

## An interview with Bharati Mukherjee

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## Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee was born in 1940 in Calcutta, and moved to the United States at an early age to attend a two-year course on creative writing. There she married writer Clark Blaise, then a fellow student, and stayed in North America since. Among her most famous novels are *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), *Jasmine* (1989), and *Desirable Daughters* (2002). The latter, which relates the story of three generations of a Brahmin family, forms part of a trilogy whose second volume, *The Tree Bride*, has been recently published. She has also written two collections of short stories, *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) —which earned her the American Book Critics Circle Award that same year— focused on migration experience in North America.

In this interview we asked Bharati Mukherjee about *The Tree Bride* and about her own experience as a migrant writer as the primary concern of her work.

## Interview

**Elena Martos:** *Let's first talk about your latest novel, The Tree Bride. What's the meaning of 'Tree Bride'?*

**Bharati Mukherjee:** In the nineteenth century Tara Lata is married off in my caste and subcaste, which is like the purest of the Brahmins in the province of Bengal. A woman could only go to Heaven by marrying and worshipping her husband as God. I think it was because there were more women and not that many men, so the men could have many wives. In the case of my character, her bridegroom died of snakebite —as it often used to happen in that part of the country— on his way to the wedding pavilion on the night of the wedding. And so the worst luck is to be a widow, second worse luck is to be considered a bringer of death. So then what the society would do is marry off the girl to a proxy groom, and the proxy groom is a tree or a stone or a crocodile. So Tara Chatterjee's ancestor was married to a tree, and the society's expectations was that if you are a woman your life is wasted anyway, so you devote yourself to men and community service. But what this character does —as did a few historical women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century— was that she became the sanctuary-giver to

freedom fighters, young Indians fighting against British colonial rule. And so she gave her house and her money, and by the end of the second novel, which is actually the second volume, *The Tree Bride*, she is dragged off to jail and killed there by the British magistrates.

And what I did in *Desirable Daughters* was talk about how much you want to give up in this age of globalization and national identity, unlike US immigration of the 1930s and the 1940s, when if you wanted to become American, you were supposed to learn English, not as in the 1980s and 1990s when people from India with degrees came to America or Japan or Europe and say ‘we’re both’, you know, like that kind of accommodation where you don’t have to become totally American, and you can have a sense of balance. Her quest was trying to find out how much of the Indian traditions — Hindu traditions— I want to get rid of that I didn’t like and how much of the American traditions do I want and how do I make it off fit for me. And there are three sisters in this book so that one sister replicates the India she’d left behind. She becomes more Indian in New Jersey, in the U. S., than she would ever had been in India, and she thinks that this is not for her and goes back to India and becomes her version of modern Indian urban housewife and mother. And on the other hand, the younger sister wants to experiment. She is the natural American in the sense that she wants to push the frontier, and find individualism vs. communal identity. When I began this book I knew that it would be more than just one novel, you know? And when I finished the novel it ended with the narrator and her son, a fifteen-year-old son who turns out to begin going back to the ancestral village and finds out where they came from where the freedom fighting took place and where the Tree Bride ancestor —after whom the narrator is named— lived and died. And as I was writing those last paragraphs I realized that my narrator didn’t know who she was as a new American if she didn’t find out more about the past. So I began *The Tree Bride* as a kind of very American roots search but Americans need to know their roots —like what village in Spain or village in Italy their family, their great-grandmother etc. came from. Now I know seven generations, because Hindu Indians have to know the names of the seven male side. And I know the name of the ancestor’s village because if someone asks —if you ask me— ‘where is your home?’, in the sense of homeland, I’m not supposed to say San Francisco even though that’s where I live and there’s where I feel most at home. I have to say the village now in Bangladesh that I haven’t seen until about five years ago when I was doing research for this book. So that

sense of places, that ‘who I am’ as an Indo-American really is not just about individual family. It’s about politics, it’s about history; even the language that I’m fluent in it’s because the British ruled India rather than some other country – or if India had been independent all along things would have been very different. What I mean is that I have not made the choices, that there are limits to free will and identity because of history and politics. So I’m re-writing the format of the American roots search novel by saying ‘people like me, who have come from non-European countries are changing what it means to be American’.

**E. M.:** *You are not for hyphenation then, like Indo-American, Italian-American...?*

**B. M.:** No. Well, I say that when I want to define myself as Indo-American, that’s great. But I don’t want the mainstream to always describe me as Indo-American if they don’t also describe, say, John Updike as an Anglo-American, or John Irving as European-American or someone else as Italian-American. You know, there is a kind of covert racism implied in saying those are these are just regular Americans, and the rest of you are not quite, hyphenated and all. So that was a political stance that I took when I wrote an essay called ‘A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman’ and said I’m against that arbitrary and selective hyphenation. And in a novel called *Jasmine*, which is the book immediately after this, the editor wanted to italicise every Hindi word I used, you know any word taken from Indian languages, which was the convention at that time. And I said no, this is a new America and that just as the word ‘pizza’ has come into the American language now you have to deal with the fact that since 1965, when the immigration laws were changed to allow more numbers of non-Europeans to come, we bring with us our foods, our languages and that if it is natural for this character to be code-switching, using words from two languages, then that’s part of American vocabulary. So that’s how I fought for changing the way, the convention, of how to write those words.

**Paula García:** *Yes because if, I mean, writing in italics some of these expressions, is just turning the text into an anthropological study, probably.*

**B. M.:** Exactly. You’re so right –that my big mission was to get readers to see that these are novels, that these are works of art, and that they succeed or fail on the

basis of whether I have moved you as a writer with my characters, you know? They are there to help the reader enter the imaginary play, whereas academics and certainly editors, that is, the book publishing industry, wanted these to be ethnographical works, like, are they true to, am I learning, about National Geographical kind of sociological texts.

**E. M.:** *Which is quite simplistic. When do you plan to finish the trilogy?*

**B. M.:** I'm on leave this semester from my full-time teaching at the University of California Berkeley, and I've just started the last, the third volume of the trilogy. If *Desirable Daughters* was about the present, a thirty-seven-year-old woman who is trying to find her way through pursuit of personal happiness, which included leaving husband, divorcing husband, being a single mother and taking on a lover, dumping lover, and trying to get back with her husband, then *The Tree Bride* was about going back to the past, finding out who you are in the present by retrieving the past. And the last volume—I don't know if it'll turn out this way finally—will deal with the future where boundaries are so unreal. The Internet collapses time, place; I may be in San Francisco and I want to buy something, buy a television, for example, and I may be talking to a young man or a young woman in Bangalore, India, because they are working for that outsourcing. So it's going to be the story told by the same narrator but about the uncertain future and the collapsed boundaries—in terms of place—of the son, who will be about seventeen during the writing of this novel, and her new daughter born to her at the end of *The Tree Bride*. So, a son from the first phase of the marriage and a little daughter from the second; that's the future of us who have made our homes across borders, crossing, having crossed borders and who are constantly crossing borders.

The old immigrants to the US, European immigrants for example, and of course the slave industry, the African American community descended from slaves, they came and they stayed because they wanted to or they were forced to because of war, economics, whatever or post-slavery conditions. The new immigrants, that sort of cosmopolitan, you know, they shuttle constantly so that sense of home-belonging all that I'm trying to work out; we think, and we therefore re-dramatize our contemporaries.

**P. G.:** *Is it also a contribution to your own country or culture if you go back? Is it just a way of telling that you go on being a part of all this?*

**B. M.:** I go every year and all my family except my older sister —we're three sisters like the sisters here— are all in India. So my entire family amily clan is there. I don't need huh India as a cultural recharging of batteries; I don't feel lost or bereft outside India. But I love my family and huh for me it's a way not only of seeing how much India has changed —the India I grew up in. If I were saying 'I'm an Indian writer but living forty years outside', I wouldn't know that India, I'd let Indians write about contemporary India. The India I want —I feel I can have any authority to write about— that I feel I can get inside are about the border-crossers in a way and when I came there were hardly any women coming by themselves to the US or to Europe. Now every family, low- or middle-class families even someone or other, you know like hoards, scores of families from every small town, big city, even some villages, have all moved to New Jersey or Detroit. So that's why there's more reception among Indians to my work, especially to this book, which was a best-seller —the Indian edition was a best-seller in India— because they understand now the mentality or the ups and downs, the emotional crises that these people go through. Whereas for a while they would say 'Oh, you're right but America, Indians in America has nothing to do with us. Why are you not coming back to live in India?'

**P. G.:** *Probably we have a rather different perspective of immigration; in the case of Spain many people went abroad and went to work in Germany but it was only for job opportunities and afterwards most of them came back.*

**B.M.:** I think that's what the original urban professional Indian immigrants did because the laws were revised in 1965 but people didn't actually work there so long — they didn't actually arrive in Canada and the US until about 1972. And they came with very little infants, or they had their children immediately born in North America and they had exactly the same psychological expectations —we'll make enough money, we'll retire early and we'll go back. But suddenly they found that they needed both worlds, that they couldn't relocate permanently. The newest phenomenon —and that's going to be in my next novel— is people who have, say, high level jobs in IBM or Silicon Valley kinds of technical high-tech worlds, and who find that their daughters are

like eleven and that there are many of them who are going back with a lot of money — not cutting off connections completely but they want that Indian heritage that modern Indians living in India no longer care about. They all want to wear European brand-named blue jeans and listen to European rock music; but Diasporic Indians want to provide Kathakali dance and Hindu culture or Islamic culture for their children and they have enough money to set up new schools in big cities.

**P. G.:** *You also deal with other minorities in some of your texts, you choose people from everywhere.*

**B.M.:** Yes, I'm very interested in border-crossing. If I'm interested in a character, and I feel confident enough that I can get into that communal group, then I have absolutely no problem —aesthetically or politically— crossing that gender boundary, or cultural or ethnic boundary. A lot of my American friends will say, women writers for example, they don't want to write or read about men. I don't have that problem and I don't know if it's because the first few years of my life there was still British colonialism, it was still the British Raj, and textbooks hadn't been changed so that the first Indian history textbooks that I was exposed to were Europeans writing very colonial versions of Indian history and we had to say 'we trashed the Indians', and that 'we' was both the British and me reading about my people. So that I think helped me as writer to get into both sides. This is what I think —I have no idea if that's what makes it so much easier for me to slip into. And in *The Middleman and Other Stories* I was very interested in the two-way transformation. My first book of stories, *Darkness*, was about South Asians going into Canada and the US, whereas by the time I came to write this I felt confident as an artist and about immigration to say, you know, white Americans, 'traditional' Americans are also being changed because we've come, and we are being changed by the Americans also.

**E. M.:** *So when you write who are you having in mind, I mean, your ideal reader is an immigrant?*

**B. M.:** No, I think of my primary reader as being an American —he or she can be white, can be minority, it doesn't matter— but the important thing is that I'm writing from the inside from a very different perspective about places that the reader thinks she

or he knows. Let's say someone in Iowa —I'm going to give them, give an Iowan, minority or mainstream, a version of Iowa in *Jasmine* that the reader has never thought of. And then I hope —as in Bergman movies, or the late Bengali film director Satyajit Ray, you know, movies that are located so specifically in a Swedish community or in a Bengali village but we all watch and we all felt we have learnt something shared something— like that I hope that reading my books gives the reader, no matter where, an insight into the way human nature works, the failures and the small heroisms. But I think of myself as an American writer writing about the changing American scene. So I'd say that I'm an American of Hindu Indian origin and the languages I speak have shaped me in many ways. My first language was Bangla, and the first eight years I didn't hear anything but Bangla, my mother tongue. And the melody, the euphony of that language I think is still very important to me, so that when I'm writing in English, the musicality matters to me and I will choose one synonym over another because of the number of syllables or how it sounds.

**P.G.:** *Do you feel a part of the mainstream American literature?*

**B. M.:** Well, I don't think I can say I feel a part of mainstream but I want to delete that whole sense of American, old idea of America, that white writers are the mainstream and the rest of us are hyphenated and on the periphery and so I want to expand it to say there are so many different ways of being American. It's not the melting-pot idea that you have to be Anglo and you have to speak with a certain accent and look a certain kind, wear certain clothes. So that's what I hope my fiction helps dissolve. And the most touching letters I got were after *The Middleman* came out and I got some attention because of the big prize and a lot of the readers wrote to say that, you know, I have an Indian dentist or I have an Indian doctor or in the shopping mall, I see them shopping away, but they never really seemed real to me; they were stereotypes and now I'm beginning to think of them as fully emotional human beings with their floods and their desires —they didn't exist as people to them before or let alone as new Americans changing us.

**E. M.:** *You said you don't have many problems writing from the point of view of say an Iraqi Jew, for example. So how about writing from the point of view of a man?*



**B. M.:** For whatever reason I have no way of explaining it. Maybe it is because I read novels as a kid and as a teenager from both male and female points of view and it wasn't a politicized scene in those days about gender. If I can hear the voice of the character then I go with it. I may not be able to write about a woman character as well as some male who's shouting inside my head and whom I can now visualize—I know where he would buy his clothes, what kind of books he would read, what kind of movies he would go to if he goes to the movies. So you know it's like that individual that gets hold of me and it's a magical moment when the character is actually talking to me. Until that happens my fingers are on the keyboard and I'm trying to write about something. Once I've gotten so inside the skin of the main character to narrate, then the adventures dictate themselves. I do an awful lot of research before I begin for everything, and I think that's because I never left the university. I started formal school at age three and I've been inside for so long, and I have access—I have taught in Columbia, I've been teaching for the last fourteen years at Berkeley, McGill University in Canada was the first university. I've always had access to fantastic libraries and with Indian holdings; these three that I've mentioned are specialized in Indian holdings, so that I've always ingested an enormous amount of material. But once I start to write I don't want to look at the material. Then the character has to dictate what part of the eleven years of research will actually show up. *The Holder of the World* which was like four novels ago—came out in 1993-1994—was about a colonial Massachusetts woman who goes as the wife of an East India Company worker to India so, out of Massachusetts but still an English citizen because America hadn't become America, USA. And the novel had a modern narrator that covered three hundred years and three different countries, colonial Massachusetts, England and India with those enormous amount of trade between the East India Company and India. And it was really eleven years of solid research. I did other things in between, but once I started I was so into those characters and those scenes that I didn't have to look at any book.

In *Jasmine* there are only one or two paragraphs set in the basement of the upper west-side Manhattan Columbia University building where my main character is the nanny to an American faculty physics professor and his wife and she does laundry with Caribbean indentured labourers in the basement of this American building. Of course I was in that building living and doing the laundry with other families, but to write that scene I read every single published and unpublished article, research material available

about the hostile relations between these African Caribbean women who come leaving their own children behind in order to make enough money and send it back to the family, and the white young mothers who are lawyers or interior decorators but whose feminist high-tech careers are based on the underpaid jobs of these other women. It was a very hostile relationship in those days. So in order to feel confident I think that I try to do as much research as possible, so I know that world. And then maybe only one sentence will come up afterwards.

**P. G.:** *I see that most of your characters belong to high classes, and some of them come from an Indian background and they emigrate, as is the case of Desirable Daughters. Why is this so?*

**B. M.:** Yes, and also *The Tiger's Daughter*, yes. I didn't know until a reviewer pointed out that about the narrator of both my first novel *The Tiger's Daughter*. I didn't realize it was autobiographical, but the rest of the family did. But with *Desirable Daughters* I had originally thought that I wanted at that time in my life to write the biography of a generation and a class in Calcutta that's extinct. That way of life has gone and in the case of my generation of women in this exclusive caste, we were brought up to speak a certain way, to speak the same politics, to have the same accent, same handwriting, dress a particular way, have expectations of life that were similar. And that's not the way things worked out but I wanted that communal biography—you know that non-fiction communal biography—I couldn't do it. It seemed as if I couldn't do it until I allowed myself to write fiction, to create a character who would somehow reveal through her adventures that particular boundary that upper-class very restrictive lifestyle imposed on the women. So I took the idea of the three sisters from my own life. I took the idea that each of us was sent to the States just to study, and the idea was to go back and marry the man picked out by my father. And then they made very very different decisions vis à vis living in a foreign country, and about their homeland, and then the novel wrote itself. So I invented all the adventures and so on but those characters from *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Desirable Daughters* are upper class because I wanted very much to write about a particular lifestyle. It's about my sense of vanishing class that didn't have the right to exist anymore and then history and politics did not allow it to continue anyway, whereas the stuff in between, like my second novel, *Wife*, is about a middle-class woman, and a lot of the characters in *Darkness* are more like illegal

aliens. And as a writer, as long as I can imagine that life, I want the right to enter any class, any gender, any ethnic and linguistic group.

**P. G.:** *Yes, and I think this is something a reader can see in the text, which is something very valuable because you don't get the feeling that it's a woman the one that writes or it's just someone belonging to a particular class, that the text is directed to the same class.*

**B. M.:** Right, take for example the second story in *The Middleman and Other Stories* called 'Loose Ends', which is from a Florida Vietnamese point of view, you know? For me the stories—I have two books of stories, I'm working on a third which is just nearly done—I planned them as a book, as a collection, it's not picking one from here one from there, so there's a central concept for the book and this was about two-way transformation. I use things that I read in the newspapers, or overheard dialogue on the public bus—I don't drive, so I use public transportation—just suddenly fit themselves in the stories. I was teaching in a different town from my husband when I was putting these stories together, and my husband sent me a clipping of a murderer—that guy went crazy in a Florida motel and killed the daughter of the owner, who was cleaning the rooms and it became a story of the frustration of the insider who says, I've lived for my country and look at all these dark people who are coming in by the backdoor and who own more than I do and so on. So I was able to understand and have some sympathy for all sides and inhabit that rage, but then as an author you can have wisdom that is larger than the knowledge of any of the characters.

**E. M.:** *And how would you write about terrorism after 9/11? Would you do it in the same way as in the last story in The Middleman and Other Stories, 'The Management of Grief'?*

**B. M.:** That was the result of a terrorist attack. Yes, that was totally neglected, it happened in 1985 and 329 people were killed, mostly ninety-nine percent of them were Canadians of Indian origin, and the perpetrators were also Canadians of Indian origin who called themselves Khalistanis. These were people who led a secessionist program, they wanted a secession to create what they called 'the land of the Pure'—'Khalistan' means 'Land of the Pure'—to rebaptize Sikhs. And, you know, Canadians didn't see

these lost lives as a loss of Canadian lives and so the Prime Minister in Canada at that time, in 1985, had sent a cable of condolences to the Indian Prime Minister at that time, who was the late Rajiv Gandhi, saying ‘So sorry about your people’. And that’s when Clark Blaise, my husband, and I realized that what we had in our hands was an immigration tragedy as well as a terrorist attack. We interviewed everybody and we did what was a best-seller in Canada, a book called *The Sorrow and the Terror*, which is out of print now, and which put us under death threat for long. And writing that book, discovering what I did about the ways in which you can be a fully-functioning adaptive dark-skinned Canadian citizen or American citizen, but you’re not necessarily going to be seen as a Canadian or as an American. That was a big-time awakening for me. And the question is how many cells of terrorists from how many countries there are under the surface in small towns and big towns? We interviewed incredibly rich Sikh ophthalmologists, cardiologists, huge suburban homes who openly said that six days a week we give to ourselves and pay our taxes to the US government or Canadian government, and one day a week, we give it to Khalistan, and they had all these illegal aliens in their basements or attics. And we attended trials also in courts in New York, Vancouver and Victoria. So that I was aware long before 9/11 —we’re talking about 1985— of how other countries, political rages, or even in fighting —you know like Khalistan, one group of Indians fighting another group of Indians— can affect the lives of Canadians or Americans or Europeans. And so in the novel *Jasmine*, the plot is determined, her adventures are determined by the sighting of terrorists who’d been given refuge in North America to hide out. Because those came from real life, so 9/11 to me didn’t come as a surprise, but the scale came as a surprise. In *Desirable Daughters*, which was finished before 9/11, I have terrorists, and she thinks they were economic terrorists who burn down their San Francisco house. If 9/11 had happened, I would have thought on a much bigger scale, but my imagination failed. But I was very conscious of what could happen, unlike most American or Indo-American diasporic Indians who are writing about emotional things, who are not interested in the real life. I’ve written many essays or newspapers, you know, on the anniversary they asked me to write perspectives on 9/11. And, as long as I’m writing directly about terrorism, anti-Americanism and the consequence of 9/11 on our American way of thinking civil rights, I can do a fine job. But when I’m writing fiction I find I don’t want to deal dramatically with 9/11 at the center. That seems to me, at least for me, it would seem like trying to cash in on a big-time dramatic event. It hasn’t entered my imagination for writing novels. But terrorism

and the destruction, how we are caught up in the fantasies of other people or terrorism as big business, that's what I discovered, how much money they raise in the corporation of terrorism. But that has always been very much a point of my imagination, of my fiction. But huh I can't see myself writing about characters dealing with 9/11, maybe only marginally. My daughter-in-law, my older son's wife, she's an Irish-American but generally American. She was just sort of half a block from there —she's an elementary schoolteacher— and she saw bodies falling and she was trying to keep her second-grade children on the floor so that they wouldn't look out of the windows, and watch this, you know, what was going on, and a couple of the students lost both parents in that World Trade Center. So it was a trauma that affected my family but I can't write about it in fiction.

**P.G.:** *So this is a kind of butterfly effect, and this is something I've also perceived in Desirable Daughters.*

**B. M.:** Yes, it's a butterfly effect, and it's so central to my thinking and my construction of plot and novels. You know, at the top of that WTC there was a restaurant and many Bangladeshi waiters working there were illegal immigrants. And so once they died, their families —because they were illegal— are under threat of deportation, or they have already been deported, they have no money, the wives don't necessarily speak English, they have no job skills. And so I can see myself writing about that, in fact I want to write a story post-9/11, a widow having to make her life and decide whether she wants to stay in the New World or go back to her very restricted life in a village in Bangladesh, but not about what is like for the man to try to get out or... that I can't —or want to do.

**P. G.:** *Something similar happens with African literature, when some of those writers have shocking experiences. In the case of Achebe, for example, he's more interested in the particular drama of people, just on the effects.*

**B. M.:** Right, and Achebe is a hero. I can't claim him as a literary ancestor but his writings certainly have done an awful lot for me, thinking through problems. It is very much like what Cynthia Ozick did in that very short short story called 'The Shawl', that you write about the Holocaust but you pick a very specific individual cha-

racter and situation, you know, so that to write you don't even have to mention the Holocaust, but everyone understands the scale of the horror. That's the kind of thing I would do, I don't know if I'll ever write a story about 9/11 in that way but I would like to do something for the victims.

**P. G.:** *Which other writers belong to your personal canon?*

**B. M.:** First of all I have to say that, because I grew up in such a sexist culture, and you had to have a mentor, a guru you had to be grateful to, all my life I've tried to think that I don't want a guru, that I want to find my own way. So those works that I admire I try to avoid thinking of them as canonical. But in my incredibly pathologically untidy huge study I have one bookcase in which I keep my favourite texts and that I keep taking out and reading every now and then a sentence here or a paragraph there. And it's a very varied group. Isaac Babel the Soviet writer who wrote about the Gaza Jews, you know, his stories are so vigorous, they're wicked in some ways, they're capable of big breakings and at the same time they portray the pain, the adolescents growing up..., that kind of minority community living by its wits, weaving a large, sometimes hostile but certainly a mainstream community. And I read them when I was receptive, right? In the same way Bernard Malamud's stories, and that's how *Darkness* came to be written and dedicated to him. I've known him since 1963, but it wasn't until the very early eighties, at a very low point in my life, that I received an early copy sent by Malamud of his selected stories, and even though they look so white and they look so part of the mainstream, the Jewish American characters he's talking about are also making those adjustments in assimilation or rejection of their own culture. So I realized that my characters are also the ones that I live among and the ones that I want to write about, so Malamud's stories again were very eye-opening, mind-expanding to me. I like Flannery O'Connor, I like Chekhov very much, I like Alice Munro's short stories, and then I read a lot of mystery stories. To me they are like high energy, you know, like not that they're going to be in many ways showing up in my sentences but people like James Elroy, and Elmore Leonard for pleasure on the plane.

But Flannery O'Connor has that kind of morality that decides the end, and where the character committing sin is not necessarily what the church would say, but hardness of heart and the punishment is disproportionate. That sense of moral drama I find fasci-

nating. But they don't necessarily write like me or think like me. In India I had read Chekhov, but it was part of my world class, people who are losing their life and don't know how to fight. But coming to America suddenly I have characters who are assertive about what is happening to them, they think all right, that was then, I got a new life, I got to do new things with what I have. And about English, I've just written an essay that was published in an anthology in April. The anthology is called *The Genius of Language*. The editor asked fifteen American writers who started out in a language other than English. And I realized as I was writing it that if I had moved to Britain, married an English and moved to Britain, I was still in that colonial mindset and would be writing like Jane Austenian kinds of sentences, which it was what we were taught to prize in schools in Calcutta. But coming to the States, where I didn't understand a word anyone said during the first few months in the classroom, but that freed me up to make mistakes and not be ashamed or to think about syntax, plot construction in different ways, end the sentence with a preposition if I wanted to and definitely it opened up the way that would lead to my *Wife* character.

**E. M.:** *And were you conscious of that choice, I mean why did you choose America and not Britain?*

**B. M.:** Oh, I simply, accidentally I was sent. I got a scholarship and my father sent me to the only programme in the world that gave the MFA Degree, Masters of Fine Arts, in the world for creative writing. And I was lucky that I ran into a professor who had heard about this, and said this is where you apply. And then I fell in love with my husband; this is a story that I think must be on the Internet. I'd never been in a room with males before, I belonged to that kind of old-fashioned, even for Calcutta, very old-fashioned feudal family. And so my father was very particular that I didn't go to schools and colleges in Calcutta where there was co-education, and I don't know how he had the guts to send us so far away. So that was how the first time in Iowa I found myself in a co-educational classroom, and after a two-week courtship Clark —then a fellow student— and I got married during a five-minute lunch break in a lawyer's office. So that's why I landed in North America. But we lived in Canada the first fourteen years because his parents had been Canadian and they met and married in Montreal so that's the only place where we got our jobs. I think this was typical of the newly independent citizen of newly independent India, but I wanted not to speak in that British upper-class way that

elocution classes had forced us to use in Calcutta, that BBC English. I think that was absurd and that was a mark of coloniality that I and all my friends had, so it was a relief for me to lose it. But even now I don't know whether a word is going to come out as 'bath' /æ/ or 'bath' /a:/, and I have to think in order not to make it 'bath' /a:/. Yes, everything is in-between, everything is slippery.

**E. M.:** *And what about your education in India? Was it always carried out in English?*

**B. M.:** In my schools it was. You know, I'm an old lady, so we are talking about someone who was educated in the first twelve years let's say after independence. And the missionary schools provided in those days the best education, and we were often controlled by the colonial government. And now I'm reading in PhD dissertations of my students that they were often funded or subsidized by the British colonial government, even if they were American prospect missionaries. So the missionaries' aim was not only to teach us in the English language but to make us think like little English, so that everything Indian, Bengali culture, Bengali literature, Bengali films, Bengali art, was denigrated and everything British, even if it was para-Victorian literature, second-rate romances was more valuable. That was independent India and that was in Calcutta. So my education was very much still in the format of colonial English language and mentality. This is true also of the people from the next generation in places like Nigeria or Kenya or anywhere in the former colonies; the exams that we took were for the overseas Cambridge University school certificate, and they were exactly the same texts, and so I did European history instead of Indian history because the books tended to be the same. But that's not true anymore and for a while, immediately after my younger sister for example, there was a real anti-English wave, and so they wanted to get rid of not only all of the missionaries, by not renewing their visas, but they also wanted to get rid of English from curriculum. And now it's come back to say it's a useful language and everybody wants English language skills so that they can get these jobs that pay well.

**E.M.:** *Which is more or less like the situation which is portrayed in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, they would tell the twins off for speaking Malayalam. Was it as crude as that?*



**B.M.:** Well, not really in Calcutta, because in the case of Malayalam you have a high percentage of Christians, and English is the desired language. There wasn't that same pride in native language, whereas the Bengalis are like the Irish, we think we are the most artistic, we think that we are culturally superior, and we have incredible pride in Bengali language and literature, so they wanted to know enough language to be able to use the English law against the British or to get the right jobs. But the reason why sometimes I used to be attacked in India —before they understood that every family has one or two members in New Jersey— is that sense of pride, which is like saying that if you are a Bengali you must always yearn to come back and live in Bengal. And I said no, I have an American husband, I have children, you know, and then I'm going to fit in, and so well I love the language of my culture and my heritage. I am not going to return to live permanently in India and then I don't want to write about a place that I no longer live in.

I think Arundhati Roy is a very brave woman, and that she has —this is totally off, I am not talking about literature but the political stance that she has taken over the regional dams— has given her a lot of unpopularity from the Indian government, and also from Indian politicians, Indian Marxists who say why don't you go on and write your novels because you don't understand politics well enough to know how to fight, so they see her as a star who always has the camera around her during protests. So such a successful novelist getting into political activism is such a complicated issue. This is the butterfly effect again that leads to complicated reactions.

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