Mukherjee’s works focus on the “phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates” as well as on Indian women and their struggle (Alam 7) (2). Her own struggle with identity first as an exile from India, then as an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as an immigrant in the United States has led to her current contentment of being an immigrant in a country of immigrants (Alam 10). The unavoidable aspect that any immigrant has to face is the cross-cultural conflict, which mostly leads an individual to ‘identity-crisis’.

The human species is never satisfied with what is ‘natural’ and human beings have survived due to their adapting to things that were not ‘natural’. Cultures evolve because humans are malleable. Sheila Ruth (5) observes:

> The factor of malleability raises the familiar issue of the “nature/nurture” controversy. . . . Although nature, our physical selves and our genes, constitutes the raw material of our beings and thus imposes its own limits on our development, social scientist generally agree that nurture contributes the lion’s share to our development. (214)

The nature-nurture friction in an individual pushes him/her into agonized states that make him succumb to a neurotic disposition. The discord usually happens because of cultural dissociation or due to cross-cultural quandary.

The concept of culture becomes complicated since everyone has potentially several cultures, more complicated due to acculturation that has to happen during migration. This obviously leads a person to cross-cultural dilemma. Conflicts that occur between individuals or social groups separated by cultural boundaries can be considered ‘cross-cultural conflict’. Kevin Avruch (1) in his article “Cross-Cultural Conflict” (Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems) writes:

But individuals, even in the same society, are potentially members of many different groups, organized in different ways by different criteria: for example, by kinship into families or clans; by language,
religion, ethnicity, or nationality; by socioeconomic characteristics into social classes; by geographical region into political interest groups; and by education, occupation, or institutional memberships into professions, trade unions, organizations, industries, bureaucracies, political parties, or militaries. The more complex and differentiated the society the more numerous are potential groupings. Each of these groups is a potential “container” for culture, and thus any complex society is likely to be made up various “subcultures,” that is of individuals who, by virtue of overlapping and multiple group memberships, are themselves “multicultural.” (http://www.eolss.net).

This means that cross-cultural predicament may occur simultaneously at many different levels and is likely to become more acute when an individual’s mindset is rooted in a particular culture. Culture thus frames the contexts in which conflict occurs. One such touchy context amidst the feminist circle is ‘abortion’, which has been considered sin by Indians and is not a ‘murder’ to the westerners. The problem of unwanted pregnancy is faced globally but is dealt with in many different ways. Multicultural authors try to present information from a broader view.

When writers who are a part of two cultures embark on writing about a controversial topic, it is difficult to say how they manage to stay true to one culture and adequately express that culture’s beliefs, while at the same time doing so for another culture. They have been raised to follow certain belief systems and to understand the reasons for them. Yet being in a different culture, sometimes they undergo training to pursue completely different standards of beliefs. If one generation is taught to follow a particular aspect of culture, another has to practice the same with strict variations. Bharati Mukherjee’s short story A Father presents challenges faced by restrained cultures in a multicultural world. In A Father the author presents three main characters, each tossed between the Indian and American cultures. The Bhowmick family that includes the father, the mother, and their daughter, experiences the constant pull of Indian and American identities.

A Father, a short story by Bharati Mukherjee (5), is about an Indian man, Mr. Bhowmick who moves from India to the United States with his wife after marriage and is not happy with it. Moving to the United States is his wife’s idea. Though Mr. Bhowmick has a great job in India, his wife insists on migrating to US. This story shows why moving to the United States is not at all a good proposition, as he compares his life in the United States to his satisfied life back in India. Mr. Bhowmick practices a daily routine that he carries on every day. He wakes up at 5:43 A.M. and wakes his wife two minutes later. Mr. Bhowmick, a religious and spiritual man, is discouraged by his wife because of his religious practice. She does not have to be at work until 8:30, but she prefers getting up early to make a big breakfast for her husband every morning. Theirs was an arranged marriage in India, but there was no love between them. Mr. and Mrs. Bhowmick, though husband and wife, have nothing in common except a daughter. Mrs. Bhowmick’s desire has always been to live in America and so she rejects Hindu religious traditions. But, she is hard working and quite independent. Bhoumick’s daughter Babli is “not the child he would have chosen as his only heir”. He has a deep regret that she is not the child of his dreams.

One day when he returns from his office, he hears his daughter gagging and throwing up in the bathroom. To his utter dismay, he understands that she is pregnant. “Babli would abort, of course. He knew his Babli. It was the only possible option if she didn’t want to bring shame to the Bhowmick family.” Without hesitation Mr. Bhowmick blames his wife that it has been her idea of coming to America. Watching his daughter for weeks trying to figure out who must be the father of the unborn baby, he comes to the conclusion that she must have “yielded to love” or must have been raped. Then one day in July when her stomach begins to show, when Mr.Bhowmick hears the two women arguing, he yells out “stop it. shut up! Babli’s Pregnant”. In their heated argument, the truth comes out — who the father of the child is. Babli says very bluntly, “who needs a man? The father of my child is a bottle and a syringe.” Obviously, she has had an artificial insemination. With a prolonged and continuous argument between her parents and herself, Babli says finally that she just wanted to have a baby. The US nurtured girl indirectly declares that she wants to respect neither her parents nor the system of marriage and she can be a single mother to bring up her child. A Father is an excellent story about a father’s predicament, who believes that moving to the states would corrupt his children.

A Father deals with a very controversial topic; pregnancy out of wedlock. It is more controversial in India than in the first world western nations. Although India’s social codes have decreased in strictness to a great extent, they are still much stricter than what many in the U.S. are accustomed to. The story reveals various ideas related to the discrimination between one culture and another and raises questions on moral code and the right for decision. It brings to light the challenges that a person caught between two very different cultures, faces.

Mr. Bhowmick sees America as a frightening place, tries to hold on to his Indian culture by keeping the statue of Kali and offers prayer to her. The image of Kali, in a variety of ways, teaches man that pain,
sorrow, decay, death, and destruction cannot be overcome or conquered by denying them or explaining them away. Goddess Kali destroys evil force for the sake of man and Kali’s boon is won when man confronts or accepts her. Man understands the realities she dramatically conveys to him. Mukherjee, in essence, breathes life into her story through the family’s goddess Kali-Mata. Kali-Mata is essentially a symbol for the old world that the author uses to personify the ideals and beliefs that Mr. Bhowmick clings to. He refers to her as the “goddess of wrath and vengeance.” (Mukherjee 364) Anytime Mr. Bhowmick is on the verge of accepting a new world philosophy, the image of Kali-Mata’s “scarlet little tongue tip” (366) mocks at him. Multiple references to Kali-Mata’s tongue are seen within the text. Mukherjee uses the imagery of Her tongue to persistently remind the reader and Mr. Bhowmick, of the symbol that Kali-Mata represents. Adjectives such as “scarlet and saucy” and “thick and red” are used to correlate with Kali’s symbol of vengeance. (Mukherjee 364, 370) The vengeance of the old world is towards those “ambulatory sinners” who try to abandon the old world for the new. (Mukherjee 365) The phrase “Red and saucy was the tongue that Kali-Mata stuck [sticks] out at the world” symbolizes the old-world beliefs that ‘stick it’s tongue’ out to the new, modern world that strays from core values of the past. (Mukherjee 365) The imagery of Kali-Mata is not one that represents happiness and light but a warning that man should not stray away from the path of righteousness.

Pain and sorrow are woven into the texture of man’s life so thoroughly that to deny them is ultimately futile. For man to realize the fullness of his being and for him to exploit his potential as a human being, he must finally accept this dimension of existence. For Mr. Bhowmick becoming American and adjusting to the American traditions seem to be painful. Due to the artificial insemination of his daughter, Babli, Mr. Bhowmick feels his daughter has tainted the family name because of the way Babli’s baby was conceived. Babli conceived her child through in-vitro, which lacks a male presence, a total contradiction to the sexist belief system of her Indian heritage. In eliminating the male figure, Mr. Bhowmick, the representative of the old world’s sexist ideas and male dominance within the family is juxtaposed to the female independence that Babli displays with her scientific mode of pregnancy, designed generally for the issueless sterile couple (7). In the Indian culture, sexism was supported with respect to male-dominance, and it was perfectly acceptable to “threatened [threaten] to beat her [his wife] with his shoe as his father had his mother” since the male was the breadwinner of the family; it was also “the thrust and volley of marriage.” (Mukherjee 364) The Middle Eastern culture never considered the question of women’s independence. That is why it is such a huge ordeal for Babli to delete the male presence out of her pregnancy, thus breaking the barriers of sexism in doing so. This an unanswerable question raised between modernism and orthodoxy, as Babli will have enough support for her decision. The geographical settings of a story can literally make a difference between life and death. What may be considered socially wrong but acceptable in one country may be considered as an unforgivable sin that should be harshly punished in another. This is the case in A Father. In the Indian culture, a woman becoming pregnant out of wedlock is breaking of a stringent social law. In A Father the narrator, Mr. Bhowmick, has to confront the problem of following his Indian culture while living in a more liberal Western world with a totally different value system. He reveals this in his reverie about his unwed pregnant daughter, “Babli would abort, of course . . . It was the only possible option if she didn’t want to bring shame to the Bhowmick family.” (87) However, later on, he divulges his belief that much of the fault lies in the Western culture when he says to his wife, “It’s your fault. You made us come to the States.”

Like Mrs. Bhowmick, Babli personifies Western culture and symbolizes the freedom from the rules of their past. Babli, more so than her mother, adopts the ideals of American women. She obtained a high quality job as an engineer, was the “only female in most of her classes at Georgia Tech, wore “linen business suit[s],” and could help her father out “moneywise if something ever happened to him.” (Mukherjee 365) She would have never had these opportunities to be successful back in India where women were expected to “shopped [shop] and cooked [cook] everyday.” (Mukherjee 368) According to her father, “Babli could never comfort him. She wasn’t womanly or tender the way that unmarried girls had been in the wistful days of his adolescence” and more importantly “she was headstrong and independent and he was afraid of her.” (Mukherjee 365, 367) These characteristics symbolize the new age American women who strive to be independent especially from the reins of male dominance not only in the home life but also in the work place. Mukherjee puts special attention to the imagery and details of Babli through the clothes and lifestyle she chooses because it allows us as readers to see the differentiation between the western and eastern culture’s emphasis on gender biases and how they relate to Mr. Bhowmick’s struggle to accept his daughter and what she stands for.

The multicultural conflicts inside of the American society poses an issue in families that struggle to maintain the lifestyle they were accustomed to in their homeland. In Bharati Mukherjee’s A Father, the culturally diverse issues of a Father’s incessant need to preserve the beliefs of his home country clash with his wife’s and daughter’s modern lifestyle. This consequently leads to the ultimate breaking
point when it is disclosed that his daughter has become pregnant through artificial insemination. The issues rose in Mukherjee's short story make the readers assess that the author's views on western culture and that of Middle Eastern culture by the portrayal of Mr. Bhowmick, the father, and also through the use of symbolism, vivid imagery, foreshadowing, and ultimately allegory.

References