"Indiascape": Bharati Mukherjee's engagement with E.M. Forster, Herman Hesse, and R.K. Narayan

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Introduction: Recuperating Bharati Mukherjee's Forgotten Writing

Bharati Mukherjee (1940-2017) is principally known for her prize-winning, bestselling fiction: *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) won the National Book Critics' Circle Award, while her novel *Jasmine* (1989) has sold widely and been translated into multiple languages. It is still frequently researched and taught, especially in the United States. But much of Mukherjee's early work, especially her unpublished creative and academic writings from the 1960s, has been entirely overlooked by scholars and critics. In this essay, I address that lacuna by evaluating her doctoral dissertation, "The Use of Indian Mythology in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*" (1969), thus attempting to give her main scholarly intervention the fuller consideration it deserves. Having first positioned her PhD in the broader context of her life, I then contend that *A Passage to India* exerts a particular anxiety of influence over Mukherjee, haunting her later writings, especially her essays on Indian writing in English. By examining one such essay—her little-known 1994 discussion of teaching R.K. Narayan's *The Financial Expert*—I consider another under-researched aspect of Mukherjee's life and work: her pedagogy. She belonged to the North American academy from 1964 until her retirement in 2013, yet her teaching has received no critical notice. In exploring her often fraught relationship with Forster and, to a lesser extent, Narayan—both in the classroom and in her own writing—I uncover the complexity of her intertextual debt to their fictions of India. By going back to Mukherjee's forgotten academic work and bringing it into conversation with her pedagogical activities, my essay, while necessarily speculative at times, illuminates some of the lesser-known aspects of the life and career—at both the beginning and end—of this pioneering South Asian American writer.

Turning first, then, to some brief and necessary biographical context, by the late 1960s, Mukherjee was completing her doctorate in comparative literature at the University of Iowa. She was also an Assistant Professor of English at McGill University in Montreal and the mother of two young sons. Having spent most of her early life in India, she entered the United States in 1961 as a graduate student at the

prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, receiving her MFA in 1963. In the same year, Mukherjee married Clark Blaise, a white Canadian American writer and fellow Workshop alumnus. Before moving to the US, she graduated with a BA in English from the University of Calcutta in 1959 and gained an MA in English and Ancient Indian Culture from the University of Baroda in 1961.

Bharati Mukherjee Blaise, who submitted her doctoral dissertation with her complete spousal name, received it in 1969.[1] Even earlier—on the M.F.A. programme at Iowa—she had been honing her critical skills, learning "to read more closely and cannily than I ever had, approaching the work from the inside out, seeing the work as process rather than product, stalking the author's aesthetic strategy for the work's embedded meaning" ("Autobiographical Essay" n.p.). This sustained study of other writers, followed by her PhD, laid the foundations for richly intertextual fiction where Indian, and specifically Hindu, mythology sometimes plays a prominent role, for instance in *Jasmine* and such short stories as "Nostalgia" and "A Father" from her 1985 collection *Darkness*. As Mukherjee puts it in *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), a composite autobiography co-authored with Blaise, "my aesthetic ... must accommodate a decidedly Hindu imagination with an Americanised sense of the craft of fiction" (Blaise and Mukherjee 298). This early self-positioning was borne out by the inclusion of Hindu characters and a Hindu worldview throughout her later writing. As she comments in a 2007 interview,

> I have always been . . . obsessed with . . . the value of mythology to a fiction writer. I've used this quite consciously in *Jasmine* and [the 1997 novel] *Leave It to Me*, in which gods and goddesses come down to earth in shape-changed form. (cited in Edwards 144)

Mukherjee's choice of *A Passage to India* (1924) and *Siddhartha* (1922) allowed her to examine two classic European fictions of India, published at a similar time by writers born within two years of each other. These novels—one about the limits of British colonial rule, the other a hypnotically written fable of spiritual seeking—were also important versions of an imagined India for 1960s Americans interested in the wider world. This broader significance is demonstrated by the place of *Siddhartha* within both mainstream U.S. society and the counterculture as part of the "Hesse boom . . . [when] almost everyone seemed to be reading and discussing Hesse . . . and . . . almost 15 million copies of Hesse's works were sold within a single decade: a literary phenomenon without precedent in America" (Mileck 348). Joseph Mileck argues that "Hesse excelled in the depiction of personal crises and private agony" (352), and it is worth noting the ambivalence, as well as excitement, that Mukherjee felt about her dramatic shift from cosseted Bengali girl to *déclassé* new arrival, reinventing herself in the United States and then Canada. These

complex emotions, which included a sense of isolation and a recognition of her downward mobility, are possibly the reason why for many years she saw herself as "permanently stranded in North America" ("American Dreamer" 34), and they may be part of what attracted her to Hesse's work.

The status of *A Passage to India* was greatly boosted by the success of Santha Rama Rau's theatrical adaptation of the novel, staged on Broadway in 1962 and televized in the United States in 1968 (Gent 59), with its theme of "a possible sexual encounter between a white woman and a brown man" reflecting the fears and possibilities of the Civil Rights era (Burton 80). Rama Rau's version laid the groundwork for David Lean's Oscar-winning film interpretation of Forster's novel in 1984: another key moment for popular representations of India to US audiences, however problematic the film remains, because it "helped to galvanise a long narrative arc of Raj nostalgia in the United States" (Burton 72).

The larger cultural capital of *A Passage to India* and *Siddhartha* may well explain why Mukherjee selected these particular novels of India for further interrogation. And her scholarly involvement with both works was not so easily forgotten: such literary depictions of the "Indiascape," as she terms it in her thesis ("Use" 28), were to have a lifelong impact upon her own fictional works, for example the stylistic inspiration of *A Passage to India* for her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971; see Hancock 16) and the thematic influence of Forster's novel upon *The Holder of the World* (1993), her later work of historical fiction (compare Maxey 120–121n27). Mukherjee's use of the word "Indiascape" anticipates Arjun Appadurai's language of

> global cultural flow . . . ethnoscapes . . . mediascapes . . . technoscapes . . . finanscapes . . . ideoscapes. The suffix -scape allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes . . . . These terms . . . indicate that these are not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but rather that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors. (328–329)

Mukherjee's earlier usage of another "scape" refers to fictional imaginings of India, a nation given to deeply complex and contested political definitions in the post-Independence context, as Sunil Khilnani argues in *The Idea of India* (1997).

A Passage to India, which "offers fertile ground for the broadest range of analytical and theoretical perspectives" (Childs 188), particularly dominates Mukherjee's PhD discussion and appears to have interested her more than *Siddhartha*. Positioning herself

explicitly as a "Hindu reader" in her PhD ("Use" 123), Mukherjee is also less critical of *A Passage to India* than she is of Hesse's novel. When it came to writing fiction, however—and despite its powerful hold on her imagination—*A Passage to India* was principally an example for Mukherjee to work against. In a writers' panel, held at Concordia University, Montreal in 1979, she recalls that,

> *it wasn't until I was twenty and a graduate student in a muddled middle western America that I discovered Forster and A Passage to India.* Until then . . . . I had assumed that India and Indians were not worthy of serious literature . . . (cited in Hertz and Martin 291; emphasis added)

She goes on to note that,

> the wonder in reading Forster was that forty years before, he had written about a society I thought I could still recognise. Though he couldn't provide me with a literary model, only another post-colonial writer could do that . . . he had validated for me a fictional world. The chaos that I had been trained to perceive by the Anglos . . . as a weakness of the Indian character, was really the life-renewing muddle and mystery of Forster . . . (quoted in Hertz and Martin 292)

She confesses, moreover, that "I cannot ignore Forster when I set my characters or my fiction in India . . . The concerns [have] remained unabashedly Forsterian—where is the real India and what is the real India . . ." (cited in Hertz and Martin 292–293).

I have quoted this account at some length because it highlights the turning point for Mukherjee marked by the discovery of Forster's most well-known and influential novel. Only after her own passage to America could she discover *A Passage to India*, itself named after a U.S. work: Walt Whitman's poem of 1871 (Childs 289). Mukherjee applied to the Iowa Writers' Workshop "because an American professor [Paul Engle] passing through [Calcutta] . . . informed my father that if I wanted to be a writer that was where I should study" ("Autobiographical Essay" n.p.). This fateful decision led to doctoral research at the same university. Moreover, as Marina MacKay has put it, "what any critic ends up actually writing about is dizzyingly overdetermined, and accidents of many kinds stand behind scholarly interests that appear to be freely chosen" (56).

In the 1979 panel, Mukherjee observes that, when reading Forster's

> *Aspects of the Novel* [1927] . . . as a literary theory . . . it didn't mean anything to me as a writer. Then once I was writing fiction and went back to . . . *Aspects* suddenly it was like skyrockets going off. It was a totally different experience, an articulation of what I felt. (cited in Hertz and Martin 305)

As "literary theory," then, Forster's work did not apparently ignite anything for Mukherjee. Nor does she mention here that Forster's fiction was the subject of much of her PhD thesis. Yet Mukherjee's

response to Forster in the writers' panel demonstrates that—well after her doctoral dissertation—his celebrated novel continued to be an important referent,[2] an intertextual debt still to be explored by critics, who have also failed to connect Mukherjee's scholarly writing with the creative work she later produced.

Reading Mukherjee's doctoral thesis demonstrates, however, that scholarship was not her passion. As she diligently synthesises the main findings of her secondary sources in the PhD, one senses that she was uninspired, even bored, by the strict conventions and specific parameters of academic writing. Mukherjee's natural milieu was fiction and that is what truly excited her. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that she recognizes Forster's creative, rather than intellectual, impact upon her when discussing *Aspects of the Novel*. But without her detailed, in-depth engagement with *A Passage to India* in her academic work, Mukherjee's relationship with Forster might have remained considerably less meaningful and enduring.

Undertaking doctoral work

What motivated Mukherjee to pursue doctoral research? Her Bengali Brahmin father, Sudhir Lal Mukherjee, held "a doctoral degree in biochemistry from England and . . . [had] done post-doctoral research in Europe" ("Autobiographical Essay" n.p.). According to Clark Blaise, Sudhir was a formidable, unconventional, and adventurous man with a "double vision" (Blaise and Mukherjee 57). Within the Mukherjees' local world, it was, after all, an unusual, trailblazing step both to travel abroad and to undertake doctoral research. Blaise notes that in

> a family of ten . . . [Sudhir] alone received an education . . . in 1936 . . . [he] applied to the University of Heidelberg for additional research, was given a German scholarship, and then was granted the University of Calcutta's travelling scholarship for doctoral work at the University of London. (25)

Having embarked on the long sea voyage from India to Germany, Sudhir's father died suddenly, and he was expected to "return home immediately . . . and contribute to the education and support of the rest of the family" but his young wife, Bina (née Chatterjee), "and her father urged against it" (25). Thanks to their vital encouragement, Sudhir went on to complete his doctoral studies in Heidelberg and London and did not return to India until 1939.

Mukherjee also paid tribute to Bina, honouring her mother's strength and ambition in the face of Indian patriarchal expectations, for her two sisters and herself. Hence, as much as seeing her father as a role model, she recalls that "getting an academic PhD was an acknowledgement of my mother's determination for her

daughters" ("Autobiographical Essay" n.p.). Mukherjee's sisters, Mira Bakhle and Ranu Vanikar, also forged successful careers based on prestigious academic degrees gained in India and the United States: Bakhle became a "nationally recognised" expert on American pre-school education ("Two Ways" 271), while Vanikar was for many years a professor of English at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda.

In her later writing and interviews, Mukherjee spoke little about her doctorate. At 187 pages, it is short by today's standards and considers just two primary sources; these elements may explain why the PhD has usually warranted only a passing mention in accounts of Mukherjee's career. Nevertheless, it is unclear why, as a professor at McGill, she chose not to publish her dissertation, either as articles or in book form, thus adding to the growing scholarship on Forster and Hesse in the 1960s and '70s. And as a result, Mukherjee's well written, thoughtful study—animated by her keen intelligence, especially when considering *A Passage to India*—has not been consulted by Forster or Hesse researchers.[3] However, her later shift from academic research to creative writing might suggest that the PhD was essentially a staging-post, an impressive qualification intended to accelerate her professional development as a tenure-track professor at McGill. Looking at her career as a whole, the thesis does appear to have become less relevant as she launched herself in literary terms, going on to publish eight novels, two short-story collections, two works of non-fiction, and numerous essays and reviews. Before *The Tiger's Daughter* was published, however, Mukherjee "considered herself an academic, not a writer" (Polak). Doctoral research is, moreover, an intense, herculean, even life-changing task; a PhD thesis is usually the result of years of research and thinking. As such, it deserves to be properly evaluated rather than gathering dust in a university library or existing, unconsulted, in a digital archive, especially when its author went on to become the first major South Asian American writer.

Mukherjee's interpretation of Forster and Hesse

Mukherjee's brief PhD acknowledgements reflect the predominantly male world of 1960s American academia and include her supervisor, the Forster expert Frederick P. McDowell (1916–2009); David Hayman (1927–), a Joyce authority, "for first suggesting the approach I have taken" ("Use" ii); and Curt A. Zimansky (1913–1973), a scholar of Renaissance drama. After a very short introduction, Mukherjee moves to a second chapter on "The Mythic Structure of India." Here she provides the necessary explanation of key Indian myths, gods, and goddesses, citing a wealth of secondary literature. The next chapter, "Indiascape: Play and Connection," is the first of two on *A Passage to*

India, and it is spatially organized, moving through sections on "City," "Mosque," "Cave," "Garden," "Mau," and "Temple."

Mukherjee's Forster chapters form the core of her thesis. But at this point, one might ask how well Forster's and Hesse's fictions of India actually work as a basis for comparison. Indeed, despite the title of the dissertation, Mukherjee rarely considers the two texts together. There is little formal analysis of either novel, and it is worth noting that the section on *Siddhartha* is some 45 pages as opposed to the 67 afforded to *A Passage to India*. In contrast to Hesse's novel, which is exclusively about Buddhism, *A Passage to India* is primarily about Islam. Reflecting a traditional British bias (Rotter 526), Forster thus focuses upon Muslim characters, especially Dr. Aziz, as representatively Indian and controversially renders Hindus as being of lesser importance (Childs 190). However, Mukherjee makes a strong case later in Chapter 3, particularly in the lengthy "Cave" section,[4] that *A Passage to India* is substantially supported by Hindu cosmology. Hence, she writes that, in Forster's novel, "the symbolic function of water in Hinduism, as an elixir, as a metamorphosing agent, as a revealer of the magic maya, is absorbed into the groundwork of the novel's meaning" ("Use" 54). Initially freighted with endnotes, this chapter shows Mukherjee increasingly taking charge of her material, bringing to bear her own invaluable cultural perspective as a "Hindu reader" of Forster and Hesse ("Use" 123). This self-presentation relates to the specific religious beliefs to which she was exposed from her earliest years. In the late essay "Romance and Ritual" (2015), she recalls—of the rites that she witnessed as a young child at her uncle's wedding in Calcutta—that "the literal and the symbolic merge in Hindu rituals, and though I didn't recognise it then, I was learning a lesson useful for my future as a writer" (82). Her PhD topic was also a natural progression from her MA studies at Baroda, where she had explored ancient Indian culture.

Chapter 4, looking at the "heroic and artistic quest" in *A Passage to India*, celebrates the multiplicity of Forster's vision of India as a congeries: "a comic opera, a flock of morning birds, naked bodies, sacred idols, echoes, Brahmin's songs, English faces, grim caves, grey elephants, temples, tangles, clubs, pleaders, clients, muddles, and mysteries" ("Use" 68). In this chapter, Mukherjee again asserts her particular critical position in a compelling manner by contending that "the quest is not, as one critic has suggested, a journey into nightmare. The passage to the 'real' India is a passage from form and reason to mystery" (69). Later she critiques Norman Kelvin's interpretation of the Hindu Professor Godbole's dance towards the end of the novel,

> Kelvin construes . . . [the] dance as happiness. But the dance in Mau, I suggest, goes far beyond any temperament-index. It creates the God of Love (Krishna). For the "chronometrically observed" moment of Krishna's birth, Godbole's art coincides

> with the art (maya) of the Absolute whose maya-shakti produces the universe and the god-avatar. Godbole's Gokul dance assumes the dimensions of Shiva's cosmic dance. His dance releases the regenerative force of infinite love into the universe, and assumes the continuation of the cosmic cycle. (98–99)

As opposed to the first two chapters of the thesis, where the distinctive nature of Mukherjee's scholarly voice is so tentative as to become almost invisible at times, her tone here is authoritative and persuasive, grounded both in wider reading and her position as a Hindu insider.

In Chapter 4, Mukherjee elucidates the complex nature of Forster's novel by looking at all the main characters in turn—from the white British figures Cyril Fielding, Adela Quested, and Mrs. Moore to the Indians Godbole and Aziz—devoting most space to the last of these characters. Foregrounding her own Hindu-centric vision, Mukherjee first refers to Dr. Aziz as "the non-Hindu Indian" (5). She argues that,

> if the social and cultural soil of modern India has a hundred fissures then they are reflected, not united, in Aziz . . . His persistent need for separating and categorising (the mosque is holy, the temple is not) makes it impossible for him to attain the totality of vision of the mythic hero. ("Use" 79–80)

As opposed to the note of uncertainty one detects earlier in the dissertation, her voice now becomes almost dogmatic as she claims that "Mrs. Moore and Godbole must be viewed as complementary figures . . . . It is essential . . . to relate Mrs. Moore's experiences to the structural 'passage' of the whole novel" (88–89). Why such a position is "essential," however, is neither explained nor developed.

Having noted that in Forster's novel, "there are no 'good' or 'bad' characters; there is only echo and song" ("Use" 89), Mukherjee argues that it is Godbole, the only major Hindu character, who has "completed the passage to the 'real' India" (95; compare Childs 2007, 194). Her use of inverted commas signals, of course, that any claims to a "real" India are questionable. Forster explores this idea early in the novel when he writes that "Miss Quested . . . accepted everything Aziz said as true verbally. In her ignorance, she regarded him as 'India', and never surmised . . . that no one is India" (Forster 65). Mukherjee's attention to the debatable notion of a "real" India also foreshadows her later discussion of writerly "concerns [that have] remained unabashedly Forsterian—where is the real India and what is the real India" (cited in Hertz and Martin 293),[5] while anticipating Khilnani's widely debated "idea of India" (xi).

Linking to these epistemological and ontological questions concerning a "real India," Mukherjee ends Chapter 4 with an effective discussion of the paralinguistic elements of Godbole's physical performance,

> he prefers non-verbal art: dancing. When he sings, it is in a language not immediately understood by the non-Indian listener. As a singer, therefore, Godbole impresses with bizarre sounds rather than conceptual language . . . Forster seems to say that although conceptual language separates man from beast, it creates the very human problem of misunderstandings. ("Use" 96)

She then connects such mutual incomprehension to the breakdown of the relationships between Aziz, Fielding, and Adela.

Chapter 5 on "Hesse: India as a symbol of the 'Inner Voice'" begins—unlike the Forster chapters—with some biographical background and then moves into its main argument: that Hesse's depiction of Buddhism owes more to German Romantic and Christian thought than to any Indian tradition. Mukherjee is careful to set the parameters for her analysis: "the Romantic tendencies will be developed in the body of the chapter; the Christian aspects are not properly the concern of this study, nor are they in the least an area I feel competent to develop" (102). Her refusal to engage with "the Christian aspects" goes beyond a conventional need to delimit the scope of a particular scholarly discussion. Rather, it belongs to Mukherjee's broader "disdain for Christianity, especially for the European nuns and missionaries in India and those Indians who embraced the coloniser's religion" (Maxey 35). An emphasis on Christianity would also detract from the Hindu-inflected critical position of her study overall. Yet, in view of the importance of Christianity to Hesse, its absence signifies a notable gap within Mukherjee's discussion.

Distinguishing between "Hesse's direct use of India in *Siddhartha* . . . and his indirect use of India in the Magic Theater of *Der Steppenwolf* [1927] and . . . 'Indischer Lebenslauf,' a biographical appendix in *Das Glasperlenspiel* [1943]" ("Use" 105), she offers an initially narrative account of *Siddhartha*, approaching the novel through the idea of "circle and spiral" (105). Later, she argues that "to learn what the Samanas have to offer and then to move on to new discoveries is to break out of the circle into a spiral: towards freedom" (117). Mukherjee asks an important question: "why . . . is Hesse attracted to India? Or, more pertinently, *how* does he adapt Indian mythology to his personal concerns?" (106; emphasis in original). These significant questions have challenged later researchers of Hesse's work (see Benton 9–10; Irwin 72, 78–79). In posing them, Mukherjee is disparaging of Hesse,

> the entire Samana experience of Siddhartha emphasises learning: he *learned* to overcome pain, hunger, and natural desire for women. But the reader is not told *why* he needs to learn this, nor what joys this learning brings. Similarly, Hesse withholds the usual motivations—Siddhartha's ascetic discoveries are patently unconvincing, due to the great unsupported claims Hesse makes for them, and the evidence he

> withholds. In other words, the Samana episodes lack drama and credibility, and the effect, which is certanly [*sic*] intended, is one of irony. ("Use" 115; emphasis in original)

Similarly, Mukherjee contends that "the division between quest and withdrawal is purely Hesse's, for Hinduism regards action, knowledge, and meditation all as possible paths from the periphery to the centre" (118). She also refers to Siddhartha's post-Gotama awakening as "absurd" (123) and discusses "a strictly Hindu context" in which Hesse's portrayal of Siddhartha's spiritual journey is "fallacious" and even "improper to the Hindu reader" (123). Yet *Siddhartha* is actually a novel about Buddhism, and these statements once again betray Mukherjee's Hindu-centric position.

It is also worth noting that she strikes a more moralistic tone here than in her reading of Forster. Thus, she suggests that there is an unseemliness to Hesse's Europeanized appropriation of a sacred Indian context in his "twentieth-century Western adaptation" (136). Once more, she asserts her own critical position: "the rejection of Buddha, [Mark] Boulby suggests, is the rejection of Buddhist and Indian teaching and a movement toward universal love. I suggest, however, that Siddhartha rejects knowledge rather than any specific creeds" (121). These intelligent points notwithstanding, she appears less confident when writing about Hesse than Forster, and her copious use of untranslated German quotations from *Siddhartha* obfuscates, rather than clarifies, her discussion. Perhaps, however, the inclusion of material in a range of languages was a requirement for a doctoral thesis in comparative literature.

At just five pages, Mukherjee's final chapter, "India as Resolution for Forster and Hesse," constitutes a very short conclusion. In it she compares Forster's novel—"Krishna as the embodiment of Infinite Love . . . releases mystery and tradition into an unhappy, divided British India" (149–150)—with "Siddhartha's vision of love and understanding . . . through *Bilder*; unlike Mrs. Moore, he does not see nothing" (150). The chapter concludes without a compelling argument, simply stating that "India, for Hesse, is a modal tool, not thematic symbol" (151). Indeed, the perennial problem of how to conclude scholarly chapters dogs the thesis as a whole.

She provides insightful analyses of both *Siddhartha* and *A Passage to India*, yet as the thesis develops, Mukherjee's chapters can still seem rather descriptive, impressionistic, and loosely structured. I have already argued that, however glittering her family's academic achievements were and however brightly her own intellect shone as a young woman, she was not entirely at home producing scholarship. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the voice of her academic work is at variance with that of her protean fictional characters: less assured and wide-ranging, more formal and dutiful. Regularly confusing "author" with

"narrator" (37 and *passim*), she makes clunky use of "says" (29, 93, 94) and "said" (95). At times, Mukherjee appears unsure of how to interject her own voice smoothly. Thus, she relies on "I believe" (2 and *passim*) and "I suggest" (81, 89, 98), two rather subjective formulations nowadays, and ones that are usually sandwiched hesitantly between clauses. Mukherjee may have been discouraged by her supervisor and other advisors from the overuse of the first person singular. In a broader sense, it is difficult, without hard evidence, to grasp the nature of that supervision.

In 1983, she opined, rather self-deprecatingly, that "I am not a scholar of Commonwealth Literature, only an enthusiastic reader, and an occasional writer, of it" ("Mimicry and Reinvention" 150). Many years later, as an established author, she argued in bolder terms for the pre-eminent power of creative writing: "people are readier to understand the other when reading a novel or a story . . . than . . . a scholarly treatise" (quoted in Edwards 156). Why, then, is her dissertation worth reading today? I would argue that, whatever its limitations, it offers particular insights into the European-inflected India of Hesse and especially Forster, and, as I will show in the final part of this article, it reveals Mukherjee's lifelong anxiety of influence vis-à-vis *A Passage to India*, a classic novel that profoundly shaped her teaching of, and essays about, the "Indiascape."

Writing about pedagogy

In a career spanning nearly 50 years, Mukherjee taught at a range of North American colleges and universities. After leaving Canada for good in 1980 in response to bitter experiences of racism, she lived through a peripatetic "ten years of part-time teaching . . . commuting between jobs . . . harsh teaching-years in New Jersey and Queens" ("Autobiographical Essay" n.p.). In 1989, she was appointed Distinguished Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and when she died, colleagues and former students at Berkeley paid tribute to her teaching. One such colleague, the poet Robert Hass, observed that,

> a former student . . . looking back in 2009 on his Berkeley experience . . . wrote, ". . . Bharati Mukherjee was the real deal. She provided excellent commentary on my essays and treated our class like professionals . . ." Two classes per semester for most of 24 years—a mix of small seminars and large lectures—would suggest that she touched the lives of between 1,500 and 2,000 students. (Hass n.p.)

Mukherjee clearly inspired would-be writers from a range of ethnic backgrounds, and her teaching, mentorship, and literary example are even the subject of posthumous panegyric (McCormick; Tenorio).[6]

Teaching gave Mukherjee the financial security she needed in order to write fiction. Thus, in a public interview with John Updike and two other writers in 1981, she answered Updike's question regarding "the problem of how the author supports himself [*sic*] while turning out these eternal works" with the response "teaches writing" (Updike *et al*. 53). Throughout her time in the classroom, she taught "creative writing, the short story, the contemporary and classical novel, and world Anglophone fiction at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first" (Hass n.p.). As part of this curriculum, she introduced colonial and postcolonial literature to successive generations of North American students, regularly including *A Passage to India* in her courses, along with works by Rudyard Kipling, J.R. Ackerley, R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul, and Paul Scott. In this respect, Mukherjee resembled Maya Sanyal, the protagonist of her campus-based short story "The Tenant" (1985), who has "a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and will introduce writers like R.K. Narayan and Chinua Achebe to three sections of sophomores at the University of Northern Iowa" (*Darkness* 98). The subject of Mukherjee's PhD thesis—an India fictively imagined—continued, then, like Maya's doctoral research, to inform her pedagogical work, once again underscoring its lasting impact.

A graduate class reading list from Berkeley in the mid-1990s for a course entitled "Cannibals and Conceitmakers" also includes Charles Allen's edited book *Plain Tales From The Raj: Images of British India in the 20th Century* (1974) and Alexander Frater's 1990 travelogue *Chasing the Monsoon* (Riddle) as well as landmark *desi* literary fiction: Indian and South Asian diasporic works such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905); Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981); Farrukh Dhondy's *Bombay Duck* (1990); and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990). Other than the presence of Hossain, the "Cannibals and Conceitmakers" outline is entirely male. Although any reading list is necessarily selective, such figures as Rumer Godden, Anita Desai, and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala are notable by their absence. This exclusion can be explained by Mukherjee's derisive comments in her 1994 essay on Narayan regarding,

> India's best-known writers in English—Kamala Markandaya, Arun Joshi . . . Desai, Nayantara Sahgel [sic], and . . . Jhabvala . . .—one can imagine their characters . . . speaking English at home, and their concerns being far removed from the cares of everyday Indians. At best, such authors are . . . popular entertainers, lightweights. ("R.K. Narayan" 158)

Before producing her essay on teaching Narayan, Mukherjee was also dismissive of his *oeuvre*, claiming in 1983 that,

> the works of Hindu writers writing in English about Hindu characters often read like unpolished, self-conscious

> translations. To avoid this ornateness, other writers opt for limpid naïveté: simply narrated stories about simple village folk. Complexities the voice cannot encompass are simply left out. But for me, an accidental immigrant, the brave and appropriate model is not R.K. Narayan, but V.S. Naipaul. ("Mimicry and Reinvention" 298–299)

By contrast—and in something of a *volte-face*, considering her earlier disparagement of his work (compare Chen and Goudie 83)—her later essay on Narayan reflects upon his contribution to Indian fiction at some length. He is, after all, a writer's writer whose work has spoken to everyone from Graham Greene (Kain 206–209), Alexander McCall Smith (Kamath) and Updike to Ved Mehta, Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Pico Iyer, Monica Ali, and Pankaj Mishra (Updike 2001; Mehta 1962; Naipaul 2001; Lahiri 2006; Iyer 2009; and see also Mason 2006). Indeed, *desi* writers are particularly influenced by Narayan's work (Iyer 2009) and often engage with it explicitly. Mukherjee is acting in the same manner, which is almost *de rigueur*; and through the lens of a specific novel, *The Financial Expert* (1952), she provides a more nuanced and compelling assessment than "limpid naïveté" and "simply narrated stories" ("Mimicry and Reinvention" 298).[7]

She begins with what she terms "'The Narayan Problem,'" the assumption by non-Indian commentators that this novelist and short-story writer is "a trustworthy, even genial, guide" and by Indians that his use of English results in "inauthentic" writing ("R.K. Narayan" 157). Instead, she praises Narayan's style as

> a remarkable achievement, one of the wonders of the Anglographic world . . . I know of no contemporary author, Indian or otherwise, who articulates so clearly the essence of his vision, and who adumbrates the vision with such charm and variety. He is simultaneously less familiarly Indian than the West may think, and more profoundly Indian than his native critics take him for. ("R.K. Narayan" 158, 160)

After making these claims for Narayan's exceptional status, she further separates him from other Indian writers in English, such as Markandaya and Desai, by referring specifically to Forster. Thus, Narayan "is not part of the same writing world as the authors mentioned above, who are really stylistic and thematic descendants of Forster, clones and competitors of British counterparts" ("R.K. Narayan" 158). As opposed to Mukherjee's appreciation of Forster's fiction earlier in her career, the novelist who so ably wrote about "the life-renewing muddle and mystery" of India (cited in Hertz and Martin 292) is now adduced as a way to discredit other modern Indian writers in English; and even earlier, in her 1983 essay "Mimicry and Reinvention," Mukherjee had already presented *A Passage to India* as outdated.

Yet such a position is not surprising. Although she repeatedly taught and drew upon it in her writing, Mukherjee's relationship to

British literature—as a writer who came of age in post-Independence India—was fraught and downright hostile at times. Alberto Fernández Carbajal notes that "Forster's legacies . . . operate along . . . [a] continuum, whereby postcolonial writers can both criticise and celebrate different aspects of his work, often providing evidence of critique and indebtedness within the same text" (11). That *A Passage to India* should remain a touchstone for Mukherjee's thinking and teaching is highlighted later in the 1994 essay when she writes that "the priest [in *The Financial Expert*] is one of Narayan's perfectly realised figures of human indifference, rather like Forster's Dr. Godbole ('We are so late!' 'Late for what?')" ("R.K. Narayan" 162). In a rather circular fashion, then, it is impossible for Mukherjee to ignore Forster's Indiascape, however much she might wish to. When considering other Anglophone fictions of India, his work underpins her thinking.

Further recalling her doctoral dissertation, Mukherjee reads Narayan's fiction in relation to a Hindu cosmology. Moving beyond *The Financial Expert*, she contends that,

> his further plot complications . . . are distractions from each novel's major conflict, which is always and ever, human beings toying with divine perspective, their daring to demand more of the gods than they are prepared to give, their misinterpreting of God's bounty, and their pathetic attachment to maya (illusion). ("R.K. Narayan" 159)

For Mukherjee, this "conflict" plays out in archetypal fashion in *The Financial Expert*, which dramatises "the allowances built into the Hindu imagination to accommodate the roles of myth, mysticism, illusion, play, ignorance, and sheer human folly" ("R.K. Narayan" 160). She argues, more specifically, that Narayan charts an agonistic struggle between the goddesses of wealth (Lakshmi) and wisdom (Saraswati) for the mastery of the protagonist, Margayya. His love of money becomes his downfall, and after "Margayya has been seduced and abandoned by the goddess Lakshmi," he returns "to the pinched, impoverished embrace of Saraswati" ("R.K. Narayan" 164). Mukherjee pays tribute to the complex morality of the novel's muted ending which, is "sobering and detached" ("R.K. Narayan" 165), illuminating Margayya's limited agency.

She also states that Narayan possesses an imaginative "double vision" (158). As a result, he achieves "two separate creations, two separate time schemes: the fabulous world of nearly pure essences—a timeless, godly realm—and a familiar (if idealised) South-Indian town called Malgudi, as it might have appeared a few decades ago" (158). The notion of "double vision" recalls both Mukherjee's doctoral thesis, where she explains in Chapter 2 that "the completed man learns to recognise and accept a dual perspective: human and cosmic" ("Use" 7), and her husband's tribute to Sudhir, Mukherjee's father, as having a

"double vision" (Blaise and Mukherjee 57). It is also Forster's phrase when he writes of Mrs. Moore in *A Passage to India* that "she had come to that . . . twilight of the double vision in which so many elderly people are involved . . . a spiritual muddledom . . . for which no high-sounding words can be found" (195–196). And Benita Parry applies it to Forster himself, referring to his "double vision as a liberal humanist and . . . reverent agnostic" (272). Mukherjee's appropriation of this important phrase, decades after extolling a "dual perspective" in her dissertation, suggests—*contra* Forster's usage—its positive power to evoke qualities of expansiveness, prescience, and originality. These qualities are needed to understand the complexities of India which cannot be seen from just one "angle of vision" (Appadurai 329).

Although Mukherjee honors Narayan's particular achievements, she still refers to his "underlying Hindu chauvinism, and . . . his other-worldly inattention to India's persistent social and political squalor" ("R.K. Narayan" 161). The power of his art can be detected, however, in "how he works to minimise their absence" ("R.K. Narayan" 161). And Margayya, the eponymous, miserly "expert" of Narayan's novel, is celebrated by Mukherjee for his rich tragicomic dimensions. She frames him in European literary terms, contending that he embodies "a clownish tragedy akin to that of Gogol, Kafka, or Beckett" ("R.K. Narayan" 163). Mukherjee draws, too, upon American filmic intertextuality (compare Maxey 7): Margayya is "like an Oliver Hardy," while "for all his celebrated geniality, Narayan is not Frank Capra" ("R.K. Narayan" 163, 164).

The essay ends with a "topics for discussion" section that includes such questions as "how successfully does . . . Narayan . . . convey the Indian experience for Western readers?" (165) and "do you see resemblances to specific Hindu myths or to classical Western mythology?" (166). These queries are rather pointed and essentializing: for example, the notion of a homogeneous "Indian experience." Most strikingly, perhaps—and as opposed to Feroza Jussawalla's 1992 article on Narayan's novel *Swami and Friends* (1935), to take only one point of comparison—this essay is not actually about Mukherjee's experiences of teaching *The Financial Expert*. Like "Mimicry and Reinvention," it, too, is concerned with the specific context of Indian writing in English: in this case, Mukherjee's interpretation of a specific novel and her qualified celebration of Narayan's craft.

Such an indirect approach to discussing her teaching is also manifest in an unpublished, undated essay, "Attitudes," where Mukherjee explores her encounters with three different female students of Indian descent at Berkeley in her role as "unofficial listening post for three generations of Indian-American young women" (n.p.).[8] Thus, she explores how Indian American culture and identity have evolved

since her arrival in Iowa in 1961, using these three students as a prism through which to discuss such changes. The students range from a bicultural, outwardly dutiful Bengali American "molecular-cell-biology major" in the early 1990s to a noughties "California-born sorority girl . . . [whose] comically open, autobiographical stories, were almost identical to those of other 'So Cal' students" to a further student "obviously 'Indian' by name and appearance . . . [whose] life had been a partnership in survival with her widowed Latina mother, in a drug and alcohol haze" ("Attitudes" n.p.). Although Mukherjee calls the account "a record of a 40-year teaching career," she offers very little consideration of her actual teaching experiences or classroom philosophy, a silence in line with her self-confessed reluctance to produce autobiographical writing.[9]

Some of Mukherjee's most direct and intimate comments about teaching can be found in a late interview with Bradley C. Edwards. Here she connects her teaching to the need for the best academic resources when writing historical fiction: "I have to have access to very good libraries. That's probably one of the reasons that I continue to teach, the access to libraries" (Edwards 151). Later, she notes that,

> I like the interaction with my students and some of the classes, like this current graduate fiction workshop . . . I really look forward to it . . . they bring me what they're reading, or they make references to comic books or TV shows that I don't know, so it keeps me on my toes. (179)

In a scenario familiar to many who teach, she also confesses that "I have anxiety dreams before classes start, every semester, even now after all these decades of teaching" (181). Such dreams demonstrate that her teaching genuinely mattered to Mukherjee and even affected her wellbeing. Beyond the key practical issues of financial security and access to scholarly resources, five decades of institutional affiliation and academic teaching also provided her with a crucial professional home in North America. I have argued here that this teaching career was launched by her doctoral research and was later reflected in essays drawing on her pedagogical experience. To treat her fiction as though it were an artistic entity free from such a context is to ignore the important ways in which contemporary creative writers are shaped by, embedded within, and even architects of the academy (McGurl 21). This article has teased out the specific ways in which Mukherjee's career—and most particularly, her long-standing creative and critical engagement with E.M. Forster—signifies that important pattern.

Notes

1. Mukherjee used this longer authorial name only intermittently, and by the mid-1980s she had dropped "Blaise." The reasons for this

decision are not clear. She may have found the name too cumbersome, or she may have wished to achieve a more independent writerly identity, undefined by her status as Blaise's wife.

2. See also Blaise, "Mimicry and Reinvention" 148, 157. Indian writers in English have, of course, often felt compelled to respond to Forster, for instance Narayan (A.94; and see Hutton 5) and Salman Rushdie.

3. A rare exception is Spano; unfortunately, this PhD dissertation also remains unpublished.

4. This idea has evolved and developed in later Forster scholarship; see, for instance, Das 255 and Singh 37-38.

5. Morey contends, however, that while "Forster may not believe in the 'Real India'. . . he does have an enormous emotional investment in the idea that there are 'real Indians'. . . a landed nobility personified . . . by [real-life figures] the . . . Maharajah of Dewas Senior . . . and Syed Ross Masood" (270).

6. On the website, *Ratemyprofessors.com,* a more ambivalent, even negative, picture of Mukherjee's teaching emerges. In the sample available, however, only five respondents have recorded their thoughts; see "Bharati Mukherjee." *Ratemyprofessors* is, of course, a notoriously unreliable measure of academic teaching; see Boswell 155–156.

7. Mukherjee may have selected this novel because it was not already the subject of a pedagogical essay about Narayan: Jussawalla frames *Swami and Friends* (1935) as a classroom text for comparative and linguistic interpretation; coevally with Mukherjee, Spivak writes about teaching *The Guide* (1958); Kanaganayakam responds, at least in part, to Spivak in his later essay on teaching *The Guide*, as do Alam and Hutton.

8. This essay is likely to date from around 2012 because—although Mukherjee writes of "a 40-year teaching career" and her first academic position was as an English instructor at Marquette University in 1964 (Secrest)—she also speaks here of "closing in on" her "golden" wedding anniversary. My sincere thanks to Clark Blaise for sharing "Attitudes" with me.

9. Compare Mukherjee, "Autobiographical Essay," where she writes, "there is no literary task I undertake with less enthusiasm than autobiography" (n.p.).

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