

## Example Student Essay

### “Two Ways to Belong in America” by Bharati Mukherjee-Rhetorical Analysis

It would be an understatement to say that immigration is, today, an important political topic. It would be an understatement to say that it was important to Americans in 1996, the year the “Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act”, which increased penalties for undocumented immigrants who committed crimes, was signed into law. It was in the context of 1996 that Bharati Mukherjee wrote “Two Ways to Belong in America”, an article for the *New York Times*. In it, Mukherjee aims — in order to defend immigrants from attempts to delegitimize them — to elicit sympathy for their plight by drawing on her personal experience, employing juxtaposition, and articulating pointed diction throughout. Mukherjee wrote it regarding a movement in Congress to remove government benefits from non-US citizen immigrants, but its importance still remains today. Her story is one that all Americans should hear.

Mukherjee follows the story of her sister, Mira, and herself, both immigrants from India that came to the United States in the early 60s. Since their arrival, Bharati has embraced North American culture and becoming a citizen, while Mira has held to her identity as an Indian, and has not. The main focus of the article is the phone conversations that the two of them have weekly. It is when Mukherjee is describing them that her point starts to come across. Mukherjee quotes her sister during one of their conversations: “I feel manipulated and discarded...For over 30 years, I’ve invested my creativity and professional skills into the improvement of this country’s pre-school system....How dare America now change its rules midstream?” Through this, Mukherjee appeals to her audience’s emotions and reasoning, as her sister’s argument makes effective logical sense and echoes the experiences and feelings of unfairness that many people have suffered through; though it is sometimes impossible, everyone wants their life to be fair, and it isn’t fair that the country that Mira has put her livelihood into is, now, seemingly turning against her.

Mukherjee’s use of her story also adds credibility, as her own opinions and standpoint are different from her sister’s. Rather, she asks, “Have we the right to demand and to expect, that we be loved?” when regarding an immigrant’s place in America (Mukherjee par. 9). Because she provides both sides of the argument, the audience can see and trust that she has considered all angles of the issue. Immigrants are ostracized from society unless they commit to Americanism, but the decision to commit is not an easy one. As the audience comes to realize this, they develop a certain level of remorse for the difficult spot this puts immigrants in, regardless of their opinions on immigration. The inclusion of the personal story and the differing opinions of her and her sister also directly provides areas for the audience to engage in comparison.

Towards the end of the article, Mukherjee summarizes the juxtaposition she has built. She claims that there “could not be a wider divergence of immigrant experience” (Mukherjee par. 11) between her and her sister. Because Mukherjee became a citizen and Mira did not, she feels less unwelcomed in America in 1996 than her sister. However, she never quite specifies whether either sister is more correct in their thinking than the other. Mukherjee explains that the difference between her and her sister was that she made the transformation from “expatriate aristocrat to immigrant nobody”, but both terms in this phrase carry negative connotations. The

word “aristocrat” is often associated with people that are so immersed in one culture that they refuse to acknowledge some of the realities of those who are not, but “immigrant nobody” suggests a lack of voice in society. Furthermore, Mukherjee supports her sister’s side by telling of her own experience in Canada, 20 years earlier, where she was (like her sister is now) shunned by those around her due to governmental action. The comparison that Mukherjee builds is extremely impactful on the audience because there is no “right” side established. The audience is forced to consider: if there is no correct side, then what is the huge difference that Mukherjee is referring to? Is it significant enough that one sister should be feeling less welcome than the other? It is as the audience considers these questions that Mukherjee’s point becomes manifest and the audience’s sympathy grows: the conundrum that immigrants find themselves in is a difficult one to confront. This level of subtlety, of saying things without writing them, extends even to Mukherjee’s choice of words.

Within the last several paragraphs, Mukherjee’s articulation becomes extremely effective. She details the masses of documented immigrants that her sister represents with her complaints, but adds at the end of the list, “...as well as their less fortunate “illegal” brothers and sisters” (Mukherjee par. 12). Because Mukherjee puts “illegal” in quotations, the audience knows that, in a sense, this is not her word, and instead inserts it in the mouth of someone else, someone oppressive, perhaps. She follows up this word with “brothers and sisters” to immediately create a sense of irony. People tend to think of illegal things as wrong, unsolicited, or dangerous, but would seldom put those same labels on their own siblings or family. The audience sympathizes with immigrants at this moment because, in most cases, they wouldn’t want to see their own family called “illegal.”

In the final sentence of the article, Mukherjee leaves the audience with a weight on their shoulders by claiming that the “price that the immigrant willingly pays, and the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation” (Mukherjee par. 15) “Trauma” is a word that immediately evokes heavy emotion, as it is associated with upsetting or harmful situations. An immigrant is forced to go through trauma if they are to be accepted in a society that sees them and will treat them as having a lesser value by holding to their home culture. With this last sentence, Mukherjee makes a final call to the audience’s empathy, ending the article on a note of lasting sobriety.

In “Two Ways to Belong in America,” Bharati Mukherjee presents the plight of immigrants, specifically, her sister, in 1996. This is still the plight of immigrants today: forget the culture of home or be unaccepted by the majorities and government of American people. This either-or choice delegitimizes the identity that may want to be held by immigrants, and instead forces them to accept the dominant narrative of becoming “Americans.” It is because of this that Mukherjee writes: to encourage sympathy for those who are forced into the box that America draws for them. She presents her and her sister’s own experience of the view from both inside and outside that box, asks the audience to compare, and she uses subtle, yet powerful articulation to do so. By combining all these factors, Mukherjee has created an article that has remained relevant after over 20 years, and, if nothing changes, will continue to remain relevant for years to come.