable attributes in the marriage market: “Ann Arbor was a magic word. A boy goes to Ann Arbor and gets an education, and all the barriers come crashing down. So Ann Arbor was the place to be” (129). In addition to giving her a goal, the matrimonial announcements make her a critical listener to the things men say to her and an interpreter of the motivation behind their talk. Her practical attitude to love and intimacy becomes evident in other comments throughout the story: she thinks she would not have been offered the loan for immigration if she was not pretty

enough and refers to the loan-approval process as “some damn uncomfortable times with the assistant manager” (135). At the end of the story, while having sex with her new boss, Bill Moffitt, her mood is changing: “She’d never felt this good on the island where men did this all the time, and girls went with it always for favors” (138).

Before the love-making scene, Jasmine has moved from the Daboos and left the community of Trinidadians to work as a “mother’s helper” (131) for a white American family. The mother, Lara, works as a performance artist and is often away on road-trips, while the father stays home. Bill Moffitt is a professor at Ann Arbor, linking Jasmine to the place she wants to belong to. Bill also cooks on Sundays, which makes Jasmine comment on the gender roles inside the family: “Things were topsy-turvy in the Moffitt house. […] But even her Daddy, who’d never poured himself a cup of tea, wouldn’t put Bill down as a woman” (133). Towards the end of the story, Lara goes for a long tour, reporting from the road a couple of times a week. Meanwhile, Jasmine, Bill and Muffie become “a family, almost” (136). Their family –like existence culminates in the love-making scene, which makes Jasmine reflective: “She was thinking this as they made love on the Turkish carpet in front of the fire: she was a bright, pretty girl with no visa, no papers, and no birth certificate. No nothing other than what she wanted to invent and tell. She was a girl rushing wildly into the future” (138).

“Jasmine” has been interpreted as a story of exploitation, with Jasmine oblivious to the Bill taking advantage of her powerless status (Sant-Wade and Radell 15). Instead of victimizing Jasmine, another way to read the interethnic romance is to see it from her perspective: she seems to have a crush on Bill and during the seduction, is more composed than him: “He nearly flung his socks and Adidas into the fire” (138). Mukherjee even gives her the final word of the dialogue. Bill says: “’You’re really something, flower of Trinidad.’ ‘Flower of Ann Arbor,‘ she said, ‘not Trinidad’” (138). Alam cites Mukherjee’s interviews and her comments on the ending of

"Jasmine". In opposition to the reading of Jasmine's and Bill's sexual encounter as an exploitation of a vulnerable young girl, she has insisted that "Jasmine is a woman who knows the power, is discovering the power of sexuality" (Alam 89). Also Dlaska notes that the ending can be empowering for Jasmine: "Making love to the white professor is paramount to replacing the wife, whose status and freedom she admires so much" (112).

The political edge of the ending is targeted at Lara, whose professionalism and feminism are "built on the backs of underemployed Caribbean or Hispanic au-pair girls" (Alam 90). Both in the everyday life and intimate space, Jasmine replaces Lara as the woman in the house while she is working, calling occasionally and reporting on her professional advancements. In this respect, the story is an example of an immigrant woman offering a sexually appealing, more traditionally feminine alternative to the emancipated, work-oriented white woman. In Koshy's terms, Jasmine possesses sexual capital in the world of the story. The discourse of the sexual model minority implies "a perfect match between family-centrism and sex-appeal" (Koshy 137) and Jasmine embodies this quite literally. However, the family she forms with Bill and Muffie is undercut by the word "almost" (136). As Koshy notes, the Asian American woman cannot fully displace the white woman, because of the racial privilege whiteness entails (137). However, the irony of making Jasmine, the more stereotypically feminine embodiment of American family values and gender norms, an underpaid, undocumented immigrant, is striking.

Mukherjee does not exclude the downside of Jasmine's adventure. As Dlaska observes, she "presents it with a good deal of irony" (111). Jasmine does not seem to mind being objectified as a "flower" by Bill, nor does she criticize her condition and the way the Moffitts exploit her as cheap labor force. On the contrary, she seems to celebrate her new life: "'Man!', she'd exclaim as she vacuumed […]. 'In this country Jesus givin out good luck only!'" (134). Also Sant-Wade and Radell notice on the irony of Jasmine's embrace of her role in the liberal family.

Jasmine embraces an ideal Jackson connects to romantic love and romantic heroines in the West: individualism (51). “Being her own person” is a phrase first used by Lara, and later adopted by Jasmine as she thinks of her family at Christmas: “She loved them, but she’d become her own person” (135). Jasmine is also her own person when choosing the music to dance to with Bill, right before the final act of substituting Lara: “’I want *you* to pick,’ he said. ‘You are your own person now.’” (137). Dlaska argues that Jasmine’s willingness to copy Lara is due to the fact that for the time being, the Moffitts represent America for her and America is where she is determined to belong to (111). The important element in Dlaska’s interpretation is to read “Jasmine” as a transformation in process: being exploited and underpaid by the white liberal family is a step forward from working for the Daboos with no pay at all (112). Furthermore, Jasmine is young, which can also explain her rather naive embrace of the American dream (113). To conclude, Jasmine uses her sexual capital to empower herself, trying to benefit from Bill's desire for her. She seeks access to America through the institution of family, embodying the traditional, desirable attributes of femininity. However, Mukherjee shows that myth as being founded on the exploitative situation she is in and leaves the heroine without a romantic closure. Instead, the ending suggests a fictional, performative understanding of identity: “she was ...[n]o nothing other than what she wanted to invent and tell. She was a girl rushing wildly into the future” (138).

The illegal, poor but ambitious Jasmine stands in sharp contrast to the pampered aristocrat heroine in “Fighting for the Rebound”. The story is set in the 1980s Atlanta, in a world of short-term romances. It is told from the point of view of Griff, “a low-level money manager, a solid, decent guy” with “thinning, sandy hair” (80). The narrator repeatedly compares his latest conquest, Blanquita, to his exes. The plot of the story is quickly told; the couple has an argument over the nature of their relationship at the narrator’s apartment. The fight ends with Blanquita leaving Griff to be with his boss, “the Chief”. While Blanquita is at the Chief’s cabin, Griff goes to the mall in

search of a rebound. He meets Maura, but their “relaxed fun and zero sentiment” (92) is haunted by his thoughts of Blanquita. In the final scene, hysterical Blanquita calls Griff from a diner after being maltreated by the Chief. Griff rushes to rescue her, which leaves the art-framer Maura conclude: “I don’t want to know […] I don’t want to start anything complicated” (94).

Maura’s last words could be Griff’s motto, especially before he became involved with Blanquita. It becomes evident that Griff has had several women, each leaving some marks but not changing him. In his comparisons between Blanquita and the others, Griff fluently shifts from the language of sex and romance into the world of finance: “she isn't a looker in the blondhair-smalltits-greatlegs way that Wendi was. Or Emilou, for that matter. But beautiful is how she makes me feel. Wendi was slow-growth. Emilou was strictly Chapter Eleven” (81). To use hooks' phrase he shops for sexual partners (24). The quotation reveals another difference in the way Griff approaches Blanquita compared to his previous, white women: she is not just beautiful, but makes him feel so, too.

The story discusses Griff's attempts to objectify Blanquita in the mundane context of watching the TV, using metaphors derived from another daily intake: food. The story's first paragraph sets the tone of the American language, while introducing the topics mentioned above:

> I'm in bed watching the Vanilla Gorilla stick it to the Abilene Christians on some really obscure cable channel when Blanquita comes through the door wearing lavender sweats, and over them a frilly see-through apron. It's a November Thursday, a chilly fifty-three, but she's hibachiing butterfly lamb on the balcony. (79)

Griff's ordinary, everyday life is disturbed by the presence of Blanquita, who brings markers of difference into his world by using a hibachi on his balcony and distracting his attention off the screen with her looks and outfit, a rather unusual combination of sweats and a French maid's apron.

While Griff tries to keep on watching the TV, Blanquita starts a conversation on their

relationship: "'Face it, Griff,' Blanquita says, wielding the barbeque fork the way empresses wield scepters. 'Face what?' 'That's what I mean,' she says. You're so insensitive, it's awesome'" (79). Griff tries to rescue the situation by calling her beautiful, but Blanquita wants something beyond appearances: "You're a racist, patronizing jerk if you think I'm beautiful. I'm just different, that's all" (81). She goes on to accuse Griff of not loving her and of keeping her "in limbo" (84). Their dialogue is told from Griff's point of view and colored by his unfocused thoughts which wander on Blanquita's looks, his exes, his work and TV-spectacles.

It becomes evident in the story that sex and Blanquita's looks are important for Griff:

> "Did you ever try out as a cheerleader?" I ask. I can sense the imminence of terrific times. Blanquita the Beautiful watches the kids on the screen with gratifying intensity. Then she thrusts a hesitant leg in the air. It's the fault of the French maid's apron that she's wearing over her baggy sweats; my saucy exotic's turned a schoolgirl routine into something alien and absurd. (86)

Griff tries to objectify Blanquita, make her fit into a familiar sexual stereotype, but she makes it alien and absurd. Griff is not the only man who desires Blanquita: "The woman of many men's dreams doesn't wrench herself free from my kissing hold. I don't deserve her" (88).

Griff cherishes the sexual side of their affair, but Blanquita seems to want emotional commitment. She draws parallels between their relationship and world politics by calling all Americans "emotional cripples", who do not care how much they hurt the world. Griff's view on international relations is that "It's okay for a nation of pioneers to bully the rest of the world as long as the cause is just" (85). Many critics have noticed the parallel, treating the characters as representatives of the emotional trends in their cultures. For example Dlaska argues that Griff's indifference represents "a trend in western societies to avoid the conflict of interpersonal confrontation" and symbolizes "western indifference towards intercultural exchanges", whereas Blanquita's search for love speaks of her desire to belong (119). Similar reading is suggested by Kumar, who thinks Blanquita's unhappiness is typical of an Eastern woman who does not know

how to deal with the "soulless" and overtly sexual American culture where marriage has lost its foothold (97). The polarization of their expectations along the axis of culture is one way to read the story, but it is not in keeping with the theoretical framework of this thesis which sees culture as more problematic and heterogeneous. Furthermore, an important facet of the story is obscured in a reading focusing on the private romance as an indicator of culture: the social milieu outside the walls of Griff's apartment.

Regardless of what one sees as the cause (culture, gender, individual preference), the lovers seem to want different things from the relationship. The conflict culminates in Blanquita's decision to leave Griff and go camping with his boss. Before she leaves, Griff warns her: "You're not going to the Chief's cabin in the north woods, period. He's Jack the Ripper" (90). Blanquita expresses her awareness of the stereotypes before she ignores Griff's warnings and leaves him for the Chief: "You think I'm just a dumb, naive foreigner you have to protect, right?" (90). Griff's warnings turn out to be reasonable. When she calls him from the diner at night, Blanquita has noticed that "The Chief's into games. The Chief doesn't love her" (94).

Dlaska reads the ending of the story as both Griff and Blanquita "left as victims of insufficient emotional courage and flexibility" (118). Griff is obsessive of his freedom from emotional commitment, whereas Blanquita attempts to connect desperately (Dlaska 119). Also Alam lists Griff among the white Americans who are unwilling to transform and respond to the demands of the new Americans. According to Alam, Griff does not resist change actively, but is too superficial and self-centered to commit to a lasting relationship (93). Furthermore, the story's ending leaves it unclear whether Griff will abandon his old, noncommittal ways and "respond to Blanquita's cry for love" (94).

Griff contemplates on the difference between exotic and foreign with a reference to the Chief:

> The Chief, a jowly fifty-five, is rumored to enjoy exotic tastes. But Christ, there's a difference between exotic and *foreign*, isn't there? Exotic means you know how to use your

> foreignness, or you make yourself a little foreign in order to appear exotic. Real foreign is a little scary, believe me. (83)

The move of making one's self appear a little exotic is what Koshy calls "self-Orientalizing eroticism" (133), empowerment achieved by performing the ethnosexual stereotype. The framework Koshy uses to interpret the Mukherjee's novels involves not stopping at the seeming celebration of the heroine's Americanization, but paying attention to the repressed narrative revealing the costs of assimilation. The contradictions arising from such a reading make it possible to approach the story as a narrative of passing, not assimilation. Passing, in this context, means "acting out the dominant scripts of exotic otherness as an avenue to the American Dream" rather than acting or looking white (*ibid*.). As opposed to critics who see Mukherjee's work as hiding the psychological costs of assimilation, Koshy argues that the damage surfaces as seemingly random violence. Similarly, in "Fighting for the Rebound" Blanquita acts the role of a pampered upper class girl and tries to benefit from the men's desire for her. Blanquita's awareness of the roles available for her are evidenced by Griff's suspicions of her sincerity:

> It's hard to know where she learns her lines. They're all so tragically sincere. Maybe they go back to the instant-marriage emporiums in Manila. Or the magazines she reads. Or a series of married, misunderstood men that she must have introduced to emotional chaos. […] Why do I think she's said it all before? Why do I hear 'sailor' instead of my name? (82)

However, the story is not a simple celebration of Blanquita's successful use of her sexual capital: she is exploited by the Chief, her self-Orientalizing eroticism does not lead to the American Dream, but to an Amoco diner from where Griff rescues her.

Griff seems to imply Blanquita is not exotic but "real foreign", something scary and tries to tone her foreignness down by closing his eyes from her past:

> The less I know about growing up in Manila, rich or any other way, the less foreign she feels. Dear old redneck Atlanta is a thing of the past, no need to feel foreign here. Just wheel your shopping cart through aisles of bok choy and twenty kinds of Jamaican spices at the Farmer's Market, and you'll see that the US of A is still a pioneer country. (81)

Griff attempts to assimilate Blanquita, comparing intercultural exchange to the presence of new spices at the Farmer's Market. But, as evident from the references to Blanquita's family Griff lets on, he does know about growing up in Manila. And his comments reveal that it is foreign, not exotic what he feels his girlfriend to be, although he might want otherwise. Furthermore, I would argue that she has a permanent effect on Griff. There are two passages where Griff briefly refers to himself as from the outside. First, when pleading Blanquita not to leave him: "'I don't want you to go,' I say. I'm not myself. I'm a romantic in red suspenders" (84) and at the end, before choosing to respond to Blanquita's call: "I hear my voice, loud and insistent. 'Amoco?' I'm shouting." (94).

The research question was whether the story provides a socially sanctioned identity for the immigrant heroine with the conventions of romance: "Fighting for the Rebound" does not end with "happily ever after", although there are references to Griff as Blanquita's savior. By revealing the thoughts of the "white knight" as objectifying and stemming from the Orientalist stereotype of Asian women as docile and sexually available de-mystifies his heroic status. Moreover, Blanquita is not an adaptable Eastern woman who turns out to be a domestic angel, but an outspoken, pampered aristocrat who cannot cook, but burns their dinner, leaving Griff to tidy up.

Blanquita expresses her desire for love and stability. Thus, in that sense the story resembles a conventional romance, positing the heroine's greatest happiness in love and marriage. Moreover, Griff has characteristics of an anti-establishment romantic hero who is tamed to fit a socially sanctioned role of a monogamous partner. These are the aspects which support the reading of the story as upholding prevailing hegemonies of gender and ethnicity.

As discussed in the theoretical section, generic romances are often criticized for their lack of attention to social issues, for instance by Li: "The apparent asocialness of the 'romance' has thus come to confirm, through an explicit denial of its connection to society and politics, both an essential American freedom of individual autonomy and a political system that makes the freedom

possible" (95). A love story discussing interethnic romance only as a privatized, domestic drama fails to take into account the social context producing the inequalities and patterns affecting the relationship. In "Fighting for the Rebound" there are references to the world outside the walls of Griff's apartment. Indeed, the parallels Blanquita draws between their relationship and international relations are a recurring detail coming across in the criticisms of the story. As regards revealing the public immigrant histories as relevant contexts for understanding the private, the story does contain references to the fate and economic demotion of Blanquita's family after migration: her father used to be a "big-shot publisher tight with the Marcos crew" but now works at a liquor store in California, living "like a peon" (80). "Fighting for the Rebound" tells the asocial storyline of a romance among references to U.S. colonization and its aftermaths in the Philippines.

"Orbiting" is another story of interethnic romance told by a white protagonist, but this time, the woman is white and the man is a refugee from Afghanistan. The story is set on Thanksgiving and the narrator, Rindy deMarco, introduces her new lover, Ro, to her family. The family consists of the parents, Rindy's sister Cindi, her husband Brent and Brent's daughter Franny.

The variety of characters emphasizes the relativity of the definition of foreign and the way ethnic diversity is already present in the "white" American family when examined in more detail. It is revealed that the main couple is not the only interethnic one, but other liaisons have been formed across boundaries considered significant. The narrator, Rindy, is a second-generation Italian-American. Her father was born in America and his life's adventure was to marry a Calabrian peasant. There is a sense of irony in describing a man proudly identifying as an Italian marrying an Italian woman as adventure: "He made it sound as though Mom was Korean or something, and their marriage was a kind of taming of the West, and that everything about her could be explained as a cultural deficiency" (59). Also Cindi has crossed one border by marrying Brent: "Cindi didn't

marry a Catholic, so he [the father] has no right to be upset about Ro, about us" (69). Cindi's husband is the son of an Amish farmer: "Brent, in spite of the obvious hairpiece and the gold chain, is a rebel. He was born Schwartzendruber, but changed his name to Schwartz. Now no one believes the Brent, either. They call him Bernie on the street and it makes everyone more comfortable" (62). Brent is not the only one whose name speaks of toning one's foreignness down to make it easier for the others: Rindy and Cindi used to be Renata and Carla but changed their names in high-school. Roashan is shortened to Ro, but even that is mispronounced by Brent when he tries to chat with the newcomer: "What do you think, Roy?" (71).

As Carchidi notes, the characters of "Orbiting" seem undeniably American: the story takes place on Thanksgiving, the family members talk about basketball, family dinners and skiing holidays. The almost stereotypically American characters and setting bend to contain a new, "unhoused" figure: the Afghan refugee Roashan, Rindy's new boyfriend. Roashan's arrival causes a "comedy of manners" (Carchidi 94). When Ro arrives, Rindy is changing behind a four-panel screen, "the kind long-legged showgirls change behind in black and white movies while their moustached lovers keep talking" (67). The situation differs from a thirties black and white love scene: "Instead of a thirties lover, it's my moustached papa talking to me from the other side of the screen" (*ibid*.). While the father is talking, the lover arrives: "Mom screams for the cops. Dad shouts too, at Mom for her to shut up. It's my fault, I should have warned Ro not to use his key this afternoon" (68). Rindy characterizes the encounter as "farce" and legitimizes her interethnic desire and romance by constructing him as non-threatening: "I peek over the screen's top and see my lover the way my parents see him. He's a slight, pretty man with hazel eyes and a tufty moustache, so whom can he intimidate? I've seen Jews and Greeks, not to mention Sons of Italy, darker-skinned than Ro" (*ibid*.).

The parallels between the three couples (Rindy's parents, Cindi and Brent and Rindy and Ro)

and the depiction of Ro's skin color as lighter than many Italians' suggest that the definition of foreign is relative and that the "whiteness" of the deMarcos family has little to do with skin color. This is a central idea in whiteness-studies, which emphasize the constructedness of whiteness (Maxey 530)[11]. Ro's foreignness manifests as different masculinity, manners and political fervor. As she watches Ro and the way her relatives look at him, Rindy notices that he looks "both too effeminate and too macho" (70), and comments: "Each culture establishes its own manly posture, different ways of claiming space" (*ibid.*). He also differs from the other men by not drinking alcohol or watching baseball. Another reason why he makes the family uncomfortable is his talk of politics: "Even Brent is slightly embarrassed. It's his first exposure to Third World passion. He thought only Americans had informed political opinion" (72). Drake points out that Ro's arrival disrupts the deMarcos' comfort zone, making them remember the complex histories of immigration they carry but have forgotten (80). For instance, when Ro tells them his story of the Soviet menace in Kabul, being tortured in jail, his flight and the way he orbited various airports before landing in the United States, the family cannot help being affected: "Dad looks sick. The meaning of Thanksgiving should not be so explicit" (73).

Thus, the daughter's new boyfriend makes the family uncomfortable by disturbing their hitherto invisible and taken-for-granted scripts of ethnic whiteness. Similarly, the romance disturbs the previously coherent narrative of Rindy. As Drake notes, Rindy's desire for Ro opposes the Orientalist stereotype of Asian men as effeminate and unattractive (81). On the other hand, in all her goodwill, she tries to assimilate him to fit the scripts she knows of, make him exhibit a familiar form of masculinity: "I shall teach him how to walk like an American, how to dress like Brent but better, how to fill up a room as Dad does instead of melting and blending but sticking out the Afghan way [...] Ro is Clint Eastwood, scarred hero and survivor" (74-5). Mukherjee also writes

[11] Maxey detects the deconstruction of whiteness to be a common theme in texts by South Asian American women. She notes that Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri portray whites as "people of color" by examining white corporeality (531).

her protagonist unaware of the contradiction of her thoughts: Rindy's remarks on her father explaining her mother's behavior by cultural deficiency are succeeded by her doing the same thing with Ro: “He's totally unlike any man I have ever known. He wants men to come on to me. Lately when we go to a bar he makes me sit far enough from him so some poor lonely guy thinks I'm looking for action. Ro likes to swagger out of a dark booth as soon as someone buys me a drink. I go along. He comes from a macho culture” (65). Later, when remembering the scrs on his body, she calls her hero's culture “the culture of pain” (74).

At first, Rindy's affection for Ro seems rebellious. There are passages revealing that she enjoys the shock-effect her current Afghan lover has on her parents. When her father mistakes a man she mentions in passing as her new boyfriend, she reacts: “Shocking him makes me feel good. It would serve him right if Jorge were my new boyfriend” (61). After seeing the confused reactions of her parents after Ro’s arrival, she kisses him in front of them: “I make the kiss really sexy so they’ll know I’ve slept with this man. Many times. And if he asks me, I will marry him” (68). However, the family’s consent is important for Rindy: “It’s important to me that she [her sister] like Ro, that Mom and Dad more than tolerate him” (63).

Another trait detectable in Rindy’s attitude towards Ro is that she turns their relationship into a transformative encounter for herself. As Drake puts it, she “makes his story hers, uses it to exoticize her own” (81), participating in a form of dominance by seeking contact with the Other in order to shed the innocence of the self (hooks 25). Rindy's narrative of ethnic whiteness used to be coherent, and she likes the disturbance Ro brings to it. However, her narrative is also contradictory, because she tries to transform Ro into a white American hero. Both Drake and Nyman see the contradictions of Rindy’s story as telling of Mukherjee’s identity politics: the story makes it impossible for the protagonist to cling on to a logic of the incommensurability of ethnic difference, because she has been transformed by her encounter with Ro (Drake 82), whereas his participation

in the American cultural traditions is not a celebration of American exceptionalism, but a questioning of the view on identity as an opposition between us and them (Nyman 159).

Dlaska calls Rindy's thoughts of assimilation and marriage as her "missionary zeal" (117), since the opportunity to give Ro citizenship by marrying him gives her a sense of importance and purpose: "I will give him citizenship if he asks. Vic[12] was beautiful, but Vic was self-sufficient. Ro's my chance to heal the world" (74). Thus, romance culminating in marriage receives new meanings: if the conventional romance narratives uphold traditional gender roles by positing a woman's greatest happiness in marriage, "Orbiting" shows other sources of privilege than gender. Rindy's status as a white American gives her the power to give or deny Ro citizenship through marriage. The story fulfills the romance's function of rewarding the protagonists with stability and a socially sanctioned identity on Ro's part, but for Rindy, the affair offers disturbance of her formerly unproblematic, white narrative.

At the end of the story, Mukherjee writes Ro as part of the American family traditions, when Rindy wants him to carve the turkey with his Afghan dagger: "We stare fascinated as my lover slashes and slices, swiftly, confidently, at the huge, browned, juicy breast. The dagger scoops out flesh" (74). As Gabriel (2005) points out, the act of craving the turkey is symbolic of becoming a member of the family. The contents of the Thanksgiving dinner have had cultural meanings before for the deMarcos: "The story of Grandma deMarco, Dad's mama, is that every Thanksgiving she served two full dinners, one American with the roast turkey, candied jams, pumpkin pie, the works, and another with Grandpa's favorite pastas" (67). This year, the new seasoning comes from Afghanistan in the form of nutmeg Ro brought from "Little Kabul".

The metaphor of spice is used in all of the stories discussed above. Ro leaves his mark on the deMarcos' Thanksgiving dinner with his nutmeg, Griff thinks exotic spice shops are enough

[12] Vic is Rindy's ex-boyfriend who she refers to several times in the story.

evidence of America having shed its “dear old redneck” (81) ways and Jasmine starts her journey in America by working simultaneously at a marriage market agency and a Caribbean spice shop. The spice references correspond to the transformations of the characters through their romances. In “Jasmine”, the protagonist’s attitude to marriage is very practical: saving money for forging a marriage deal would be a way to secure her position in America and becoming a naturalized citizen instead of an illegal immigrant. However, she finds another way for “breaking free”: her romance with Bill Moffitt marks her as a member of the American family. The white couple she works for call her with the euphemism “mother’s helper”, an expression “to cover their shame” (132). Her role inside the family reflects the status of illegal immigrants: she is fit to work for the Moffitts, they are kind to her but close their eyes from her condition of underemployment they uphold and illegality she hides. However, Jasmine disturbs the order of the family by substituting the mother instead of merely helping her.

Jasmine discovers the power of her sexuality over Bill, who is a professor at the university she sees as the emblem of her future. While Jasmine seems unaware of how the family could or does exploit her, the ironic tone of the narrative reveals the underside of the heroine’s youthful celebration of the American dream she could achieve by using her exotic charm. A similar pattern emerges in “Fighting for the Rebound”, where the heroine Blanquita tries to outplay Griff and “goad” him into confessing he loves her. Griff cannot tell the difference between “Sex, intimacy, love” (90) and his emphasis on the physical side of their relationship turns out to be shared by other men of the story. Although Blanquita wants to oppose the stereotype of being a vulnerable foreigner in need of protection, her fate in the hands of the abusive Chief reveals that she cannot escape the dominant scripts that write her as a harmless, saucy exotic. Blanquita is cast in the role of an active, resourceful heroine in her quest for love, but the reader is again introduced to the underside of her story: the world dominated by white men like the Chief does not allow her to

emerge unharmed and triumphant from her ethnosexual encounters.

In “Jasmine” and “Fighting for the Rebound”, the Asian American heroines and the expectations towards them exemplify Koshy’s concept of sexual model minority: Jasmine and Blanquita integrate in the realm of the sexual by offering an appealing alternative to the white women they replace or succeed. “Orbiting”, the interethnic romance between a white woman and an Asian man, touches on another Orientalist stereotype: the effeminacy and undesirability of Asian American men. The narrator, Rindy, constructs Ro as sexual and desirable, although she notices the difference in his masculine behavior compared to other men of the story. But she does this in a language of Americanization, trying to translate his “Third World passion” into white lore of spaghetti-Westerns by comparing him to Clint Eastwood.

In addition to confronting gendered stereotypes of Asian Americans, the stories rewrite romantic conventions. In “Jasmine”, the romanticism of a Cinderella story is questioned by Jasmine’s practicality and the ironic description of her position. “Fighting for the Rebound” casts Griff as a reluctant romantic hero, who saves the heroine from the hands of the villain. However, his objectification of Blanquita and his imperialist attitudes reveal that he is not that dissimilar from the Chief. “Orbiting” is a version of a historically more taboo and less popular narrative, that of romance between a white woman and an Asian man. Contrary to stories which posit the romance as a threat, which has been common for instance in discourse on miscegenation between white women and Asian men (Koshy 22), Rindy's parents' scared reactions at Ro's arrival are comic, the fear is ridiculed. For Rindy, the relationship is a welcome disturbance, bringing the coherence of her family’s whiteness into question. For Ro, the relationship could mean stability after his precarious refugee journey. All the stories contain an element Stacey and Pearce call "key ingredient" (17) in romances: transformation of the characters as a result of the romance. However, as I have demonstrated, it is not only the immigrant characters who transform or assimilate, but

also the white characters are affected.

3.2. Interethnic Desire and the Legacy of Vietnam

White-Asian miscegenation has a unique feature in its history: it flourished overseas while being prohibited inside the nation. The division into territorial and extraterritorial also corresponded to a gender division: Asian men living in the United States often paired with white women, whereas the Asian woman-white man dyad first emerged outside the national borders (Koshy 13). There are two stories which refer to extraterritorial desire in *The Middleman and Other Stories*. The stories "Loose Ends" and "Fathering" have Vietnam War veterans as their narrators. I analyze them under the same heading in order to draw attention to the importance and effects of extraterritorial relationships. I will argue that despite being absent, the Asian women referred to in the stories have left their imprint on the protagonists, which in turn affects an institution crucial for formulating the American nation: the family.

Dlaska argues that Mukherjee challenges normative ideas of the American family in two ways: by depicting traditional American families in crisis and by creating new, hybrid families. The second strategy is also in accordance with her agenda of bringing "ethnic diversity a norm in all areas of American society" (114). As already evident in the story's title, "Fathering" is among the stories which discuss and redefines the American family. The people sharing a household in the story are Jason, the narrator who tries to come to terms with his experiences in Vietnam, his half-Vietnamese daughter Eng and the stepmother Sharon.

In terms of conventional narratives of white-Asian romance, the plot has elements of the butterfly-story in it. "Madame Butterfly" stories have been common in for example Hollywood. These tales of white men falling in love with young girls of another culture far from the moral influences of their homelands typically make the non-white woman sacrifice herself. The white man returns home, marries another and later finds out that the woman he left behind has had a

child. He adopts the child with his new white wife, and the non-white lover kills herself (Marchetti 78). The Butterfly character's martyrdom is central in these narratives: her sacrifice makes her morally "superior" compared to the Western man who destroys her. However, her death causes only slight unease and guilt among the viewers. Her sacrifice is tragic, but the West's authority is legitimized because it allows her to emerge as a martyr, a genuinely feminine victim of love (79).

In "Fathering", all the action takes place in the United States, with the extraterritorial space of Vietnam being only remembered by Jason and Eng. Eng's mother, who would be the butterfly of the story, is only briefly referred to as "the honeyest-skinned bar girl with the tiniest feet in Saigon" (117). The story does not tell what happened to her after Jason returned to Vietnam to find and adopt Eng. By obscuring the fate of the butterfly, whose martyrdom's celebration would traditionally be the primary legitimizer of Western involvement in Asia, Mukherjee directs attention instead to the re-formation of the American family as a consequence of the ethnosexual encounter, which happened during America's war in Vietnam.

The story opens with Jason and Sharon in bed and Eng arriving in the bedroom. She says "I'm starved" (117) and Jason assumes her to be sick. Sharon, however, thinks Eng is faking: "For God's sake leave us alone" (117), "go raid the refrigerator like a normal kid" (118). Their dislike seems mutual: "Dad, let's go to the kitchen. Just you and me… Not her, Dad. We don't want her with us in the kitchen" (118-9). Jason tries to manage the conflict between them: "She loves you… Don't you, Sharon?" (119). But Sharon thinks Jason is being manipulated by Eng and she calls the doctor. Instead of the flu Jason wants to have investigated, she reports of the bruises Eng has on her arms and seeks mental help for her. Sharon and Jason have an argument and she leaves the house.

Meanwhile, Eng is still sick and Jason tries to be a good father by reading her delirious daughter a story. He chooses a sci-fi novel, which significantly tells of how "Aliens have taken

over small towns all over the country" (121). But Eng is not curable by the means Jason has: while he is reading the story, she stops up her ears, and when he offers her his arms to run into, she resists. She even says "I want to be ghost. I don't want to get better" (121). The bruises she has on her arms turn out to be self-inflicted. She keeps pressing a coin on her arm until it bruises, which is reminiscent of the way women in Vietnam cured napalm burns by "sticking coins and amulets" (118) into them. As Dlaska notes, Jason and Sharon fail to parent Eng with "the parameters of their American views" (115) and the story shows how their liberal good-will is not enough, but a "genuine cultural interaction and change on both sides are necessary" (*ibid*.). Many critics have noticed Eng's foreignness in the American context: Knippling reads the story through the lens of representation, seeing it as an example of how it can and cannot be executed by Mukherjee. She argues that the author succeeds in representing Jason, because they share the values of American capitalism and neo-imperialism, but Eng is more problematic. She is the real stranger of the story, but her strangeness is assimilated, domesticated in "the process of translation of the wholly other, the subaltern, to the self-consolidating other, the West's Other" (150). Although this seems to be what Jason and especially Sharon try to do (assimilate Eng into their family), the ending of the story leaves open the question of Eng's assimilation. A different interpretation of the ending is presented by Alam, who treats the story as an example of a successful, positive response on Jason's part (94-5).

The final scene of the short story happens at a hospital. The doctor calls and asks Jason to come and take Sharon home, because she has been given sedatives. Jason takes the feverish Eng with him, but is surprised by the doctor trying to examine Eng, as well. The doctor's attempts make Eng hysterical: she bites him, takes off her clothes and holds her arm like a gun to shoot Sharon and the doctor. To Jason she simply yells "Scram, Yankee bastard!" (124). The story ends with Jason rescuing Eng from their "enemies", meaning the doctor and Sharon who try to tie and

calm Eng down. “My Saigon kid and me: we’re a team. In five minutes we’ll be safely away in the cold chariot of our van” (124). Morton-Mollo analyzes the final sentence in great detail, arguing that it exemplifies the ambivalence of the story: “The wonderful juxtaposition of ‘safely’ and ‘cold’ and ‘chariot’ (as metaphor) expresses simultaneously the positive and negative aspects of the narrator’s decision to break up his home” (285). In his attempts to father Eng, Jason consorts to unrealism: “Then, as in fairy tales, I know what has to be done. ‘Coming, pardner!’ I whisper. ‘I got no end of coins.’ I jiggle the change in my pocket. I jerk her away from our enemies” (124). The rosy future of the father and daughter is not self-evident, because it starts with a leap from the realistic concerns of parenting to the world of adventure stories and heroism (Morton-Mollo 285). As Drake argues, Jason tries his best as a man and a father and “many American stories would reward him with a happy ending” (77). However, Mukherjee’s story leaves the hero with an open ending and a resort to the only script available for him to access the shared experiences he has with his daughter: the world of adventure stories (*ibid*.).

If Eng’s and Jason’s future is left open at the end, Sharon’s and Jason’s relationship seems to meet its end. Especially Sharon is eager to attribute their problems to Eng: “Everything was fine until she got here. Send her back, Jase. If you love me, send her back” (123). Apparently, adopting Eng had been her idea in the first place: “Coming to terms with the past was Sharon’s idea” (118). For Sharon, Eng seems to be a way to work on their “near-marriage” (117): “Waiting for Eng was good. Sharon herself said it was good for our relationship” (119). Thus, Eng is linked to the state of their relationship throughout the story. The fact that the relationship is broken at the end suggests a counter-hegemonic reading of the story: if conventional romance stories of extraterritorial desire end with adoption and the celebration of the white, American family, “Fathering” shows how the family breaks apart after the adoption.

The unsympathetic portrayal of Sharon as the evil stepmother is another way to question the

norm of the ideal American family. Sharon resists the role of the nurturing mother, wanting to return Eng when she does not fit her preconceptions. There are references to Jason having children, who are now raised in an unconventional setting: “I brought the twins up without much help ten years ago” (117), “My twins are being raised in some organic-farming lesbo commune” (118). The break-ups shatter the normative foundation of the family. In Drake’s words: “What happens is the failure of patriarchy, the American family, the idea that 'nation' equals 'common culture'. What happens is the dissolution of heterosexual coupling, as the 'alien child' (123) displaces the white American almost-wife” (77).

The dissolution of the normative family in “Fathering” follows the ethnosexual encounter Jason had overseas, which happened because of America's war in Vietnam. Koshy argues that in the early 20th century representations of white-Asian intimacies, extraterritorial desire existed outside the nation also in the symbolic sense of existing outside its moral codes. Thus, it signified sexual license or freedom (91). The sense of sexual license overseas is implicit in Jason’s narrative, but it is more obvious in the story of another Vietnam veteran, Jeb in “Loose Ends”. As a white American, Jeb differs from the other white protagonists discussed so far (Griff, Rindy and Jason). Whereas the others express some willingness to accept the immigrants and change their ways, Jeb Marshall is xenophobic and reluctant to share his Florida with immigrants.

Jeb lives in a manufactured house with his long-term girlfriend, Jonda. The story starts with the couple bickering about a Goldilocks doll she wants from a mail-order catalog and the amount of work he has to do to pay for it. Childless and fighting, with problems in communication, they are the antithesis of a happy family. Jeb describes their relationship and explains the meaning of the doll:

> Hey, what we have sounds like the constitution of the United States. We have freedom and no strings attached. We have no debts. We come and go as we like. She wants a kid but I don’t think I have the makings of a good father. That’s part of what the Goldilocks thing is… By the time Goldilocks arrives in the mail, she’ll have moved her stuff out of Laguna Vista

Estates (45).

The narrator works as a "gunship" (46) for a man he refers to as Mr. Vee. His job is to "show up at the time and place of his choosing and perform a simple operation" (*ibid*.). Although he never uses the actual expression, his job is to kill people. He draws parallels between his experiences in Vietnam and the life he leads afterwards. When describing the shooting of a man called Chavez, he still follows the advice his mentor gave him in Vietnam: "Doc Healy used to teach us: torch the whole hut and make sure you get the kids, the grannies, cringing on to the sleeping mat – or else you'll meet them on the trail with fire in their eyes" (47). Thus, he also shoots the girl he finds in Chavez's bed, which forces him to leave the city to let things cool down: "You get a reputation, especially if young women are involved" (*ibid*.). He seems to follow another piece of advice by Doc Healy: "If you want to stay alive… just keep consuming and moving like a locust" (45).

Leaving Miami, Jeb steals a car from "a protesting coed" (50). The car and part of his money are stolen from him and he hitchhikes to a motel. The "potel", as the owner jokes, is a motel owned by Patels. The Indo-American family is dining and celebrating in the back room and when Jeb asks for a room a young girl comes to show him to it. Alone with her, Jeb rapes and kills the girl, steals a car and moves on. "This is what I've become. I want to squeeze this state dry and swallow it whole" (54) are the final words of his narrative.

"Loose Ends" is the most violent and pessimistic of the stories and the action described above is colored by Jeb's bitter comments on foreigners. The men he works for in Florida are Hispanics, and he tries to bully them for it: "'I could get you deported real easy.' I smile. I want him to know that for all his flash and jangle and elocution lessons so he won't go around like an underworld Ricky Ricardo, to me he's just another boat person" (47). As Dlaska observes, his only sense of self-worth comes from his feeling of racial superiority (121). He acknowledges the impact immigration has on America, but resents it: "Where did America go? I want to know. Down the

rabbit whole, Doc Healy used to say. Alice knows, but she took it with her. Hard to know which one's the Wonderland. Back when me and my buddies were barricading the front door, who left the back door open?" (48) As the passage suggests, he feels he is not given enough credit for his heroism in war. There are also further comments revealing his bitterness and paranoia. Jonda's fruitless attempt at being hired by a Sikh employer makes him conclude: "We're coolie labor in our own country" (44).[13] He seems to view the immigrants as having some kind of a conspiracy: "They got their money, their family networks, and their secretive languages" (53).

However, his memories reveal that he was "coolie labor" also in the old Florida he holds such a nostalgia for: "I knew your pappy and grammie, I mowed their lawn, trimmed their hedges, washed their cars" (50). Drake marks on the ironic gap in Jeb's narrative: the pappies and grannies of his implied white audience have been immigrants, as well (74). The difference between his pre- and post-Vietnam existence is not in his economic privilege and position, but in the ethnicity of his employers.

Vietnam unleashed Jeb's potential for violence, but it also taught him to enjoy the sexual license he had overseas. Jeb mentions another veteran who was convicted for "sinking his teeth into sweet, succulent coed flesh", but explains that "the appetite remains, after the easy targets have all been eaten" (45). The sentence can refer to two things: violence or sex.

In times of war and conflict, the military base becomes a site for ethnosexual encounters. Often, the military camps are huge complexes, where foreign soldiers reside among local civilians. Diverse ethnosexual encounters happen around the bases: dance, bars and even prostitution. Prostitution can be a way of constructing military masculinity: by stating their manhood in bed the soldiers prove to be fit for masculine fighting (Nagel 180). Another link between war and sex is the use of sexual threat and rape as weapons. Rape is "a transaction between men, where women are

[13] Lee notes that the construction of "the coolie", the racialization of Chinese immigrant workers, served to define white working-class identity in the 1870s and 1880s (9).

the currency" (181), and Nagel distinguishes three functions it has. Firstly, it is a method of terror and domination, for the rape of the woman is a symbolic offense to her kin, as well. Secondly, the sexual license and freedom obtained by the conquest can be "a carrot" for the soldiers. However, if and when the sexual assault causes guilt, the guilt serves to evoke solidarity among the groups of soldiers (*ibid*.).

There are several references to the sexual nature of Jeb's experience in "Loose Ends". For example his description of globalization reveals he does not resent all foreigners:

> Havana has shifted its headquarters. Beirut has come west. And now, it's Miami that gives me warm memories of always-Christmas Saigon. It's life in the procurement belt, between those lines of tropical latitudes, where the world shops for its illicit goods and dumps its surplus parts, where it prefers to fight its wars, and once you've settled into its give and take, you find it's impossible to live anywhere else. (50)

Despite being hostile towards the Hispanic and Asian immigrants who start businesses and have family networks, he does not seem to mind prostitutes.

Jeb tries to find a coherent narrative, building it on the opposition between "us" and "them". However, his time in Vietnam changed him, as it had transformed America. Nowadays, America is characterized by "global exchange, cultural contact, violence" (Drake 73) and his frequent comparisons between Vietnam and Miami make it evident that he cannot discard the experience shaping him. Thus, the grammar of difference no longer applies. In Vietnam, he had embodied the popular narratives of American masculinity, as Drake puts it: "He becomes his cinematic heroes, the stuff of legends, the American male outlaw" (73). In order to come to terms with his post-Vietnam rage, he tries to uphold the logic of racism and hold on to every possible story and myth available. He desperately tries to love the country that sent its working-class youth to war by resorting to nostalgia (Drake 73).[14]

Jeb is between two narratives: the nostalgic one of the old, coherent Florida and the new,

[14] Mukherjee's class politics in this story are criticized by for instance Pfeil who argues that in "Loose Ends" racism in America is displaced into the lower classes, portrayed as a working class problem.

multicultural Florida, which makes more sense to him despite his resistance towards it. “He lives the logic of war, battle, the little brown enemy, self-hatred, racism disguised as nationalism” (Drake 75). He confuses his sense of betrayal for hatred of a “visibly different enemy” (*ibid*.). The tragedy is, he cannot rewrite the story by including the visibly different people. “Jeb just can't renarrate what 'we the people' might look like” (*ibid*.). His sense of rage, which erupts in the violence towards the young, Jersey-born American girl named Patel is grounded on a moment when he is seen as the Other. First, the Patel family stare at the intruder: “A bunch of aliens and they stare like I’m the freak” (52). Later, the girl looks at him: “That’s when I catch the look on her face. Disgust, isn’t that what it is? Distaste for the likes of me” (54). By raping “Alice”, he writes himself as part of her transformation, disabling her and her family to renarrate America without him (Drake 76).

In both of the veteran’s narratives, Mukherjee writes about the white-Asian intimate relationships overseas, with the focus on the effects they have on America. The narrators reflect on the popular scripts of heroism and masculinity: Jason resorts to the romanticism of adventure stories as a way to connect to Eng, whereas Jeb has embodied his cinematic heroes in war. Jason tries to live up to the expectations of good masculinity by adopting Eng and fathering her. However, his failure comes in the form of underestimating Eng’s trauma and through the actions and demands of Sharon. Instead of ending in an adoption, suggesting a bright future of a hybrid family with assimilable children, “Fathering” shows the family in crisis. Jason's and Sharon's break-up and Eng's refusal to be subjected to their parenting and medical care dissolve into a non-realistic ending, where Jason consorts to the world of adventure-stories. Jeb's story is also an exploration into the concept of the American family: he refers to his manufactured home as "his castle", but his family soon disintegrates as Jonda moves out and takes the child substitute Goldilocks-doll with her. At the motel, right before assaulting the girl, Jeb notices the significant

difference between the two rooms he has been to: "She's aiming to race back to the motel room not much different than this except that it's jammed with family" (54).

Jeb embodies a gloomier side of masculinity, the one connected to violence and warfare. Jeb's narrative probes the connections between family, class issues and the racialization of Asian labor as he denounces himself to be "coolie labor" in his "own" country. Although containing references to ethnosexual encounters overseas, the story ends in a scene of an ethnosexual encounter inside the nation: the rape of the Patel girl. As argued by Marchetti, narratives of rape involving Asian American characters typically awaken the myth of the purity of white women, whereas the villain is Asian (10). In order to strengthen the ethnosexual boundaries between whites and Asians, the popular rape fantasies involve punishment of the rapist as a closure. "Loose Ends" approaches rape in a different way: Jeb's actions are motivated by what he sees as nationalism, but they culminate in violating a fellow American. As hinted at by the story's title, Mukherjee does not provide a closure, heroes or punishment but leaves the protagonist moving on "like a locust".

In this chapter, I have focused on white-Asian interethnic pairings. In keeping with Koshy's point on the special role extraterritorial relationships played in the formation of the discourse, I organized the two Vietnam war narratives in a separate subchapter. I asked how Mukherjee uses the conventions of romance to explore national belonging, ethnicity and sexuality. "Jasmine" and "Fighting for the Rebound" play with the stereotype of sexual model minority, casting the Asian heroines as sexually appealing and more traditionally feminine compared to the white women they displace of succeed. The taboo of interethnic romance between a white man and a non-white woman is retold in "Orbiting", a story which deconstructs the ethnic whiteness of European immigrants in America. The Veteran narratives deconstruct the myth of heroism in war, showing how America's involvement in Asia and the ethnosexual encounters overseas disturb the norm of family.

4. Immigrant Courtships

The previous chapter focused on the five stories of interethnic relationships between Asian and white characters. The stories analyzed in this chapter also tell of romantic or sexual encounters, but they no longer involve white characters in important roles. Instead, they are narratives of romance among Asian characters (with the exception of “The Middleman”, which takes place in Central America). The chapter's title, “Immigrant Courtships” is a quotation from the story “The Tenant”, where it refers to the romance between two Indo-American characters who negotiate between the dating norms they learned in India and the ones they are surrounded by in America. As a chapter title, it refers to an element these stories share: immigrants encountering romance on a foreign ground, which entails a negotiation between two sets of cultural norms on intimacy.

In section 4.1., I will analyze three stories told from the point of view of transient Asian men: an Iraqi Jew in Central America, a diasporic Indian teenager in Queens and a Sri Lankan schoolteacher in Germany. The stories describe their romances with Latin or Asian women. The analysis continues to pay attention to the merging of public histories with intimate relationships discussed in the previous section. In “The Middleman” and “Buried Lives”, Mukherjee draws parallels between political rebellion and rebellion against the norms on intimacy. “Danny's Girls” discusses the intimate institution of marriage by presenting a mail-order bride network as a system that combines aspects of Eastern and Western marriage practices.

The second sub-chapter focuses on three stories of Indo-American or Indo-Canadian women. The theme of romance surfaces in these stories, and they contain negotiations between different cultural norms on intimacy. They also question stereotypes of Indian women. Especially the system of marriage as either an arranged one or the result of a romance becomes important. Mukherjee has been criticized for depicting Western culture as more liberating than the Eastern one (for example

by Tikoo), but there are scholars who read the stories as more ambiguous.

The main argument of this chapter is that these six stories examine the concept of female autonomy, at the same time depicting male authority in a state of crisis. A similar observation is made by Pati, who finds a recurring trait in Mukherjee's fiction: “historically underprivileged South Asian women discard their traditional sexual passivity in the new country and fashion new selves that are romantic, sensitive, and sensual” (205) and by Nyman who argues that female erotic autonomy is what makes Mukherjee's romances counter-hegemonic (161). In the first part, the male protagonists fall for women who, despite their more or less underprivileged origins or position, refuse to be oppressed. In section 4.2., the theme of autonomous women becomes pronounced in the women's narratives.

Another theme in these stories is family. As in the interethnic romance stories analyzed in the previous chapter, normative constructions of family continue to be challenged. The exploration into the concept of female autonomy is one way for doing this, since it questions women's role as domestic and family-centered, determined by their relationship to men.

4.1. Diasporic Heroes

The title story “The Middleman” is the first of the eleven stories and takes place in an unnamed country in Central America.[15] The country is at the verge of a civil war, and the action is described by Alfie Judah, an American citizen and a tough nomad who has traveled from Baghdad through Bombay and Queens to this “Mayan country” (3). There is a clear hierarchy between the men referred to in the story: president Gutiérrez leads the country (for the time being), a white American, Clovis T. Ransome owns a ranch and leads shady businesses, and Alfie is a middleman,

[15] The inspiration for the story has been Costa Rica, as Mukherjee comments in an interview with Byers: “Then there are others, like 'The Middleman,' the title story, the most autobiographical of my stories, in some way, because it came directly out of my having been stuck in Costa Rica among rather complicated, difficult people. That I wrote and wrote and wrote in the third person and then I realized that having a Bengali woman there, even though true, was totally implausible in the story. It wasn't until I found the first-person voice, this character of the Iraqi Jew, the middleman, that the story wrote itself in one sitting.” (189)

making his “living from things that fall” (3). Below him are “Ransome’s *indios*” (4), the natives who do the hard work.

Very early in the story, another central character is introduced: “The woman’s name is Maria” (4). As is the case with most of the characters, her ethnicity is hard to pin down: “she has to be mostly Indian”, the narrator guesses. Maria’s sexuality and charm are the primary features Alfie and the other men of the story focus on. Her story is mediated through Alfie’s narration: she had once been the mistress of the president, but now she is Ransome’s wife, “partially bought and partially seduced away from Gutiérrez” (6). She is almost like a trophy: whoever has power, has Maria. However, she has a history starting before her involvement in the power game: before Gutiérrez “plucked her out of convent school” (7) at the age of fourteen, she had had a boyfriend, Andreas. When the rebellion breaks loose at the end of the story, Maria is unleashed from Ransome's control and reunited with Andreas.

The story's plot takes place in one day. Ransome and his friend, Bud Wilkins, leave on a “fishing trip”, which the narrator interprets as a ploy. Alfie is left to watch over Maria, and she introduces him to the guerrillas and reveals her secret romance with the guerrilla camp leader. When they return at the ranch they find the drunk Ransome telling about the death of his friend, and although he blames it on the guerrillas, it is implied that he killed Bud Wilkins himself. When Ransome passes out, Alfie and Maria sleep together and during the night, the guerrillas attack on the ranch, liberating Maria, killing Ransome and leaving Alfie to continue his travels.

The first mention of Maria makes Alfie confess his soft spot: “It’s women” (4). His memories of the childhood in Baghdad contain references to women's desirability: “we had the hots for blondes… British matrons with freckled calves,... the brassiness of prewar bleachjobs – all of that could thrill us like cleavage” (4). By the age of twelve, he had already been “visiting whores”, but not the blond ones he would have preferred: “the only girls cheap enough for boys our age with

unspecified urgencies were swamp Arabs from Basra of black girls from Baluchistan" (5). Thus, there is a specific hierarchy between the women in terms of their desirability for Alfie. The white, European women were "worthy" of his lust, while the local girls were "a dark place to spend some time, like a video arcade" (*ibid.*). However, Alfie starts to want dark-skinned women after meeting Maria: "Who wants pale, thin, pink flesh, who wants limp, curly blond hair, when you can have lustrous browns, purple-blacks?" (7). The fact that these questions are asked in the first and titular story of the collection points to their importance, for instances of dark women replacing white women are many in the collection.

In addition to describing the sexual atmosphere in Iraq, while it was under the British rule, Alfie shares a childhood memory of seeing a (possibly) adulterous woman being stoned to death. He realizes to be one of the few Americans to "count the costs of adultery" (7). The public spectacle of stoning a woman who breaks the culturally accepted notions of sexual behavior is a way to enforce the rules on intimacy, to proclaim "proper sexual demeanor" (Nagel 141). For Alfie, it was part of his upbringing: "Otherwise, he [the servant taking him there] feared, my lenient Jewish upbringing would later betray me" (7). As the passage reveals, the acceptability and consequences of adultery are shown to differ across cultures. Another facet of the adultery scene is the parallels drawn between intimacy and politics.

The thwocking sounds of stones in Alfie's memories are succeeded by several scenes of thwocking, bashing and hacking in the story. When Alfie is left alone with Maria at the ranch, he watches a pair of mating ocean grabs meeting their destiny in the hands of the servant Eduardo: "The broom comes down, thwack, thwack, and bashes the shells in loud, succulent cracks. *Ransome, Gringo,* I hear" (9). "Ransome, Gringo" refers to an earlier scene of the local "*indios*" hacking away the forests on Ransome's orders. Their working is fueled by cursing a variety of "Gringos": "presidents' names, Hollywood names, Detroit names – Carter, *chop*, Reagan, *slash*,

Buick, *thump*" (4). The bashing becomes something of a motif in the story, foreshadowing the revolution breaking against the Gringos at the end.

The scene of Eduardo bashing the ocean grabs contains another element repeated in the story: nature imagery. The whole story begins with a description of the weather: "There are only two seasons in this country, the dusty and the wet. I already know the dusty and I'll get to know the wet" (3). The seasons correspond to the power regimes: the start of the rebellion coincides with the start of the rainy season. The nature references extend to describing Ransome exploiting the country and its natural resources: he orders the forests to be destroyed and Alfie describes his life as spending "his adult life in tropical paradises playing God" (5). Also individual characters have their referents in the animal world.[16] In bed with Alfie, Maria tells him of her maltreatment by Ransome:

> "You don't understand hate, Alfie. You don't understand what hate can do." She tells stories; I moan to mount her again. "No," she says, and the stories pour out. Not just the beatings; the humiliations. Loaning her out, dangling her on a leash like a cheetah. Then the beatings for what he suspects. It's the power game, I try to tell her. That's how power is played. (19)

As was the case with the adulterous woman being stoned in Baghdad, the violence towards Maria is also symbolic. The nature imagery and the reference to Ransome destroying "virgin forests" (4) points towards a reading of Maria as a symbol of her land, which many sources identify as a common strategy in nationalist discourse (Loomba 151-2, Nyman 162).

Of the patterns Marchetti finds in popular representations of interethnic relationships, Maria's story resembles a captivity-tale. In captivity tales, a woman is taken captive by villains, but is eventually returned to her place: "The white woman circulates among Caucasian and Asian men as a token of moral worth and as a legitimation of patriarchal power" (46). Maria certainly circulates among men, she has been taken captive. In "The Middleman", the parallel between the land and

[16] This is most apparent in Alfie's case: when Alfie and Maria leave the guerrilla camp, Andreas gives them a birdcage. "He puts the birdcage in the driver's seat, and in case I miss it, points at the bird, then at me, and laughs. Very funny, I think." (15).

the woman does not involve a restoration of order, her honor and purity in the hands of a savior, but a detailed description of what she has suffered and a revolution. Her captivity is not a threat, it has already happened. The story converses the ethnic division of characters typical for the stories Marchetti criticizes by making the villains white and the woman and her hero "dark, native" (6).

Importantly, it is Maria who does the shooting at the end: "She holds out her hand, and Andreas slips the pistol in it. This seems to amuse Clovis Ransome. He stands, presenting an enormous target. 'Sweetie –' he starts, and she blasts away" (21). After shooting the man who abused her, Maria is depicted as a saint-like figure: "She stands at the foot of their bed, limp and amused, like a woman disappointed in love. Smoke rises from the gun barrel, her breath condenses in little clouds, and there is a halo of condensation around her hair, her neck, her arms" (21). Maria's biblical name, combined to the saint-like depiction of her liberation and the first reference to her as "the woman", marks her as a character of immense symbolic value. Since this is the first and titular story of the collection, it is important to note that the scene contains elements which resurface in the other stories: the dark, native woman has displaced white women in terms of desirability in the framing consciousness of the narrator. Maria is aware of her desirability and tries to make the best of it, to use it to her advantage. However, she becomes commodified in the power game played by the men. Violence is an integral part of her liberation which takes place in a bedroom.

The death of the white invaders, Bud Wilkins and Clovis Ransome, unleashes Maria and frees the land from their occupation. Alfie's survival is a direct consequence of Maria not shooting him, but it is also a matter of his position: his middle-position extends beyond his role as the middleman who carries out orders between the conqueror and the conquered. Also his ethnicity is in the middle of black and white, an asset he can use to his advantage. In his narration "I sit by the lime green swimming pool, sun-screened so I won't turn black" is closely followed by "They hate

gringos – from which my darkness exempts me" (4). Dlaska sees Alfie's survival as having its roots in his rootlessness which transforms into a will to survive. He has no country to die for, which makes his sense of belonging more meaningful than blind patriotism (121). "I know none of this is worth suffering for, let alone dying for" (20) is what he says when watching Maria's and Ransome's story meet its bloody end. Instead, what he relies on is the information he has and the financial gain it can give him: "Someone in the capital will be happy to know about Santa Simona, about Bud, Clovis. There must be something worth trading for in the troubles I have seen" (21).

Alam discusses "The Middleman", "Danny's Girls" and "Buried Lives" under the same heading with "Jasmine", because these four stories tell of the "shadowy world of illegal immigrants" or are somehow else related to crime (81). "Danny's Girls" shares another element with "Jasmine", for they both describe the protagonists' involvement in a matchmaking-business. "Danny's Girls" addresses the commodification of women, depicting a mail-order bride network from the point of view of another middleman. The story is set in Flushing, Queens, in an "ethnic ghetto". The narrator is a teenager boy of Indian heritage who has never visited India and remembers little of Uganda, where his family lived before migrating to the United States. He tells the story in the past tense, in a span of two years, but his present age and whereabouts are not mentioned. The title character, Danny Sahib, is "a merchant of opportunity" (141), another young, Indian man who boasts on having been on his own since the age of six. He started his merchant's career with debts and concert tickets, but after holding a beauty contest "discovered the marriage racket" (142). At first, he arranges marriages between American girls of Indian origin and young men from India, promising them "Permanent Resident status in The U.S" (*ibid.*). Later, he realizes that "real money" was in selling docile Indian girls to American men (143). The narrator is thirteen when he starts to work for Danny, first offering money for bride volunteers in his house in Flushing, later putting up posters and passing out fliers of the mail-order brides. At the beginning

of the story, the narrator looks up to Danny, admires his orphanhood and thinks of the pair of them as “partners in some exciting enterprise” (147).

The narrator lives with his aunt Lily, who participates in the marriage market by warehousing “the merchandise” (143). The narrator describes the mail-order bride service with its context of exploitation in a similarly detached, businesslike manner: “An Old World bride who knew her place and would breed like crazy was worth at least twenty thousand dollars” (143). As evident from the comment on the desirability of an “Old World bride” knowing her place, the discourse of the sexual model minority is present in this story, as well. In the quotation, it is implied that the “docile” mail-order brides from India fit to the New World men's idea of desired femininity better than women who question their place. Nagel notices the mail-order bride network, which markets Asian women to white men, to be symptomatic of America's divided milieu of interethnic desire: while some ethnosexual boundaries are strictly guarded, with crossers inscribed in discourses of contamination, some ethnic others become eroticized (22).

The romance in the story starts when a Nepali girl arrives to lodge at the house. The girl who disturbs the narrator's universe calls herself Rosie and lists her age as sixteen. However, since all the mail-order brides have similar names and all are said to be sixteen, Rosie’s real name and age remain mysterious. The narrator runs errands for Rosie, mostly buying her cigarettes and gin and fanning her with a newspaper. In contrast to the other girls at his aunt’s house, who arrive “broken in spirit; they’d marry just about any freak Danny brought around” (144), Rosie is “a proud woman”, throwing her suitors out and living on her “dowry” Danny never sent back to Nepal. Rosie is signaled out among the masses of nameless brides hidden behind their saris, making the narrator realize his job of putting up posters is “a strange, pimpish thing” (148). It is as if he has never thought of the girls as human beings until he falls in love with one of them.

Rosie is not only signaled among the masses of imported brides, she is also contrasted to

another young, unmarried woman of South Asian origins: the “Hindu-American Princess”, Pammy Patel, who is protected from contact with teenage boys by her father and brothers. The narrator’s memories of the Gujarati classes he attended with her contain an illuminating passage on romance films and the class differences, even conflicts among the South Asian American community:

> I found the whole situation achingly romantic. In the Hindi films I’d see every Sunday, the hero was always a common man with a noble heart, in love with an unattainable beauty. Then she’d be kidnapped and he’d have to save her. Caste and class would be overcome and marriage would follow. To that background I added a certain American equality. I grew up hating rich people, especially rich Indian immigrants who didn’t have the problems of Uganda and a useless father (146).

In addition to telling the basic plot of a captivity-tale (Marchetti 46), the passage introduces class as an ingredient of romance. The fairy-tale crossing of class boundaries in the name of love is an element common in romances (Stacey and Pearce 23), but “Danny's Girls” combines class and romance in a different way. Class is not overcome in the story, but the princess is guarded against lower class boys. Differences in class and wealth are also integral to the functioning of the mail-order bride business, where Western men buy economically disenfranchised Eastern women.

In addition to revealing the class differences among the South Asian Americans, the story explicitly plays with the model minority myth, the stereotypes of Indian immigrants' professions: “Indian boys were placed on earth to become accountants and engineers. Even old Idi Amin was placed on earth to force Indians to come to America to become accountants and engineers. I went through school scared, wondering what there was in my future if I hated numbers” (145). The narrator’s confession reveals the model minority myth of Indians as building a career in America not as something they necessarily aspire to, but something they are expected to do. The narrator does not believe in himself as the fulfiller of the American Dream of equal opportunities and success: “It was a story Ma believed because she'd told it so often, though I knew better. Only the Indian doctors' kids from New Jersey and Long Island went to Columbia. Out in Flushing we got a

different message" (145). Thus, the story questions the rhetoric of love overcoming class boundaries and the rhetoric of American Dream of equal opportunities.

The narrator reflects on his identity as an Indian young man in terms of class and education. His identity re-formation process is triggered by romance, as, for instance, Alam notices in his description of the narrative as a "rites-of-passage" story (88). Falling in love with Rosie makes the narrator rebel against Danny, he abandons his position as middleman. The rebellion is further encouraged by an argument they have. Danny calls the narrator *hijra*, an eunuch not knowing their place, mocking his attempts to share his fifteen-year-old, inexperienced desire with "a real woman like Rosie" (147). The verbal assault on the narrator's masculinity is culturally encoded: Danny utters it in Hindi, a language the narrator barely understands. Thus, the narrator's emerging masculine identity is marked by an irony similar to his expectations as an Indian: he has never been to the country and resents the "rich, Indian immigrants" (146), but is counted as one of them.

The story ends in Rosie's room, where the narrator arrives "pumped up with the enormity of love", bangs the mattress with an umbrella "in the absence of rivals" and is let to Rosie's bed (149). The scene presents its romantic hero with a touch of parody. Pati reads parody in the theme of the story: the mail-order bride business parodies the South Asian marriage market. She even claims that the women's "historical enslavement in marriage thus continues as Old World methods are 'bought' by New World men" (205). The argument places the Indian arranged marriage as a system which becomes exploitative when applied to the New World setting. I would argue that the story parodies conventions of romance, which is explicit in the ridicule of the narrator as the captive Rosie's "savior", and implicit in Rosie's situation as a bride-candidate: if the conventional romances secure an American identity for the immigrant heroine by wedding her into the country, "Danny's Girls" reverses the desirability of marriage, presenting it as the threat from which the heroine must be saved.

As I have discussed so far, the story focuses on an important turn in the narrator's life; the function of romance is to open his eyes to see the “strange, pimpish” (148) side of the mail-order bride business. Pati notices the relationship's effect on Rosie: their romance helps her to consider breaking free of Danny’s contract (206). Although the transformative possibilities of romance are hinted at, the open ending leaves the question of their future unanswered: will they eventually find socially sanctioned identities in America?

“Danny's Girls” is a story discussing involuntary forms of immigration: the narrator's forced exile from Uganda and Rosie's economic hardships in “the tubercular hut in Katmandu” (144) are given as reasons for them being in America. The effects of British imperialism in the independent but isolated Nepal become evident in Rosie's speech: “'Smashing,' Rosie would say, and other times, 'Jolly good,' showing that even in the Himalayan foothills, the sun hadn't yet set on the British Empire” (145).[17]

The effects of the British rule in South Asia are addressed in more detail in the next story of the collection, “Buried Lives”, which is one of the three stories told by a third person narrator. It is a story of the Sri Lankan Mr. Venkatesan, a peace-loving and quiet schoolteacher who goes on a journey worthy of the colonial adventure stories he idolizes. There are many references to the role of literature in forming the protagonist's understanding of who he is. The story's title is the first instance of intertextuality: it is a reference to a poem by Matthew Arnold Mr. Venkatesan admires and teaches. However, Mukherjee has pluralized the poem's title, suggesting that literature can receive various meanings in reading, as exemplified by the protagonist’s comparisons between famous, Western narratives and his own life. The story is a rewriting of colonial adventure stories and perhaps the most well-known narrative of ethnic persecution in Europe: the persecution of the

[17]In many of her interviws, for example in the one with with Byers, Mukherjee has expressed her recollections of growing up in colonial India: “ in a sense, my love of America is really my rebellion against British colonialism. It is a liberation from structure. Because we don't have that same direct history between India and the U.S. as India does with Britain”.

Jews. Mukherjee rewrites these narratives from the point of view of a Tamil, who is a lover of Western canonical literature, a dutiful patriarch and family man, and possibly a killer for the benefit of a separatist terrorist group.

The story opens with the protagonist participating in a riot: “Mr. N. K. S. Venkatesan, a forty-nine-year-old schoolteacher who should have been inside a St. Joseph's Collegiate classroom explicating Arnold's 'The Buried Life' found himself instead at a barricaded intersection, axe in hand and shouting rude slogans at a truckload of soldiers” (153). The context of this story is the civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Sri Lankan government. The protagonist is a Tamil man who does not think of himself as a political man, but participates in the protest because of his sister’s new boyfriend, who is a Tamil Tiger. Mr. Venkatesan takes his family duties seriously: “he disapproved of men with family responsibilities sticking their heads between billy clubs as though they were still fighting the British for independence” (153).

Ironically, he engages in a political uprising because his sense of duty towards the family prevents him from letting his sister go alone with her new boyfriend. The confusion of family responsibility and political fervor is not the only thing he disapproves of, he also despises the guerrilla boyfriend and fears losing the authority over his sister: “The ferocity of her passion for the worthless boy... shocked him. He had patronized her when she had been a plain, pliant girl squinting at embroidered birds and flowers. But now something harsh and womanly seemed to be happening inside her” (155).

As the riot gathers momentum, Mr. Venkatesan loses his sister in the crowd, only to see her on top of a car “the March wind stiffly splaying her sari and long hair behind her” (*ibid*.). Although he came to the protest to protect her, she is out of his reach as a group of young monks attack her. Mr. Venkatesan revenges by throwing his axe at a Home Guards officer. He escapes and decides to leave Sri Lanka. Thus, it is the monks' assault at her sister, the poetic image of flowing hair and

sari, what initiates the narrator's journey.

As the protagonist starts to plan his emigration, the role of literature as a shaper of his consciousness becomes underlined. He tries to exit the island via legal channels, bribing clerks and sending applications to universities is America and England. The applications contain praise of the Western institutions and fiction writers (italics in the original):

> *On this small dead-end island, I feel I am a shadow man, a nothing. I feel I'm a stranger in my own room. What consoles me is reading. I sink my teeth into fiction by great Englishmen such as G. A. Henty and A. E. W. Mason. I live my life through their imagined lives. And when I put their works down at dawn I ask myself, Hath not a Tamil eyes, heart, ears, nose, throat, to adapt the words of the greatest Briton. Yes, I am a Tamil. If you prick me, do I not bleed? If you tickle me, do I not laugh? Then, if I dream, will you not give me a chance, respected Sir, as only you can?* (161)

The letter contains allusions to Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, where the questions are asked by a Jewish character, Shylock. Comparisons between the attitudes towards Tamils, whose separatist minority is classified as a terrorist group in many countries, and the persecution of Jews in the Nazi Germany become more explicit later in the story.

The universities reject his heart-felt wishes and his sister runs off with the boyfriend, ignoring the prohibitions imposed on her: “If you lock me in my room, I'll call the police” (162). The protagonist blames the times for her behavior: “In her lilac sari, and with the white fragrant flower wreath in her hair, she didn't look like a blackmailer. It was the times. She, her boyfriend, he himself, were all fate's victims” (163). The sister leaves with the guerrillas, “free[ing] herself of family duties and bonds” (163). Similarly, Venkatesan feels free to pursue a life abroad. As an act of thankfulness for letting his sister go, the suitor promises to send a middleman to arrange his illegal emigration. In short, the impetus for his travels and break with the past is, ultimately, her sister’s rebellion against domestic confinement and her romance with the guerrilla.

Also Venkatesan's dreams of the New World involve romantic fulfillment, as well as artistic fame: “Mr. Venkatesan glided all the way into Halifax, dodging posses of border police. He

married a girl with red, dimpled cheeks, and all winter she made love to him under a goose-down quilt. Summers he set lobster traps. Editors of quarterlies begged to see his poetry" (164). As Stacey and Pearce note, travel is often an initiator of romance, signaling the romance's promise of journey into the new self the transformation entails (18). Mr. Venkatesan's reversed colonial adventure employs this convention. Although he never reaches his intended destination, Canada, he finds romance in Germany. Upon his arrival Venkatesan meets a Surinamese solicitor, who offers to stay his deportation orders and rent him a room at his cousin's hotel. He calls his savior, Rammi, an "angel" and falls in love with his cousin, Queenie: "Her smooth gold limbs, her high-bouncing bosom, even the stockingless arch of her instep about them so tempting a careless sensuality that it made his head swim" (169). Queenie's roots go back to a Sri Lanka, from where her grandfather moved to Surinam. Queenie and her ex-husband, who she refers to as "a romantic moron" (171) moved to Germany, where she runs a hotel for undocumented transients with her nine-year old daughter.

The romance between Venkatesan and Queenie develops from physical attraction to more emotional bonding and finally, a willingness to form a family together: first, Mr. Venkatesan notices Queenie's beauty. Next, they exchange stories, a scene which ends in Queenie saying "You make me remember things I thought I'd forgotten" and Venkatesan "You make me think of things I've never done" (171). The protagonist wants to belong to her family, to take the role of father for Queenie's kleptomaniac daughter: "He would have to scold her as a father might or should without messing things up with Queenie" (173). When Queenie comes to tell him Rammi has found a captain who will transport him, he replies "I love you, I love you" (173) and realizes he does not want to leave: "he followed her down into the front hall in his night clothes. In Tamil movies heroes in his position would have been wearing brocade smoking jackets. It didn't matter. He had made his declaration. Now fate would have to sink the crooked captain and his boat" (173).

However, there are obstacles in the way, and they are derived from the protagonist's undocumented status. Firstly, the hotel has one legitimate guest, a German tourist. While he is staying in, the illegal guests have to be quiet. Here, Mukherjee refers to another narrative of anti-semitism: “Mr. Venkatesan was beginning to feel like a character in Anne Frank’s diary” (172).

Secondly, Alam cites Mukherjee’s comments on the story, and reveals she had first intended for the protagonist to drown with a ship from Hamburg to Canada, but found he “wouldn’t get on the boat” and wrote him a happy ending with Queenie (90). Indeed, the story contains foreshadowings of drowning. As he starts his journey in Tuticorin, India, he is overpowered by the symbolic value of the place: “Tuticorin was the town Mr. Venkatesan's ancestors had left to find their fortunes in Ceylon's tea-covered northern hills. The irony struck him with such force that he rocked and tipped the dinghy, and had to be fished out of the sea” (165). In Hamburg, he refuses to board a ship because he has heard of boats “dumping their cargo into the Atlantic”, generating stories of drowned Tamils (172).

Thus, there are two possible dangers he might encounter: drowning or being caught by the German authorities. His feelings for Queenie are what save him from both threats. The feelings turn out to be reciprocal, and she saves him from the hands of the German: “Then, suddenly, Queenie the beauteous, the deliverer of radiant dreams, burst through the door of the kitchen. ‘Leave him alone!’ she yelled to the man from Lübeck. ‘You’re harassing my fiancé! He’s a future German citizen. He will become my husband!’” (176). The story's ending stands out among the other stories, because it offers a romantic closure for the protagonist's quest for love: he is rewarded with a promise of stability, love conquers the barriers.

From the point of view of criticism, “Buried Lives” has received little attention. Dlaska mentions the story briefly, contrasting its sense of family as duty to the absence of family ties in stories like “Fighting for the Rebound” (119). The forty-nine year old unmarried narrator supports

his extended family with his teacher's salary, which prevents him from pursuing a life abroad and starting his own family. When he breaks free, he is transformed from a dry schoolteacher into a "worldly-wise suitor" (Dlaska 119). Alam notes that Mr. Venkatesan is resilient, but "an unlikely candidate for any quest narrative" (90). The story shows how a diasporic experience – this time initiated by the Sri Lankan civil war – unleashes energies and potential "in people as timid as Mr. Venkatesan" (91).

The narrative's reversal of gender roles in terms of the conventions of immigrant romance is something the secondary sources do not address, as well as the parallels between Jewish exile and the diaspora of today's refugees. The story's insistence on the importance of literature in forming the almost self-denying mindset of the protagonist is also worth emphasizing, for it serves as the sentimental basis for the protagonist's decisions.

The story stands out among the other stories also because it never reaches the Americas where most of the other action happens. Since America is also the author's explicitly stated object of love and redefinition, a story taking place in Sri Lanka and Germany may seem odd. But the German setting allows Mukherjee to vivify a strong myth of ethnic purity –discourse; European anti-semitism of the early 20th century. When the German tourist catches the protagonist and finds the fake passports Queenie's daughter had stolen, he shouts: "We don't want you making filthy our Germany" (175), a line which evokes more parallels between the Jewish and the contemporary situation of refugees and other "illegal aliens". [18]

As in many other stories in the collection, there is a feminist agenda in "Buried Lives". Mr. Venkatesan's solid existence as a dutiful man-in-the-house and schoolmaster comes to an end because of his sister's rebellion. The scenes describing the sister employ a rhetoric of her as an untainted image of flowing hair and sari, docility, purity and harmony. At the end of the story, the

[18] The references to Jews which are made in "Buried Lives" and "The Middleman" correspond to a claim Mukherjee made in the introduction to Darkness, the first short story collection. She names Bernard Malamud as her inspiration, trying to distance herself from the Indian diasporic writer, V.S. Naipaul. (For an analysis on Malamud's influence on Mukherjee's stories, see Carole Stone's article in Nelson 1993).

protagonist again finds his place as the head of family, this time, as a husband and father. The plot is a reversal not only of the direction of colonial adventure stories, but also of the gender roles of a conventional immigrant romance. It is the hero who has to seek for stability and meaning via his role in the family, whereas the heroine is the one who is in a more powerful and stable position. The family formulated at the end of the story is also somewhat unconventional, because it is formed by remarriage, in a hurry and without proposals. There are more references to marriage at the early part of the story; Venkatesan was arranged to marry a girl in Sri Lanka, but the astrologer saw something hazy in their horoscopes and he ended up single. The protagonist himself, a firm believer in finding order in randomness, attributes the horoscope mismatch to fate, so that he could start his family with Queenie and her child.

In the three stories analyzed in this chapter, Mukherjee writes of romantic and sexual ties among characters of Asian and Latin American origin. Each story is told from a male point of view and in two of the stories, “The Middleman” and “Danny's Girls”, the narrators participate in the objectification, even commodification of women. Neither Alfie nor the narrator of “Danny's Girls” is the bad guy of the story, both of them are middlemen, following orders and later rebelling because of their involvement with the women. I have placed Mr. Venkatesan’s story together with the other two because it, too, is focalized around an immigrant man from Asia and “Buried Lives” touches on similar issues as the other two stories.

All three stories develop into a romantic or sexual relationship. The female characters – Maria, Rosie and Queenie – are all described as very attractive to the protagonists as well as to other men. In “The Middleman” and “Danny’s Girls” the women are victims of ethnosexual invasion: the South American Maria has become the trophy in a power game played by the white invaders. Rosie, the Nepalese girl whose real identity is obscured in the process of renaming her in the bride catalog, is commodified as a “merchandise” in an intercontinental mail-order bride network. As

Nyman points out, the body of a migrant woman becomes a crucial site of ethnosexuality in phenomena like globalizing sex trade (153) and the story exemplify his point well. However, the stories do not victimize the women or present the male protagonists as their saviors, as could be expected from a more conventional tale of romance. For example, Marchetti discusses tales of captivity, where the victims are usually white and the whole storyline can be seen as a reinforcement of white, patriarchal values embodied by the white hero, who saves the innocent heroine from the hands of the non-white villain (46-7)[19]. In "The Middleman", Maria has a dreamlike moment of empowerment after shooting the conqueror of her land and body. Rosie is throughout the story described as a proud woman, whose spirit has not been broken in the circuit of human trafficking. The ending of "Danny's Girls" directly addresses the conventions of a heroic savior-narrative, as the narrator rushes to "rescue" the captured heroine, only to find out that nobody's harassing her. Instead, he has to bang the mattress with his "weapon", an umbrella.

The heroine in "Buried Lives" is not in an oppressed position. Queenie stands on her own feet, runs a dangerous business of helping undocumented transients and enjoys the stability coming from her German citizenship. It is Queenie who acts as the foundation of the nationality of the emerging family: the future husband's citizenship will be derivative of hers, he is married into the country. Thus, in all three stories, female autonomy and rebellion are major forces: Maria's liberation, Rosie's pride, Mr. Venkatesan's sister's romantic rebellion and Queenie's self-reliance after her husband's death. The theme of autonomous women becomes even more pronounced in the stories of the following section.

4.2. "Once upon a time we were well brought up women" – Female Autonomy

In the fourth and final analysis section, I will discuss three stories of intraethnic relationships among Indo-American or Indo-Canadian characters. The stories – "A Wife's Story", "The Tenant"

[19] Marchetti gives *Iliad* as an early, folklore example of this pattern and notes the threat of white slavery to pop in Hollywood repeatedly (46). A recent example of the popularity of a captivity tale of white slavery is the film *Taken* (2008), which tells of a former C.I.A. agent rescuing his daughter from a gang of Albanian human traffickers.

and “The Management of Grief” – all have an immigrant woman of Indian origin as their main character. In “A Wife’s Story” and “The Management of Grief”, the woman in question is the narrator of the story, whereas “The Tenant” is told in the third person. As many critics have noted, the choice of protagonists, their gender and ethnicity in these stories is a feature frequently found in Mukherjee’s fiction. For example, Alam names this type of a narrator a “typical Mukherjee protagonist” (83) and Grewal notes on a drier tone that “Depicting psychic violence in the lives of transplanted women is a specialty of Bharati Mukherjee, her hand gloved in distancing irony” (99). The aim of this chapter is to analyze how the “transplanted women” redefine their identities in ethnosexual contexts. There are a number of scholars sharing a similar focus in studies on Mukherjee: Pati notes that a recurrent theme in Mukherjee's short stories is “love, desire and romance as experienced by immigrant men and women from the Indian subcontinent” (197). She argues that material and sexual desire is a central motif in the characters' “self-fashioning in the New World” (*ibid*.). Pati approaches the topic by locating an internal conflict between the old and new cultures for the immigrants: “their Indian paradigms of love, desire, and romance are deconstructed by their American experiences” (198). Sant-Wade and Radell focus exclusively on the female immigrant protagonists of the short stories and the redefinition of their identities. Also Nyman emphasizes the importance of sexuality in the redefinition of the character’s ethnic identity, focusing his analysis on “A Wife’s Story”.

“A Wife’s Story” has received a large amount of critical attention. Nyman treats it as an exemplary story of Mukherjee’s vision, Dlaska dedicates one of her longest chapters to analyzing it and many sources agree that the story represents elements typical of Mukherjee’s works. The protagonist, Panna Bhatt, is an educated woman from India studying in New York. The story tells of her husband’s visit and her ambivalent reactions. Their marriage is a traditional, arranged one, but their holiday in New York resembles a romantic getaway. As Pati notes, the couple discovers

passion and romance in the privacy of the New World apartment (208). Other intimate relationships referred to in the story are Panna's roommate's various encounters with American men and the friendship between Panna and the Hungarian Imre.

The narrator engages in reflections between her identity as an Indian woman and the ethnic stereotypes she encounters in America. When her husband calls her, her name is mispronounced by the operator as Butt, a target of jokes. She spells her name, letter by letter, trying to correct the operator with references to India: "'Bhatt,' I insist. '*B* for Bombay, *H* for Haryana, *A* for Ahmadabad, double *T* for Tamil Nadu.' It's a litany" (31). The scene reflects her struggle to exit from being an object of ridicule and be treated with respect in America.

The story opens with her watching a play by David Mamet with Imre. The play, Glengarry Glen Ross, features Patel-jokes "They work hard, eat cheap, live ten to a room, stash their savings under futons in Queens, and before you know it they own half of Hoboken" (25). Although the stereotypes slightly offend the narrator, her ultimate decision to break the silence is inspired by the sexualized insult on Indian femininity, "*Seen their women? … They look like they've just been fucked by a dead cat*" (25-6). She directs her subtle anger at the man sitting next to her. Laughing at the joke, the man has nudged her elbow off their shared armrest: " 'Excuse me,' I say. My voice has the effortless meanness of well-bred displaced Third World women, though my rhetoric has been learned elsewhere. 'You're exploiting my space.'" (27) Later the same night, she has another moment of audacity: "I'll write Mamet tonight. I feel strong, reckless. Maybe I'll write Steven Spielberg too; tell them that Indians don't eat monkey brains" (29). The thought-chain leading to the narrator's sense of entitlement to dignity involves drawing parallels between Indians and New Yorkers and a summary of women's changing status in India over generations:

> In the back of the cab, without even trying, I feel light, almost free. Memories of Indian destitutes mix with the hordes of New York street people, and they float free, like astronauts, inside my head. I've made it. I'm making something of my life. I've left home, my husband, to get a Ph. D. in special ed. I have a multiple-entry visa and a small

> scholarship for two years. After that, we'll see. My mother was beaten by her mother-in-law, my grandmother, when she'd registered for French lessons at the Alliance Française. My grandmother, the eldest daughter of a rich zamindar, was illiterate. (28-9)

As the quotation reveals, she has come to New York on her own. Seeking an education and an independent existence abroad are decisions which uproot her from a fixed identity of a traditional Hindu wife (Pati 208).

The story discusses the redefinition of identity and desired attributes of femininity in several ways. Panna is in a process of renegotiating her "inherited notions of marital duty" (32) in the context of the New York metropolis. As Nyman notes, the city offers a possibility to build networks with other immigrants and to "perform new socio-cultural roles" (163). Panna lives with the Chinese-American Charity Chin. Charity is a model who "had her eyes fixed eight or nine months ago and out of gratitude sleeps with her plastic surgeon every third Wednesday" (29). In addition to having changed her appearance to meet the Western beauty standards, she is divorced, dating and seeing a nutritionist. The fact that these two women live together could be read as a comment on the heterogeneity among the subjects labeled Asian American. In America, people as different from each other as Panna and Charity are grouped under the same roof. Although they have little in common, the contact between them is also depicted as positive; Charity has someone to talk to of her "lurid love life" (32) and Panna learns to know new people and their stories through her.

Panna's arranged marriage is contrasted with the Western way of dating, marrying and divorcing Charity practices and the two norms on intimacy become even more pronounced as her husband comes to visit her. The husband's name is never mentioned, which tells of the story's atmosphere of gendered reversals (Nyman 163). The husband's visit brings tension to the narrative as he brings patriarchal domination back to the narrator's life, breaking the feminist process of questioning gender roles and norms Panna had started (*ibid*.).

The husband tries to be the one in control, although Panna's experience in America has made her the more competent one in their current setting. While the husband experiences the altered gender roles as a crisis, Panna's reaction is more ambivalent: "He looks disconcerted. He's used to a different role. He's the knowing, suspicious one in the family… I don't know if this makes me unhappy" (33). The portrait of the husband vivifies a rather stereotypical image of Indian men. As many critics of Mukherjee note, her representation of Indian women is consistently more positive than that of Indian men (for example Pati 199). Speaking with a distinctly Indian accent ("All of New York is having sales, no?" (35)), the husband is almost childlike in his endorsement of American material goods: "he follows, swiftly, greedily. He picks up hair rinses and high-protein diet powders. There's so much I already take for granted" (34). He also comes across as a stereotypical tourist, which embarrasses Panna: "I know I'll not be able to describe any of this to Charity, or to Imre. I'm too proud to admit I went on a guided tour" (37). Mukherjee's irony towards the man shows in the double standard he holds for Americanization: he expects Panna to wear a sari and his mother's wedding ring she describes as "ghastly" (33). Meanwhile, he prides in looking Western-executive in his new glasses. In her sari, Panna is supposed to be the one embodying India. Nyman argues that Panna's questioning of her identity as an Indian woman is possible because as a woman, she has an ambivalent relation to the nation: she is both inside and outside of it. Women are used as symbols in nationalism, which keeps them in the margins of the nationalist discourse and denies them full access to its institutions (162). Also Pati interprets the story in a similar way: women's adaptability can be traced to the patriarchal society that has trained them to adapt. On the contrary, when Mukherjee's male characters confront the American atmosphere which questions their patriarchal power, the result is a self-division, leading to acts of shame or madness (205). In short, the husband experiences the new setting as disconcerting because it makes him lose control.

Preserving Panna's traditional looks of Indian femininity is important for the husband for another reason, as well; when other men watch her, he thinks wearing a sari could have prevented that. "I told you not to wear pants. He thinks you are Puerto Rican. He thinks he can treat you with disrespect" (36) he says after seeing a tourist officer flirt with his wife. The comment reveals the husband's attitude, because implicit in it is the idea that Puerto Rican women who wear pants can be treated with disrespect.[20] The opposition between our women as pure and their women as promiscuous is exemplary of Nagel's argument on the sexualization of ethnic borders: the distinction between proper and deviant follows the ethnic boundary (10). Another significant detail in the husband's comment is that it presents ethnic identity as something which can be expressed or performed by clothing.

Dlaska's view on the husband's jealousy is that Panna is trying to evade accusations of infidelity, because they could put an end to her stay in America (98). Indeed, she seems almost to protect the man who flirted with her: "'Oh, him. He said he was from Dubrovnik.' It isn't true, but I don't want trouble. 'What did he say about Dubrovnik?' I know enough about Dubrovnik to get by. Imre's told me about it" (39). Later, she expresses her fear more explicitly after the husband expresses his disappointment with the city: "'New York is full of cheats and whatnot. Just like Bombay.' He is not accusing me of infidelity. I feel dread all the same" (40).

The relationship between Panna and Imre could be only friendship, but there are aspects in it which Panna hides from her husband. Panna and Imre walk holding hands, hug and dance on the Broadway before the husband arrives. During the husband's visit, Imre comes to ask them to see a movie. The scene of the three of them in the same room contains passages of the narrator assessing her feelings for the two men: "In his work shirt and leather tie, he [Imre] looks arty and strung out.

[20] His prejudice is also revealed by the fact that while wanting to visit New York's famous sights, he refuses to go to Harlem, the neighborhood known for its African-American population, high poverty and crime rates. Later, he makes Panna interpret a phone conversation with a black woman, because he is "not understanding these Negro people's accents" (40).

It's only been a week, but I feel as though I am really seeing him for the first time. […] He's a good-looking man, but self-conscious, almost arrogant" (34). The husband mistakes the arty film for a musical, which amuses Imre, whose sympathetic wink makes the narrator comment: "Guilt, shame, loyalty. I long to be ungracious, not ingratiate myself with both men" (34). The scene is followed by her finding new sides in the husband: "I feel I am just getting to know him. Maybe, like Imre, freed from the dignities of old-world culture, he too could get drunk and squirt Cheez Whiz on a guest" (34). The reference to alcohol as a facet of the new-world is revisited when the couple goes on the guided tour. A fellow tourist, Goran, offers to buy her a beer. She answers: "'I don't. Drink, I mean. Thank you very much.' I say those last words very loud, for everyone's benefit. The odd bottles of Soave with Imre don't count" (38). Thus, Imre signifies her break with the past, his name popping up in connection to things the narrator does only in the new world. Panna has broken the codes of behavior of a wife and could be accused of infidelity by her husband.

At the end of the story, the husband has to return to India to solve problems at his factory. Panna's changing feelings for him – the positive ones aroused by their newly found intimacy and the negative ones arising out of his attempts to control her – culminate in the ending. Panna's epiphany suggests she celebrates her transformation: "In the mirror that hangs on the bathroom door, I watch my naked body turn, the breasts, the thighs glow. The body's beauty amazes. I stand there shameless, in ways he has never seen me. I am free, afloat, watching somebody else (40). Nyman interprets the story's ending as Panna performing a version of her old identity, while enjoying her new sense of erotic autonomy (165). Panna abandons her role in the Indian national discourse which writes her as a domestic saint and instead, embraces a sense of diaspora. This move is also "a critique of fixed origins and established national narratives" (Nyman 166). The ambivalence of the story comes from the fact that while promoting the utopian narrative of

America as a site of liberation, it resists the closure of romance and shows the underside of America by the racism experienced by the protagonist. The epiphany with Panna's erotic autonomy is counter-hegemonic in the sense that it resists the dominant narratives of nation, Panna refuses to be "colonized by the state and its patriarchal spokesmen" (*ibid*.). Since the quotation of floating[21] is the last paragraph of the story, the ending does not arrive at a conclusive description of her future, but celebrates the moment of indecisiveness and many possibilities.

As Dlaska notes, Panna has no sentimental notions of her new life (98), which is symbolized in her wry comments during the visit to the Statue of Liberty: "Tourists and dreamers, we have spent our life's savings to see this skyline, this statue. […] The island itself disappoints. The Lady has brutal scaffolding holding her in" (37-8). The symbolic meaning of the Statue of Liberty being under construction and turning out to be a disappointment for the dreamers reflects the overall mood of the story. Panna is in America fulfilling her dream, making something of her life, broadening her horizons. However, America has not delivered its promises to her, but she is still on her way towards being accepted: "It's the tyranny of the American dream that scares me. First, you don't exist. Then you're invisible. Then you're funny. Then you're disgusting. Insult, my American friends will tell me, is a kind of acceptance. No instant dignity here" (26).

The story also reveals the high prize she has had to pay for her new life and the independence gained in the metropolis: the death of her son. The two short references of Panna's dead son are among other passages describing broken or scattered families. Also Imre has a wife and children, but they are "somewhere in the Hungarian countryside" (27). Charity Chin has an uncle who was injured in the Wuchang Uprising, but there are no mentions of the rest of her family, only references to her relationships with American men.

[21] Panna's epiphany has an important role in criticisms on Mukherjee. A good example is Burton's study, where he names floating as an integral element in and a central metaphor of immigrant writing: "Not only as authors of international backgrounds do they float between cultures, but they also mediate between the kind of polar opposites whose parameters currently preoccupy Postcolonial and Cultural studies: home versus exile, local versus global, familiar versus other, insider versus outsider" (10).

The bonds Charity builds with the men are described by Panna with very non-romantic words. She calls Charity's love-affair with her latest date, Phil "horsing around" and approaches love in a similarly non-sentimental way: "'It isn't the money,' Charity says. Oh? I think. 'He says he still loves me. Then he turns around and asks me for five hundred.' What's so strange about that, I want to ask. She still loves Eric, and Eric […] is smart enough to know it. Love is a commodity, hoarded like any other. […] But I say, 'I'm not the person to ask about love'" (30). The story addresses the distinction between Indian, arranged marriages and the American marriages, formed after a romance, supposedly because of love. However, the opposition is also questioned. Enjoying more privacy than ever in the absence of their extended family, Panna and the husband have no-one "to keep [them] modest" (33). Although the opposition between free love and arranged marriage is established in the story, the opposition is also questioned:

> This has to be love, I think. Charity, Eric, Phil: they may be experts on sex. My husband doesn't chase me around the sofa, but he pushes me down on Charity's battered cushions, and the man who has never entered the kitchen of our Ahmadabad house now comes toward me with a dish tub of steamy water to massage away the pavement heat. (35)

"The Tenant" is another story of an educated Indian woman in America, negotiating between the traditions of her country of origin and the lifestyles of her new homeland. The protagonist is Maya Sanyal, a university lecturer in the small town of Cedar Falls, Iowa. When the story begins, she has been in the town for two weeks and signed a lease of one year for an apartment. As already evident from the story's title, her presence is temporary, although she has been to America for ten years. When the story proceeds, Maya's internal monologue reveals that the feeling of non-permanence extends to her identity as an American: "She is an American citizen. But." (100).

The first person Maya interacts with in the story is Fran, a Swedish colleague who tries to befriend Maya by sharing intimate details of her personal life and failed romances. Outwardly, Maya seems similar to Fran: she has divorced her American husband she had met in college and

has experience of casual, meaningless relationships she could talk about with Fran. However, she has “not yet shared stories with Fran, apart from the divorce” (100). The story she does not share involves many more men, enough to have earned her a reputation for “indiscretions” in her former residence. Although “Fran is more friendly and helpful than anyone Maya has known in the States” (99), she seems uneager or unable to connect with her. There are hints towards Fran being insensitive towards Maya (the statement of her being the friendliest person in the States is possibly ironic, because it is made right after Fran refuses an omelet Maya had prepared for the sole purpose of pleasing her), but Maya’s sense of alienation goes beyond the banalities of food and politeness. The recollections of Maya’s experiences in a “women’s group” in the mid-seventies reveal that she has had problems in relating to American women before: “She was too feminine. She had tried to explain the world she came out of. Her grandmother had been married off at the age of five in a village now in Bangladesh. Her great-aunt had been burned to death over a dowry problem. She herself had been trained to speak softly, arrange flowers, sing, be pliant (102). These remarks on the differences between proper and encouraged forms of femininity in India and America pave way for Maya’s behavior later in the story.

Maya's attitude to Indian femininity is explored in another domestic scene. Fran has arranged a meeting between Maya and a Brahmin family, the Chatterjis. They live “in the cutting edge of suburbia”, a neighborhood with many immigrant families (103). Dr. Chatterji’s critical attitude towards America and their cherishing of Indian customs is contrasted with the more Americanized lifestyle of Maya: “She's not necessarily on Dr. Chatterji's side is what she wants to get across early; she's not against America and Americans. She makes the story – of marriage outside the Brahminic pale, the divorce – quick, dull. Her unsentimentality seems to shock him” (103). The dinner at the Chatterjis is elaborate, including heaps of food, Indian tea, nostalgic music and discussions on Maya’s relatives. As Mrs. Chatterji asks Maya about her family, she reads between

the lines: “Nothing in Calcutta is ever lost. Just as her story is known to Bengalis all over America, so are the scandals of her family” (104). For her, the curiosity is a way of saying “*I know the dirt*” *(ibid*.). By her interethnic marriage to a white American, Maya has rebelled and pursued a life outside the box she was raised to fit into. Sant-Wade and Radell mark that her reputation among the community members has made it impossible for her to return and be accepted as a respectable Brahmin (13). However, she is not at home in her lifestyle as an Americanized woman. In Dlaska’s words “She defies the past, but fails to break through into a new life and forge a satisfactory present” (101). Dlaska notes that Maya hides behind a false identity, exploiting the environment’s expectations of her: “scandalous divorcee, successful academic, helpless Indian woman, mysterious lover, adventurous immigrant” (103). Mukherjee tells her story in third person, which Dlaska interprets as a way of emphasizing Maya’s lack of authority over her own life as she wavers between the rejected Indian identity and the unfitting American one (*ibid*.).

Although the Chatterjis seem to meet the standards of a traditional, clean Bengali Brahminness Maya has rejected, their family secrets come out during the evening. The mysterious noises coming from upstairs are made by Mrs. Chatterji's nephew, who is kept hidden for falling in love with a fellow student from Ghana: “Our poor Poltoo wants to marry a Negro Muslim” (106). The idea of marriage outside one's caste, religious and ethnic group is a “horror” for the Chatterjis, but Maya feels sympathy for the graduate student: “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.” (106) Maya has differentiated herself from her role as an upper-caste Indian daughter by intermarrying a white American, and also Poltoo’s interethnic romance disturbs the stability of the Chatterji family: “It shouldn't be a big deal. But the more she watches the physicist, the more she realizes that 'Brahmin' isn't a caste; it's a metaphor. You break one small rule, and the constellation collapses... Love is anarchy” (106-7). Poltoo's romance is a version of an intergenerational conflict narrative: the older

generation is depicted as more conservative, placing value on traditional dating codes and maintaining ethnic purity by banning interethnic relationships, whereas the second generation is more willing to blend (Gupta 122, Lowe 63). Lowe criticizes narratives of intergenerational conflict for their inherent Orientalist logic of stressing the internal coherence and mutual incompatibility of host and immigrant cultures. “The Tenant”, however, presents different responses among people of the same generation, Maya and the Chatterjis.

Maya’s encounter with the Chatterjis ends in a scene which embarrasses the Indian patriarch. After driving her home, Dr. Chatterji unzips his pants, lamenting on the state of his marriage: “Divorced women can date, they can go to bars and discos. They can see mens, many mens. But inside marriage there is so much loneliness” (108). Pati reads Dr. Chatterji’s behavior as an example of how the “self-division experienced by Mukherjee's Indian men as they encounter the sexual liberation of the new country leads to acts of shame, madness, even violence “ (203). One way to interpret Maya’s rejection of the ridiculed patriarch is that it shows the collapse of the masculine power structure in the South Asian American community (Pati 199). There is also a point to be made about Maya’s position as an Americanized woman: Dr. Chatterji speaks English to Maya and Bengali to his wife and his proposition of adultery further mark Maya as an American, as opposed to a respectable Brahmin in his eyes. Thus, Dr. Chatterji seems to follow a logic of defining female respectability along the axis of ethnicity.

According to Pati, Mukherjee juxtaposes the traditional system of arranged marriages to the American system of romance culminating in marriage in “The Tenant” (198). However, neither wins over the other, but both are shown to contain downsides. Although the scene at the Chatterjis’ presents traditional, arranged marriage as a collapsing constellation, Maya’s pursuit of happiness takes a surprisingly expatriate route after it. She goes to the library’s periodical room “an asylum for homesick aliens” (108), longs to “feel what she had felt in the Chatterjis’ living room: virtues

made physical" (*ibid*.) and reads through the matrimonial columns of *India Abroad* magazines. She answers the notification of Ashoke Mehta, an ear-nose-throat specialist looking for "the new emancipated Indo-American woman" (109). Instead of the Indian femininity expected from her in youth or the American way she opted for in her adult life, the matrimonial columns reveal new desired attributes: "You who are at ease in both worlds, you are the one. She feels she has a fair chance" (*ibid*.).

When seeing Ashoke, Maya's reaction is romantic in an almost parodic way: "the man of Maya's dreams floats towards her as lovers used to in shampoo commercials" (109). Meeting this "Hindu god touching down in Illinois" makes Maya feel "ugly and unworthy. Her adult life no longer seems miraculously rebellious" (110). Dlaska reads Maya's behavior as a sign of failed assimilation. Her desire to find an Indian partner and cherish the kind of Indianness she finds in Cedar Falls is not genuine, but "a reaction to the emptiness of her American lifestyle" (102). Furthermore, the stylicized image of Ashoke as a Hindu god suggest a slip into "sentimental romanticism of a Hindu movie" from Maya's part, meaning her continuing refusal to take responsibility for her future (Dlaska 104). Pati interprets the reference to the playboy Ashoke Mehta as a Hindu god as one of the strategies to make their courtship "a parody of South Asian matrimonial advertisements and social practices" (201). Hindu gods are polygamous and impulsive, similarly to Maya and Ashoke. Despite being listed as matrimonial advertisements, Mehta's and other Indian men's ads are for an uninhibited, casual relationship, not a marriage (*ibid*.).

In the previous sub-chapter, I analyzed "Danny's Girls", arguing that the story shows how the South Asian practice of arranged marriages becomes exploitative when bought into America. In "The Tenant", the characters find romance through matrimonial announcements, a system which combines features of arranging marriages (listing the desired qualities of the spouse) and dating

(the ads are not for marriage only and the lovers themselves do the choosing). Thus, "The Tenant" presents an alternative to the polarization between old and new world customs. Maya's and Ashoke's romance is the most successful in the story, although there are several other romantic liaison referred to: Maya's marriage, the Chatterjis' marriage, and the affairs Maya has with other men[22]. The intraethnic romance negotiating between two cultures is the one to outlive Maya's rebellious intermarriage, the Chatterjis' traditional marriage and the casual lifestyle of dating Maya had tried in America.

The last story of the collection, "The Management of Grief" also explores intimate relationships among immigrants from India, told from the point of view of a wife and a mother, Shaila Bhave. Although the narrative perspective is familiar from other stories, the story differs in terms of its location and storyline. It is set in Canada, Ireland and India but more importantly, it discusses the ending of a relationship rather than the beginning of one. Dlaska notes that the story stands out among the others also because of its pace and stillness (108). Although the story does not involve a romance in the sense of developing a relationship between two characters, it offers insights into the themes of this chapter: female autonomy and the negotiation between cultural paradigms on intimacy. In this case, the focus is on the prize the narrator pays for her independence and the cultural norms on intimacy governing (re-)marriage and widowhood.

The narrator's husband and two sons have died in an air crash.[23] Tapping argues that Mukherjee's fictional texts cannot be read without taking into account her non-fictional, autobiographical writings, and that "The Management of Grief" is the story where these links are

[22] In the story, she dates and moves in with an armless man named Fred, who characterizes both of them as "freaks", a comparison which makes Maya comment "She knows she is strange, and lonely, but being an Indian is not the same, she would have thought, as being a freak" (112).

[23] The story is based on a real event, the 1985 Air India disaster, of which Mukherjee co-authored a book with her husband (*The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* 1987). In the non-fictional work, the authors interrogate the reasons for the bombing, revealing the latent racism of Canada's treatment and media coverage of the incident. Most of the passengers and victims were Canadian citizens of Indian descent, but rather than address it as a Canadian sorrow, the tragedy was displaced as an Indian problem. Furthermore, the terrorists in question were also Canadian, albeit with Sikh extremist politics.

most clearly drawn. As Tapping argues, it is a story about racism in Canada. Racism is present in the story not directly at the level of plot and action, but in the structure of the Canadian society as it is depicted by Mukherjee (36). For instance, it surfaces in the bitterness the mourning relatives feel for the official press coverage of the accident: "'How can these preachers carry on like nothing's happened?' I want to tell him we're not that important. You look at the audience, and at the preacher in his blue rope with his beautiful white hair… and you know they care about nothing" (180). Further attacks on Canada's politics are made when the narrator is in Ireland: "The Irish are not shy; they rush to me and give me hugs and some are crying. I cannot imagine reactions like that on the streets of Toronto" (187). When talking about her parents, she comments: "My parents are progressive people; they do not blame communities for a few individuals. In Canada it is a different story now" (189). Also the character of Judith Templeton, a social worker assigned to manage the grief of the mourners, is an embodiment of Mukherjee's distrust in the country's handling of the crisis.

While the official information fails or disappoints them, Shaila and her neighbors rely on unofficial networks of communication. Shaila heard of the accident from her neighbor, Kusum, who heard it from another neighbor whose cousin called her because his son had heard it on a rock channel. Thus, the story emphasizes the importance of community from very early on. Most of the action is described by the narrator in an outwardly silent, internal monologue with remarks on what she would like to say but does not. The first words she speaks out in the story are to her friend Kusum: "'I never told him that I loved him,' I say. I was too much the well brought up woman. I was so well brought up I never felt comfortable calling my husband by his first name" (181).

In contrast to "A Wife's Story", where the well brought up woman not calling her husband by the first name extends to the level of the whole story, in "The Management of Grief" the husband is named in the first paragraph, before anyone else: "when my sons were small, on Mother's Day

or when Vikram and I were tired, and they would make big, sloppy omelets" (179). Kusum comforts Shaila by telling her their husbands must have known they loved them: "Modern young girls have to say it because what they feel is fake" (181). The comment on the falseness of modern young girls introduces the first of the intergenerational conflicts in the story. Kusum has two daughters, Pam and a younger one who was on the airplane and is never named. Pam is "the daughter who's always in trouble" (181), dating Canadian boys and wearing tight clothes. The little sister dies on her way to spend her holiday with her grandparents in Bombay, but Pam is saved because she chose to stay in Toronto to waitress at McDonald's: "'If it's a choice between Bombay and Wonderland, I'm picking Wonderland" (182). The conflict between the mother and daughter becomes evident in Pam's last words before she exits the narrator's world: "'Mummy wishes my little sister were alive and I were dead'" (182).

Seeking closure, Shaila travels to Ireland to search for the bodies and hope for a miraculous survival. Then she continues to India, where the solutions of her parents and grandparents fail to comfort her (Dlaska 107). The generational differences are described by the narrator as: "The zamindar's daughter kept stubborn faith in Vedic rituals; my parents rebelled. I am trapped between two modes of knowledge" (189). In India, Shaila notices there are different expectations for women and men: most of the widowers remarry quickly, whereas the women do not. In Pati's words, Shaila "discovers her own displacement in the old country" (209). Her final decision to return to Canada is inspired by her visit to a temple in a small Himalayan village: "as I make my offering of flowers and sweetmeats to the god of a tribe of animists, my husband descends to me" (190). The husband tells her to finish alone what they had started together and she returns to Toronto.

Because of the air crash, Shaila is ripped off from her secure, stable identity as a wife and a mother and is forced to remake herself. When she arrives in India, she shouts at a customs officer

for being suspicious about her friend's coffins and comments on the reaction and the change it signifies: "Once upon a time we were well brought up women; we were dutiful wives who kept our heads veiled, our voices shy and sweet" (189). In "A Wife's Story" and "The Tenant", well brought up women also discarded their old selves and forged new identities, but in "The Management of Grief" Mukherjee shows that this process is not always a self-chosen path.

In order to outlive the crisis, the narrator follows the advice her family gives her. Jouhki lists spirituality and other-worldliness as characteristics assigned to India in Orientalist discourse (12). Vikram's appearance in the Himalayan temple and later, on the streets of Toronto, touch on this image of Indianness, the spiritual and extrarational side. The story does not present spirituality as an unproblematic part of "Indian culture", but the differences among Indians are revealed by the mother's rationality: "My mother has no patience with ghosts, prophetic dreams, holy men, and cults" (191). In "The Management of Grief", extrarational presences coincide with the narrator's forced redefinition of her identity as an Indian wife and mother. Dlaska sees them as lending fairy-tale qualities to the story, especially its ending: it suggests that everything is possible, including the discarding and adopting of new selves (107).

The narrator's role in family is questioned. After being ripped off from the family she belonged to as a wife and mother, she returns to India and becomes, "once again, an only child of rich, ailing parents" (189). However, she eventually finds solace in the community of mourners, the "relatives" (191) as they are called.

From the cultural paradigms on widowhood, she chooses neither the strictly Vedic rituals of shaving one's head her grandmother had done, nor the rationalism of her parents and the many widowers who fulfill their duties by rapidly remarrying. Although she returns to Canada, she rejects the official stages of crisis management offered by Judith Templeton, the representative of Canadian authorities. In Pati's words, Shaila presents a "counterpoint to the anarchy and confusion

of Mukherjee's other Indian immigrants and the Canadian authorities" (209). What she does is a negotiation between the two cultures of mourning in Canada and India. As is the case with most of the stories in the collection, also Shaila's narrative leaves the ending open to many possibilities: "I do not know where this voyage I have begun will end. I do not know which direction I will take. I dropped the package on a park bench and started walking" (197).

All three protagonists discussed in this chapter have been transplanted from their identities as wives, the stories begin with the "heroine's initial loss of social identity" (Stacey and Pearce 16). Panna has chosen to "broaden her horizons" and is in a process of reconsidering herself, Maya has "broken with the past" but experiences a form of nostalgia for it, whereas Shaila is forced to redefine herself after her family dies.

In the previous analysis chapter, I argued that Mukherjee's interethnic romances between white and Asian characters disturb the coherence of the white American family. The diasporic romances of the male narrators analyzed in chapter 4.1. presented family as duty, but also as a site where male power can be extorted. In this section, families are presented as broken or scattered: "A Wife's Story" and "The Management of Grief" are narratives by women who have lost their children. "The Tenant" starts at a point when the protagonist has broken with her Indian family and divorced from her American family. In the story, she witnesses the symbolic collapse of the Chatterji-family and forms an intimate bond with Ashoke Mehta. However, the story ends before revealing the final course of their romance, and the lack of romantic closure leaves her without a role in a new family, she does not arrive at a fixed identity, sanctioned by familial ties.

None of the stories arrives at a conclusion of providing the female protagonist, the immigrant woman, with a socially fixed identity. Instead of linking them to familial order, the stories describe the women's quest for autonomy and independence. As Nyman argues, female (erotic) autonomy threatens the social order, for it distances women from their domestic and reproductive roles inside

families, the building blocks of the society (161). Meanwhile, the stories depict masculine domination in a state of crisis. Pati's analysis of Mukherjee's representation of Indian men and their self-division is exemplary of this point. The ridicule towards Dr. Chatterji in “The Tenant” and the unnamed husband in “A Wife's Story” reveal the double-standard these two men hold and the discourses of female purity they want to maintain. In contrast, the absence of the husband and family is the sorrow in “The Management of Grief”.

Another issue rising from the stories in this chapter is the way they discuss arranged marriage. In “Danny's Girls”, the system is compared to the mail-order bride network. In “A Wife's Story” the opposition between an Indian arranged marriage and an American “love-marriage” is deconstructed by Charity's serial monogamy and the scenes presenting the Indian wife and husband as lovers on a honeymoon. Similarly, in “The Management of Grief”, there is a strong emphasis on love inside an arranged marriage. “The Tenant” shows the protagonist dissatisfied with both options, the American romance starting with dating and the Indian, arranged marriage. Instead, she combines aspects of both systems in her romance to Mehta.

Mukherjee depicts the women's position in an ambiguous way. Although all of the stories present cultural mixing as something positive (Panna's comments on floating, Maya's negotiation between the Indian and American marriage codes and Shaila's turn to spirituality amidst the Canadian officialdom), the position of these women is also depicted as difficult. In “A Wife's Story”, the protagonist says “I know how both sides feel, that's the trouble [...] postcolonialism has made me their referee. It's hate I long for; simple, brutish, partisan hate” (27). “The Tenant” contains several references to Maya's position: “She can't talk about the dead space she lives in” (112). In “The Management of Grief”, the existence of many conflicting values is also referred to as confining: “I am trapped between two modes of knowledge” (189).

Similarly, the stories undercut their celebration of assimilation by showing the racism and

stereotypes the protagonists encounter. “A Wife's Story” is the one where the stereotypes are explicitly referred to, ranging from the insulting play and Hollywood films on Indians to the encounters Panna has with Americans. In “The Tenant”, the expectations of femininity are what trouble the protagonist. She seems to be aware of the expectations of Indian women Americans have: “She realizes Indian women are supposed to be inventive with food, whip up exotic delights to tickle an American's palate” (98). She does not fulfill the expectation of being a culinary goddess, although in her experiences of a women's group in the mid-seventies, she had been considered “too feminine” (101). In “The Management of Grief”, racism is present on a structural level, in news and the official story of the air crash. The incompetence of the social worker also tells of the indifference towards the differences among the mourners. The last story is in keeping with Mukherjee's open critique of Canadian multicultural politics: “for Mukherjee, in the mosaic model of national community, one's visibility as an 'ethnic' subject becomes a signifier of absolute cultural difference” and “this conception of multiculturalism denies the presence of ambivalence or hybridity through its assertion of superficial pluralism and its belief in the existence of clear boundaries between cultures” (Gabriel 2005). Gabriel analyzes Mukherjee's attitude to both the mosaic-model Canada represents on her writing and the melting-pot America is considered to be and locates her vision somewhere between the two:

> critics tend to read Mukherjee's professed advocacy of the melting pot as merely an acquiescence to the hegemonic American cultural policy of assimilation, a debate with which this paper has attempted to engage in order to demonstrate that Mukherjee's apparent embrace of melting pot multiculturalism is far more radical than it appears. (*ibid*.)

The radical aspects of Mukherjee's embrace come from her naming the melting pot as ideally a site of liberation and identity re-formation, but undermining that ideal by depicting it as a battleground, a non-harmonius space, altered by the immigrants.

5. Conclusions

> The United States exists as a sovereign nation. “America,” in contrast, exists as a myth of democracy and equal opportunity to live by, or as an ideal goal to reach.
>
> I am a naturalized U.S. citizen, which means that, unlike native-born citizens, I had to prove to the U.S. government that I merited citizenship. What I didn't have to disclose was that I desired “America,” which to me is the stage for the drama of self-transformation. (Mukherjee, American Dreamer -essay).

Comments such as the one quoted above have made Bharati Mukherjee a contested figure in American literary studies. Her resistance to hyphenation and celebration of the way America has transformed her have evoked criticisms against her assimilationist politics. Her embrace of the rhetoric of the American Dream of equal opportunities is also considered problematic because of her own, privileged class position. In this thesis, I have followed the argumentation of critics like Nyman, Koshy, Drake, Dlaska, Alam and Gabriel, who read Mukherjee's fictional stories in a more positive, or, at least in a more multidimensional light, noting how they manifest a fluid and performative sense of identity, not one that is based on the Orientalist logic of stressing the absolute differences between East and West. The critical edge of her work is not in showing her immigrant characters resisting Americanization, but in depicting the racism, violence and stereotypes the characters encounter. Undercutting the seeming celebration of the characters' transformations by these instances of critique creates a much more ambivalent vision of America.

The focus of this thesis was on romance and in particular, I approached it as a framework for discussing national belonging, sexuality and ethnicity. Mukherjee's fiction has generated a number of analyses for its representation of South Asian Americans and for her relation to the American mainstream, and this question has been present in my analysis, as well. However, I did not want to focus exclusively on this side of her stories, to treat her fiction as representation of her political views. Neither did I want to ignore her position as a debated, sometimes tokenistic figure in order

to conduct a purely aesthetic reading of the stories. Paying attention to romantic conventions and Mukherjee's use of them has allowed me to combine these two impulses. I have referred to the previous studies by Koshy, Pati, Nyman and Li, but applied them on *The Middleman and Other Stories* as a whole, drawing parallels between the stories. What emerges is a reading of the collection as disturbing the tenets of romance. Mukherjee's immigrant romances challenge the understanding of nationality, ethnicity and sexuality as stable and natural categories.

In the analysis, I found four aspects which support a reading of the stories as critical towards the hierarchies of gender, ethnicity and nation: they confront ethnosexual stereotypes, reformulate the American family, are ironic towards romantic conventions and refer to the conditions and social histories of the characters.

The ethnosexual stereotypes the stories address are the myths of Asian women as the sexual model minority and Asian men as effeminate and undesirable. Importantly, Mukherjee also challenges the norm of whiteness by depicting her white heroes and heroines in less positive terms. For example, in “Fighting for the Rebound”, the narrator, Griff, is cast as a romantic hero, as a white knight who saves his girlfriend, Blanquita, from the hands of the abusive Chief. However, their thoughts towards the Philippine Blanquita are revealed to be similar. Thus, the story shows the underside of the white hero.

As evident from the theoretical section, family with its ideal characteristics is one of the primary metaphors of the nation, which makes it a crucial intimate institution for imagining nationhood. In the first part of the analysis, I focused on interethnic relationships, showing how the ethnosexual encounters between white and Asian characters destabilize the norm of the white, American family. In “Jasmine”, “Fathering” and “Loose Ends” the dissolution of the family happens explicitly, whereas in “Orbiting” the Afghan hero is included in the family. However, the story deconstructs the whiteness of the Italian-American deMarcos family, emphasizing their

immigrant histories. This multicultural, private space, where whiteness emerges as a constructed ethnicity, is where Mukherjee's vision of a hybrid, American family is most optimistic.

In the second part of the thesis, the focus was no more on questioning the whiteness of normative American families, but the stories continue the interrogation into the meaning of family. The storylines of autonomous, rebellious women became the connecting factor in the six stories of immigrant romance. Importantly, the stories employ female autonomy as a force which disturbs the status quo. In “The Middleman” Maria's violent empowerment coincides with the start of the revolution, in “Danny's Girls” the proud mail-order bride, Rosie, makes the narrator question his role in the business and the emigration of Mr. Venkatesan in “Buried Lives” is triggered by his sister's rebellious romance. In “Buried Lives” the trope of the immigrant romance, a story with the heroine wedded into the country is reversed in terms of gender, for it is the heroine, Queenie, who acts as the foundation of the newly emerging family. “A Wife's Story”, “The Tenant” and “The Management of Grief” examine female autonomy from the point of view of Indian women, who have either chosen or been forced to remake themselves in the New World. The three stories start in a situation typical for romances, in the heroine's initial loss of social identity, but they resist the romantic closure. Instead, the stories end in moments of indecisiveness, suggesting a more fluid and situational understanding of identity.

The aspect of romance is present not only in the rewriting of family, but also in the irony towards romantic conventions. The conventional storylines rewritten include the interethnic romance culminating in marriage, the Cinderella-like sublimation of class boundaries in the name of love, captivity tales and interethnic rape fantasies. In chapter 4, I noted how Mukherjee questions the opposition between an Eastern, arranged marriage and a Western “love marriage” by depicting love inside arranged marriages and in stories which blur the boundaries between the two systems. In “A Wife's Story” and “The Management of Grief” the opposition between the two is

questioned by locating love in an arranged marriage. Also “Danny's Girls” and “The Tenant” feature intimate institutions that combine aspects of both of the cultural norms.

Conventional romances are often criticised for their asocialness. Considering the focus and scope of this thesis, I have not been able to provide a detailed analysis of the references to social contexts as they appear in the stories. However, I argue that their existence as such is a sign of attentiveness to social histories. This is only one example of the issues I feel are still waiting to be studied in detail in the collection. For example the Jewish references appearing in many of the stories would make an interesting topic, as well as other instances of intertextuality. Because of my goal of situating Mukherjee in relation to America, the references to romance have been interpreted in connection to American conventions of romance. A different approach would have been to focus on her use of for instance Hindu and Tamil cultural material, which are explicitly referred to in some of the stories. However, this would have, again, taken me further away from my aim of reading Mukherjee's stories as romances that seek to redefine America by mainstreaming voices previously defined as marginal.

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