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THE USE OF IMMIGRATION HISTORY AND THE QUESTION OF ASSIMILATION IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S "ORBITING"

A b s t r a c t. The goal of this article is to discuss the use of history in Bharati Mukherjee's short story "Orbiting" from the collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). It is argued that Mukherjee refers back to the controversies that accompanied Italian immigration to the US at the turn of the 20th century in order to provide the background for the present day immigrants (the post-1965 wave), and challenge the view that their assimilation is impossible. The historical context of American attitudes towards the so called "controversial" European immigrants is provided. The essay makes also use of sociological concepts of the Dillingham Flaw (Parillo) and assimilation (Alba and Nee).

Key words: Asian American fiction; assimilation; immigration; the Dillingham Flaw.

The question of assimilation in Bharati Mukherjee's short story "Orbiting" has been given a certain amount of consideration, yet this article aims to shed some light on an aspect so far overlooked by critics, that is, Mukherjee's use of immigration history in the story. It is argued that Mukherjee attempts to show how the newest waves of immigrants, however controversial they may be, can assimilate into American society, just as in the past certain immigrant groups considered as "unassimilable" eventually joined the American mainstream. Mukherjee refers back to the history of Italian immigration to the US and in particular their problems with assimilation in the late 19th and early 20th century. Since Italians have entirely merged with the American majority, despite the initial difficulties (Alba and Nee), their ex-

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perience serves as a reason to hope that also new immigrants who experience difficulties with reception in the US may in the future become part of the mainstream. Thus, in "Orbiting" the writer attempts to challenge common fears about contemporary immigration with the use of history. She also displays a conviction that the process of integration not only changes an immigrant but is also transformative for the national identity.

Bharati Mukherjee was born in Calcutta, India, in a wealthy and traditional family, which, even with a "patriarchal father" practiced a transnational and even cosmopolitan lifestyle. She studied in India and the US, married a Canadian (writer, Clark Blaise), lived 14 years in Canada, and finally decided to settle down in the US and become a naturalized American citizen in 1988. Her most famous novel is *Jasmine* (1989); apart from fiction Mukherjee has written also memoirs (with her husband), numerous essays and articles. The short story "Orbiting" comes from her second short story collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), for which the writer received the National Book Critics Circle Award. The stories examine various problematical issues of immigrant experience, and the variety is strengthened by the different ethnicities employed in the stories: Vietnamese, Filipino, Italian-American, Afghan, and Caribbean. The range of representations tries to give a glimpse of "a new America, an America whose landscape was changing due to the presence of a large number of immigrants from all over the world" (Nelson 244), thus giving credit to the transformations of America's population after the country opened its gates to immigration with the Hart-Celler Act of 1965.

The post-1965 wave of immigration to the United States has inspired a lot of controversy and fears about a possibility of disintegration of American society and has incited numerous analyses of the phenomenon (for instance, Barone, Parillo, Waters et al.). The new mass migration, in contrast to the immigrants from the past, originates mainly from Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean Basin, and it has significantly increased the ethnic diversity of American society. As a result, questions concerning national unity have been posed, which in turn spawned questions whether these contemporary immigrants can be assimilated and how the concept of assimilation should be defined.

The importance of history for the correct understanding of contemporary phenomena cannot be ignored. In order to define processes which may govern the integration of the contemporary immigrants in the American society Richard Alba and Victor Nee in their book *Remaking the American Mainstream. Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* study the history of

migration. They compare the late 19th and 20th century immigration from Europe and East Asia with the contemporary immigration from Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean Basin. Their basic conclusion is that controversial immigrants are assimilating, despite the perception that they are not, and this process has a powerful impact on the re-definition of the mainstream. The idea that certain immigrants are unassimilable, which the authors challenge, is based on what Vincent N. Parillo calls "the Dillingham Flaw."[1] Defined as "any inaccurate comparison based upon simplistic alegorizations and/or anachronistic observations" (Parillo 526), the term means that unfair generalizations are created if modern perceptions are used to explain the past. Speaking broadly about African Americans as a single entity and neglecting their diversity, or calling the 18th-century immigrants from the British Isles "British," in this way suggesting a single cultural group, which in fact they were not (Parillo 526) are examples of the Dillingham Flaw. Parillo notes that the Dillingham Flaw can also be relevant to the perception of contemporary immigrants:

> Another manifestation of the Dillingham Flaw is to suggest that today's steadily increasing ranks of Asians and Hispanics present an unprecedented challenge to an integrative American society. The undercurrent of this thinking includes numbers, physical appearance, and alleged nonassimilationist patterns. Yet these have always been factors in native-newcomer interaction and current concerns are echoes of those raised about earlier groups, such as racist responses to southern Europeans' darker hair, eyes and complexion, or anti-Semitic reactions to Eastern European Jews. (526)

According to Parillo, it is a "myth of bygone cultural homogeneity" (525), and misconceptions about rapid assimilation of various ethnic groups in the past that spawn concern about the assimilation of current immigrants. Studying history with the awareness that the Dillingham Flaw misguided certain ethnocentric perceptions is the key to fully understand the making of the American identity in the past and today: "It is essential to know truly what we were in the past if we are to comprehend what we are and what we are becoming" (Parillo 527).[2] Thus the knowledge of immigration history of various European nations, sometimes quite turbulent, appears to help evaluate accurately the present situation.

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[1] Alba and Nee do not refer to this term in their book.

[2] Although Parillo's major aim is to show the ever-present multiculturalism of American society, he claims that it is often a stage towards assimilation and that the nation's mainstream group is expanding (540).

Alba and Nee state clearly that their findings put them in opposition to the old formulation of assimilation as presented by Milton M. Gordon in his *Assimilation in American Life* (1964). What they find objectionable in Gordon's theory is, firstly, the idea that the culture of the majority is superior and therefore most influential, which leads to the belief that acculturation can proceed in only one direction—towards the adoption of the "core culture", that is the cultural standard set by the host society. For Gordon "core culture" was mostly tantamount to the culture of middle-class, white Protestants of Anglo-Saxon origins. Secondly, they dismiss his view of assimilation as a largely one-way process, when one cultural element is substituted with its equivalent and which therefore produces a feeling that "one group 'adopts' the cultural traits of another" (Alba and Nee 25), which leads to the assumption that in the process of integration of minorities the majority is not affected, except for "minor modifications," such as food or place names (Alba and Nee 25). In contrast to Gordon, Alba and Nee indicate that assimilation may also result from a process of "group convergence" (25), that is a fusion, and therefore transformation, of two or more elements:

> the impact of minority ethnic cultures on the mainstream can occur also by an expansion of the range of what is considered normative behavior within the mainstream; thus, elements of minority cultures are absorbed alongside their equivalents of Anglo-American or other origins or are fused with mainstream elements to create a composite culture. The cultural fusion that results, especially evident in urban life, remakes the repertoire of styles, cuisine, popular culture, and myths, and incrementally becomes incorporated into the American mainstream. (Alba and Nee 25)

The re-examination of earlier conceptions of assimilation and the study of immigration history lead Alba and Nee to the conclusion that the view of assimilation as proposed by Chicago sociology school still holds. Thus their definition of assimilation is based on the assumption that the mainstream is the "composite culture," in other words, culture "evolving out of the interpenetration of diverse cultural practices and beliefs," which is a reference to "the mixed, hybrid character of the ensemble of cultural practices and beliefs that has evolved in the United States since the colonial period" (Alba and Nee 10). One has to recognize that American culture "was and is mixed, an amalgam of diverse influences" (Alba and Nee 25), which is by no means stable and unchanging but continues to evolve "from the unsystematic fusion of various regional and racial customs and traditions" (Lind Michael qtd. in

Alba and Nee 25). Assimilation is therefore perceived as a fusion and convergence, a process of change that works in two directions: transforming both an immigrant and the host society.

The inference that the nature of the mainstream is changed in the process of minorities' assimilation is based on the examination of the late 19th century immigration to America. Certain European ethnic groups considered as unassimilable at that time gradually entered the mainstream, and their "suitability as Americans" now can hardly be questioned. The groups which were particularly controversial for native born white Americans because of cultural and physical differences were eastern European Jews, Italians, and the Irish. The religious differences posed problems (Jews and Catholics vs. the Protestant mainstream), as well as a huge social and educational gap: "By western European standards, the masses of southern and eastern Europe were educationally deficient, socially backward, and bizarre in appearance" (Higham 65). These groups were considered racially different, here facial features and skin color played a crucial role. On top of that, another factor observed among representatives of these groups was their overt resistance to assimilation, which they viewed as "disappearance" into American society (Alba and Nee 68).

All of these factors contributed to the view that eastern European Jews, Italians and the Irish were "ultimately unassimilable" (Alba and Nee 68). Seen as a threat to the country's stability and homogeneity, at the turn of the century they became particular targets of nativist hostility. According to Higham, Italians and Jews "fared worst in most places" (66), with the situation of Italians even worse than that of Jews (Higham 66; Dinnerstein 54) because of high levels of illiteracy and extremely low living standards. Additionally, southern Italians had the reputation of "bloodthirsty criminals" (Higham 66) and were viewed as barbarians even by northern Italians (Dinnerstein 55).[3] In the case of Eastern European Jews who arrived to America at the end of the 19th century initially it was culture and appearance that generated antagonisms, not only from native born Americans but also from German Jews who immigrated to America earlier than Jews from Eastern Europe (Higham 66–67, Dinnerstein 55). As Alba and Nee maintain, the per-

[3] Higham reports these anti-foreign sentiments directed against Italians: "A dirty Irishman is bad enough, but he's nothing comparable to a nasty … Italian loafer" (65). Dinnerstein relates the pejorative names that native born white Americans used to describe Italians: "wops", "dagos", "guineas", "Chinese of Europe", who are "just as bad as the Negroes" (54).

ceptions of the physical differences in Jewish appearance led in the past to rhinoplasties (nose surgeries), which were considered as a "device of assimilation" (63), an attempt to resemble WASPs in a greater degree. Later, the anti-Semitic sentiments were additionally fueled by the "Shylock stereotype,"[4] in other words, a belief in Jewish avarice and unscrupulousness.

Despite the initial hostilities generated by the cultural and physical differences, which led native-born white Americans to think that Italians or Jews are "ultimately unassimilable" their assimilation eventually took place. They became incorporated into the American mainstream and that occurred through the transformation of the majority: "their eventual achievement of white racial status was not just a matter of relabeling the same populations, though this is hardly a simple shift. But, in fact, the perceptions of, and social values attached to, different physical features changed over time; standards of beauty stretched" (Alba and Nee 63). Consequently, the study of the immigration history leads Alba and Nee to the conclusion that the most controversial groups, as it was observed with Italians and Jews at the turn of the 20th century, can be assimilated, and that in the assimilation process "the majority changes too, and … the American mainstream has been continually reshaped by the incorporation of new groups. This historical reality is mirrored today in the view that American society increasingly reflects a composite culture made up of diverse ethnic elements" (64).

These findings are the basis for the claim that the assimilation pattern (in Alba and Nee's understanding of the concept) will be an important route for many descendants of the post-1965 immigration and for contemporary immigrants. Despite the great ethnic and racial diversity of these groups, since the sending countries are located mainly in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean Basin, for these immigrants it is possible to become part of the American mainstream in the future. Certainly, there are also other patterns of their incorporation. Alba and Nee mention racialized minorities (Chinese, Japanese and now black Caribbean immigrants), maintaining cultural pluralism, which may be attributed to growing transnationalism (Alba and Nee 65). Furthermore, the transformation of the mainstream does not entail that non-European groups will be redefined as "white" in the future, although it happened before. What Alba and Nee anticipate is rather "a break with the conventional equation of the mainstream with white America" (13).

[4] Shylock is a character in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* – a Venetian moneylender.

Bharati Mukherjee proves both in her personal life and her literary works that she considers assimilation[5] the most appropriate way of belonging in a new country. She criticizes the policy of multiculturalism as rather dangerous in its establishment of strict divisions and binary oppositions. She warns against establishing hierarchies such as central vs. peripheral, "us" vs. "them" mentality, and against "cultural balkanization," which may be a result of the manifestation and preservation of various groups' cultural differences. In her view maintaining one's ethnic identity works to the detriment of immigrants: they locate themselves, or allow others to locate them, in the inferior position. Secondly, such an attitude leads to certain particular interests, and lack of commitment to the national interest, in other words, it means working against the good of the nation of which one has chosen in fact to be a part ("American Dreamer", "Beyond Multiculturalism"). To manifest her ideology of avoiding divisions she rejects hyphenation—she prefers to be called American instead of Asian-American or Indo-American writer.

Mukherjee's fiction is meant to be a vehicle for her personal beliefs and political stance regarding the immigrant's identity. The writer is quite explicit about her goal and about the ideology that informs her writing. What permeates her fiction is a desire to portray various aspects of assimilation and in this way—the changing American identity: "I mean for it [fiction] to be about assimilation. My stories center on a new breed and generation of North American pioneers" (Edwards 17). Mukherjee's conception of assimilation reflects Alba and Nee's ideas—in her view assimilation works in both directions, for it leads to the transformation of both an individual and American society. An attempt to describe the process of mutual transforma-

[5] It must be noted, however, that Mukherjee frequently dismisses the word "assimilation". She tries to distance herself from it quite officially, for example on her website for the University of California, Berkeley, where among her academic interests the concept of multiculturalism is juxtaposed with "mongrelization" (http://southasia.berkeley.edu/bharati-mukherjee—accessed 9 March 2015) instead of assimilation or the melting pot. There are several reasons why she prefers to use the word "mongrelization", the term she borrows from Salman Rushdie, and which denotes syncretism, or synthesis (Gabriel, "Routes of Identity"135), both cultural and biological (Mukherjee "American Dreamer"). In her view, it is more accurate, because it immediately suggests the mutual exchange of cultural elements in the process of assimilation, that is, transformation of identity working in both directions. Secondly, by this word she wants to acknowledge that the outcome of various cultures mixing is unpredictable. Thirdly, she distances herself from the political context of assimilation as established at the beginning of the 20th century, when assimilation was a coercive practice of the state. Although her concept bears a strong resemblance to the discourse of hybridization, Mukherjee wants to dissociate also from the academic discourse, stating that the term "hybridity" is too scientific or biological.

tion has become the main purpose of the writer: "my literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show that I (and the hundreds of thousands of recent immigrants like me) are, minute-by-minute, transforming America. The transformation is a two-way process; it affects both the individual and the national-cultural identity. The end result of immigration, then, is this two-way transformation" ("Beyond Multiculturalism" 34).

Accordingly, Bharati Mukherjee can be viewed as a very conscious writer with a clearly established literary goal. It is no wonder, therefore, that critics have identified the themes of self-transformation of the individual immigrant and the impact that new immigrants have on American society as two major themes in Mukherjee's fiction. The prominence of these themes may be different in various texts, and thus, for example, Jennifer Drake writes: "Mukherjee's stories do not simply promote American multiculture or celebrate assimilation; rather ... [Mukherjee] represents the real pleasures and violences of cultural exchange" (61; see also Carter-Sanborn), while other scholars see the two themes as interconnected and inseparable: "Mukherjee gives central importance to the symbiotic process whereby today's immigrants are changed by the mythology of America but, in turn, alter an American paradigm once influenced largely by the dominant tradition of Eurocentric thought and public life" (Muller 172). Generally these statements are accurate in grasping Mukherjee's agenda for writing. The question of how she achieves her goal, that is, how she speaks about the possibility of assimilation for representatives of the new wave of immigration, and dispels fears about their incorporation by the American mainstream, may turn one's attention to the incorporation of immigration history in her texts. The problematic moments in the history of the 19th-century European immigrants, that is the unwelcoming attitude displayed by Americans, which in the course of time changed entirely, provides an interesting context for the problems experienced today. In her essay "Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature" Mukherjee makes a reference to Jews, whose suitability as Americans was, just like that of Italians, questioned. And yet also Jews joined the mainstream and became its important influence: "The Jewish contribution to every aspect of American life, and America's eventual embrace of it, speaks to a two-way assimilation" (686).

The short story "Orbiting" reflects Mukherjee's ideas of a two-way assimilation, with a particular emphasis on the ever-fluid, ever-transforming American identity. The story comes from the collection *The Middleman and*

Other Stories (1988), in which different ethnic narrative voices show multi-ethnic, multi-colored America. It is the American diversity that Mukherjee, as an American writer, wants to embrace and present as a genuine American identity: "Mukherjee feels free to speak for other nationalities and backgrounds because they are her natural subject as an American writer, and the many colored strands of people's lives are the quintessentially American experience" (Cardichi 94). For Cardichi, Mukherjee's concept of American identity is a "kaleidoscope vision," which could be associated with multiculturalism, yet the critic speaks also of the "amalgam," "admixture or mélange" (95) of various cultural traditions, in which new patterns are created, and this could point to the idea of the melting pot. Also Sharmani Patricia Gabriel in her reading of the story balances between the two concepts, and eventually agrees that the narrative promotes fusion or a "'mongrelized' model of multiculturalism" (Gabriel, "Between Mosaic and Melting Pot").

Nevertheless, "Orbiting" can be read as an articulation of assimilation in Alba and Nee's understanding of the concept and similarly to this sociological study it contextualizes the assimilation of new immigrants by referring to controversial immigrants from the past. The narrative attempts to show that representatives of the new immigration can also be assimilated, in other words, can enter the American mainstream and contribute to its transformation. The ethnicities of the characters represent the ethnicities characteristic of the old wave of immigration (the late 19th century) and the new one, which has continued since 1965. Accordingly, the deMarcos family are assimilated Italians, while their guest Roashan is from Afghanistan. The narrative establishes a link between the possibility of assimilation of a new immigrant from an ethnically diverse immigrant group and a complex history of Italians in the US, who, once deemed as unassimilable, eventually entered the mainstream and thus led to its expansion.

"Orbiting" presents an American family of Italian roots preparing for Thanksgiving and then the celebration itself, to which Rindy's (the narrator) new boyfriend is invited. The history of the deMarcos family shows how convoluted the immigrant status may be and how various degrees of assimilation the members of one family can display. Rindy's mother was born in south Italy (she is a Calabrian) while Rindy's father may be a third- or second-generation immigrant, since the narrative mentions his father, Arturo deMarco, travelling as "a fifteen-week-old fetus when his mother planted her feet on Ellis Island" (58). Rindy, Cindy and Danny were born in the US but what immigrant generation they are it is quite difficult to establish, taking

into consideration their newly arrived mother and well-established father. The cultural patterns of the family are also quite mixed, in Rindy's words "Dad's very American" (58), yet he makes frequent references to Italy, as it is his "safe source of pride" (58); also the way of expressing love in the family (by grumbling and scolding) he calls "the North Italian way" (58). What is more, he does not object to christening his daughters with Italian names: Renata and Carla. Only in junior high the girls rename themselves as Rindy and Cindy. So it can be said that a family of immigrants, although at this point quite well-assimilated, hosts another immigrant to their celebration of Thanksgiving: Rindy's new boyfriend Roashan (Ro) comes from Afghanistan and has spent only several months in the US.

The narrative establishes an analogy between the contemporary immigration and the controversial European immigrants from the turn of the 20th century by mentioning appearance. This used to be a matter of controversy in the case of southern Europeans and eastern European Jews, this is also a contentious aspect of contemporary immigration. Rindy's parents are startled by her boy friend's looks and his un-American manners, and so they can hardly utter a word at first. Rindy tries to adopt their perspective: "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" (68). By the reference to Ro's physicality, particularly to the color of his skin, and the comparison with European immigrants from the south and east the narrative establishes a direct link between his situation and that of the unwanted European immigrants from the turn of the 20th century. Dark skin complexion, perceived as a marker of racial difference, used to be an obstacle for assimilation in the past, generated fears and hostility of the white American majority towards Jews or Italians. Nevertheless, a look at the American majority shows that dark skinned European nations have been eventually incorporated by the American mainstream and that the perception of whiteness has changed, while the racial difference between northern and southern Europeans has never been acknowledged. Consequently, it seems that the narrator expresses an intuition that different appearance also in the case of new immigrants should not be a basis of fear to anyone.

A careful examination of the family members' emotional reaction to Ro reveals another way in which the narrative creates analogy between the situation of a contemporary immigrant and the despised and unwanted immigrants from the past. Rindy focuses especially on the reactions of her fa-

ther, which is significant because the father, described as "very American," stands for those who have already been shaped by the life in America and regard themselves as Americans. He symbolizes the way in which native born Americans sometimes react to new immigrants, as if forgetting the fact of their own immigrant roots. The father finds it difficult to overcome the cultural differences: he does not want to discuss politics with Ro, but would rather talk about sports, and he is shocked by the fact that the young man does not drink alcohol. Consequently, Ro evokes only negative reactions at first, Rindy observes that her father is "quietly livid" (69), she presumes he "must be under stress," and when Ro talks about his life in Afghanistan, describing tortures he experienced in jail: "Electrodes, canes, freezing tanks" (73), Rindy notices that "Dad looks sick" (73). Both the father and his son-in-law, Brent, do not take Ro seriously but feel anxious around him and "think he's a retard" (72).

The emotional reactions that Ro provokes resemble the attitudes that Italians evoked in native born white Americans at the turn of the 20th century: they aroused hostility and were even subject to violence (Alba and Nee 68). The situation seems to be very ironic: Rindy's father displays revulsion and shock but himself comes from a group that in the past stirred similar reactions. Consequently, the narrative pictures a certain continuity between different waves of immigrants. The past experience of Italians shows that what was considered unthinkable and highly improbable, that is, integration with the American majority, has actually become reality. As a result, this may also be a pathway for contemporary immigrants, who often evoke anxiety because of their ethnic and racial difference. In the future also they might be incorporated into the American mainstream, be on equal terms with other citizens. The narrative gives a symbolic expression of this possibility: when the family sit down at the table Rindy asks Ro to carve the turkey, not her father. Ro accepts this invitation. In this way Ro's status is equaled to the status of a native born American.

The narrative considers the self-transformation of the new immigrant focusing on the question of what it means to become an American. It celebrates the concept of American identity as an amalgam of cultures, whose adoption is a voluntary decision of an individual. Thus American identity is based on the view that American culture is a mixture of various elements where no element is more important than another. As it can be inferred from the narrative, it is very likely that Ro will undergo a transformation in the course of living in the US. As a matter of fact, Rindy offers to be a facilita-

tor in this process, announcing her willingness to get not only a new legal identity for Ro: "I will give him citizenship if he asks" (74), but also a new cultural identity: "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 in the Afghan way" (74-75). It seems that despite Rindy's eagerness to teach Ro American ways the statement that she is an "Americanizer" with a "patronizing attitude" (Nyman 159) may be too strong. Rindy is not intimidating or coercive but she respects Ro's decision, as her first statement "if he asks" (74) implies. This context of voluntariness cannot be ignored. What is more, she will do it in the name of love "I realize all in a rush how much I love this man with his blemished, tortured body" (74).

Secondly, the narrative celebrates the "composite culture," American identity made up of different cultural elements, with a significant omission of a WASP identity. To be "an American" for Rindy means to be like Brent Schwartzendruber, who wears a gold chain and is a rebel, since his father is an Amish farmer (62). Brent rejects the traditional and restrictive lifestyle of the Amish community; with his gold chain he celebrates American consumerism, with his marriage into an American family of Italian—so Catholic—roots, he celebrates lack of prejudice. To be "an American" means also to be like her Dad, who is "very American" and yet enjoys the ties to his homeland, Italy. Likewise, Ro is accepted despite the religious and cultural differences, because it is still possible to find similarities between the Afghan newcomer and Americans. Ro's "nicked, scarred, burned body" (74) initially signifies the man's alterity, the fact of belonging to Afghan culture, referred to as "a culture of pain" (74), and it is a marker of a great divide between him and the deMarcos family. Rindy reflects: "I am seeing Brent and Dad for the first time, too. They have their little scars, things they're proud of, football injuries and bowling elbows they brag about. Our scars are so innocent; they are invisible and come to us from rough-housing gone too far. Ro hates to talk about his scars" (74). Later Rindy compares Ro to a famous American actor: "Ro is Clint Eastwood, scarred hero and survivor" (75), which may suggest that just like Rindy, American imagination will find its ways for embracing an Afghan newcomer, while the American identity, which is already "the composite culture," will embrace and at the same time will be enhanced by yet new cultural elements.

The concept of assimilation working in two directions is continuously reinforced. Not only the self-transformation of an immigrant but also his or her

influence on American identity is highlighted, as the references to other ethnicities and their contribution to the shape of the American mainstream show. Ro's capacity to make a cultural intervention into the American mainstream is expressed both directly and symbolically. It is his sheer presence on the American soil, in the deMarcos family that has the transformative power. It leaves a mark on the consciousness of the family members, and is, in fact, an influence they want to resist, as the father's behavior exemplifies: he wants to change the subject of the conversation with Ro and when he fails he is outraged and visibly disturbed. The change of perspective is considered as a potentially dangerous element destabilizing the sense of security, it may result in the change of sensitivity and what follows—transformation of identity. Ro's stories cause also Rindy's uneasiness and lead to a new assessment of reality: "When I'm with Ro I feel I am looking at America through the wrong end of a telescope. He makes it sound like a police state, with sudden raids, papers, detention centers, deportations, and torture and death waiting in the wings" (Orbiting 66).

The narrative highlights the cultural intervention that Ro makes in the American mainstream in a symbolical way. Ro decides to carve the Thanksgiving turkey with his own knife—Afghan dagger, thus introducing a foreign cultural element to the traditional American celebration. As a result, a certain variation in the tradition occurs, possibly with a long-lasting effect. Such an alteration already took place in the past in the deMarcos family, when each Thanksgiving Grandma deMarco served two full dinners: one American and one with Grandpa's favorite pastas (67). Rindy is an advocate of change when she puts the visitor, Ro, in charge of cutting the turkey. She understands and accepts the inevitable mutability of life, which she observes even between the generations' lifestyles. "Okay, so traditions change" (61) is how she comments on her father's complaint that she does not even own a dining table. The fact that there is no table goes against her parents' expectations for a proper Thanksgiving dinner, and a tone of gentle reproach can be heardwhen her father remarks: "We've always had a sit-down dinner, hon" (61).

The story lucidly and powerfully illustrates Mukherjee's views on assimilation of immigrants presented in her essays and interviews. The writer's goal is to elucidate not only the individual transformation of an immigrant but also the impact that people's mobility has on American society. She wants to work against anxiety or even hostility directed at newcomers, which she observes to be on the rise in the US already in 1990s ("Beyond Multiculturalism" 31–2). The strategy she adopts to dispel fears and anxiety linked to

immigration is the use of immigration history, which shows that the processes of immigrants' integration were often gradual because marked by reservations about the suitability of newcomers. In "Orbiting" the context of Italian-American family which hosts an Afghan visitor provides a background that cannot be ignored. Immigrants from Italy, so unwelcomed at first and despised for their cultural, economic, and alleged racial differences, eventually joined the American majority, thus transforming the notion of what it means to be an American. It seems reasonable to interpret the short story as conveying the idea that remembering the problematic moments in the history of US immigration can help welcome the present-day immigrants.

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WYKORZYSTANIE HISTORII IMIGRACYJNEJ I KWESTIA ASYMILACJI W OPOWIADANIU BHARATI MUKHERJEE „ORBITING"

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest omówienie odwołania do historii w opowiadaniu Bharati Mukherjee „Orbiting" ze zbioru *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). Autorka artykułu stawia tezę, że Mukherjee nawiązuje do kontrowersji towarzyszących włoskim imigrantom w Stanach Zjednoczonych na początku XX wieku, aby na tym tle umiejscowić imigrację współczesną (po roku 1965) i w ten sposób podważyć pogląd, że asymilacja tej grupy jest niemożliwa. W artykule zostały przedstawione historyczne postawy Amerykanów wobec budzących kontrowersje imigrantów z Europy i zostały użyte takie socjologiczne pojęcia, jak „błąd Dillinghama" (Parillo) i asymilacja (Alba i Nee).

Słowa kluczowe: literatura Amerykanów pochodzenia azjatyckiego; asymilacja; imigracja; błąd Dillinghama.