

POSTCOLONIAL IMPACT: A STUDY OF INDIAN DIASPORIC TRADITIONS IN CANADA IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER

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Abstract

One of the serious impacts of the postcolonialism is dispersion or Diaspora. Many of the people being influenced by Western ideologies migrated to various parts of the world. Migration directly influenced the culture of new societies and settlers were also influenced by it. Migration not only transformed their culture but also influenced the older left ones. Mukherjee's maiden novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is an attempt to dig her own identity in her Indian heritage. *The Tiger's Daughter* comes out in the infant stage of Mukherjee's evolution as a writer. Mukherjee's novels generally are representatives of the expatriate sensibility. This research article attempts to study the immigrant experience in Canadian land and thus show the impact of postcolonialism.

Keywords: Diaspora, Migration, Evolution, Postcolonialism, Settlers.

INTRODUCTION

The main theme of *The Tiger's Daughter* is efforts for adjustments in a new culture. Bharati Mukherjee has admitted that an issue very important to her is "...the finding of a new identity... the painful or exhilarating process of pulling yourself out of the culture that you were born into, and then replanting yourself in another culture" (Indian Express 16). During this phase, immigrant has to go through many trials, tribulations, turmoils and traumas while trying to make it in the new world. In this way Bharati Mukherjee seems to have probed into the psyche of the culturally uprooted people and she also tries to present some of her own experiences through them. Therefore, it would be no exaggeration to call *The Tiger's Daughter* the account of Bharati Mukherjee's own self. This novel parallels Mukherjee's coming back to India with her Canadian husband Clark Blaise in 1973. During their stay in India, like Tara, they were concerned about

the social, political, religious and economic issues of Indian day to day life. Mukherjee in *The Tiger's Daughter* through the main protagonist Tara Banarjee Cartwright projects that inner chaos which she herself is going through. Like Tara, Mukherjee's visit to India widens the chasm between her and the mother country she had left behind.

The dilemma of belonging to two cultures and two nations that gives birth to a fractured identity makes the character Tara Chatterjee of *The Tiger's Daughter*. This negotiation of identities is initiated by Mukherjee in *The Tiger's Daughter* which aptly reflects the postcolonial expatriate consciousness through migrancy, belonging and characterization. Art of characterization is one of the most significant aspects of literature. Bharati Mukherjee excels in this field. Her characters reflect different shades of her own personal life. They reflect her personal concerns and circumstances that have helped in developing

her identity as an American. Through Tara she tries to explore the possibilities of maintaining a balance between Indian Expatriate and a person inclined to be merged into the India of her past:

In *The Tiger's Daughter* (1973) the protagonist presumes that her marriage to a non-Indian or non-Hindu has distanced her from her community's traditions, but her return to India for a short time proves to be more disastrous. Back home she realizes that she cannot partake of the excitement of her friends or relatives and is unable to answer the innumerable questions about the newfound land, America, and its affluence (Sunitha 263-4).

Tara's father is a wealthy Bengali Brahmin, who is known as Bengal Tiger in the higher gentry of Calcutta. He belongs to a mercantile aristocracy with its root in the Victorian age. Bengal Tiger thus, stands for the upper strata of the society; whose existence is under threat from the forthcoming social upheaval through socialist and Communists uprising. Here Mukherjee is forecasting about a social movement which is about to take place in the west Bengal. The fact also reflects Mukherjee's awareness regarding political and social life of Bengal in the early 70's. Calcutta, being the Capital of West Bengal becomes the centre of such political and social activities. Gradually she is able to complete seven years in America; in the company of her American husband. In her heart Tara for long has been dreaming of going back to her native country. Finally, after seven years, at the age of twenty-two, she is able to fulfil her wish.

The novel deals with her return journey; her homecoming which turns into an uneasy one. It proves to be futile and a great disappointment for Tara. For years she has been dreaming to return, but on returning she finds herself imbued with the 'foreignness of spirit' which was the result of not only her American domicile but also due to her early education at private school run by Belgian nuns in Calcutta. Tara's return journey stands for the literal journey commenced upon by Mukherjee to describe how Tara is pushed to the edges of her old world, and yet exiled from the new, and

how she tries vainly to reconcile the two worlds in her heart. Tara's return journey from New York to Calcutta via Mumbai gives us the glimpse of a changed Tara. Her sojourn in the America made her a woman of different attitude. Once she used to admire 'the houses on Marine Drive' but now "their shabbiness appalled her to her Bombay's railway station appears 'more like a hospital' (18-19). She becomes supercilious and behaves contemptuously with her co-passengers a Marwari and a Nepali. She ironically remarks:

The Marwari was indeed very ugly and tiny and insolent. He reminded her of a circus animal who had gotten the better of his master, and the other occupant, a Nepali was a fidgety older man with coarse hair. He kept crossing and recrossing his legs and pinching the creases of his pants. Both men, Tara decide, could effortlessly ruin her journey to Calcutta (20).

Tara finds refuge in 'Catelli – Continental Hotel' as it provides escape from Calcutta and its chaos; but she realized that it is impossible for her to escape from Calcutta or harsh realities of life. To her, Calcutta seems to be a city with riots; class-struggle, labour unrest and workers seizing the warehouses. That's why Tara observes:

Calcutta is as good or as bad as over. Newspapers are full of epidemics, collisions, fatal quarrels and starvation. But even at close quarters she finds tragedy looking large squatters occupy private property; near naked people sleep on pavements with rats and cockroaches for company, a handcuffed young man is slapped in the face, precisionists break into a bakery shop, a friend is hit on the head with a soda bottle by a frenzied mob; "Calcutta is a deadliest city in the world (210).

How ironic it is for Tara that she finds her native place as highly disorderly and anarchic whereas in an alien culture amidst the omnipresent fear of violence, 'the waiting to be mugged' she is at ease. She adjusts to her new surrounding and even marries an American. Apart from the external happenings, internally Tara is under the influence of the 'foreignness of the spirit', which makes it impossible for her

to enjoy the company of her old friends with whom she had played with “seven years ago, done her homework with Nilima, briefly fancied herself in love with Pronob, debated with Reena at the British Council” (43). Tara finds herself in the grip of the ‘foreignness of the spirit’ that widens the chasm between her and Calcutta more. This particular situation reflects one of the most common postcolonial complexities where the immigrant is unable to cope with the native country due to lack of proper understanding and interaction with the local surroundings.

The different types of postcolonial complexities are explored by Mukherjee through the type of immigrants such as elite immigrants and the common middle-class immigrant. In *The Tiger’s Daughter*, the attitude of the elite immigrant towards her primary space i.e. Calcutta is specifically mentioned. Tara represents that class of urban upper class, social elite, which never internalize the primary space, the country of birth. She has never been the common girls of Calcutta. All through her fifteen years span in Calcutta, Tara has not been exposed to the real Calcutta life. Living in Calcutta just meant to her, living in a huge house with comforts on Lamae Street, getting education at St. Blaise, watching movies at the metro and enjoying a safe, protected life. This effective insulation which Tara receives from her parents creates a secondary space where she lives untroubled. This is the reason that all her relatives develop an intense aversion to Tara and through her towards all the values that her secondary space that is America represents. She appears like a, “carefully bred tadpole that is transferred from a small aquarium to a larger one as it grows” (Ravichandra 85). Even after her return from America, she is involved in the activities of leisure. Gathering at the Catelli Continental with her wealthy friends, drinking endless cups of tea with useless chatting:

Tara has not come face to face to face with the real Calcutta of poverty and squalor, industrial unrest and increasing crimes. Even when she is surrounded by friends and relatives, she feels totally isolated and completely alone. By not being able to fit back into Calcutta society, Tara realizes that she is a misfit at both places.

She is always troubled by nostalgia for the life left behind and this leaves her in a catch-22 situation (Nityanandam 69).

The conflicts between the primary and the secondary space in Tara’s life is the main theme of the novel. Without having a proper knowledge of her native land, the secondary space or the foreign country with its own codes of survival appears attractive and desirable. It is often the result of an experience of marginality within the primary space. It could also be racial, class or gender. [S]He imagines the secondary space sometimes better because it offers him or her new liberties and possibilities, but in Tara’s case she is not well-equipped to adjust in the secondary space or her orientation at the primary space was not proper. She belongs to the upper elite class of Calcutta and having arrived she finds her secondary space quite demanding as she married with a person belonging to this space. In this situation her secondary space is a primary space for her husband. Because of this inevitable synchronicity of these conflicting loyalties the people of her primary/secondary space feel neglected. This is fundamentally a neo-colonial situation. It could happen within nation boundary, among ethnic boundaries and it could happen in transnational situation as between the immigrant and the dominant groups. Being Mukherjee’s maiden novel Tara does not seem to develop any strategy of survival in her either of spaces.

Tara feels that her marriage with an American has distanced her from her community and friend circle. After her return from America she is even afraid of her friends’ opinion and attitude regarding her. She fears “their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness” (43). Tara’s relatives do not approve of the way she is leading her life. Her relatives “attribute her arrogance to her American attitude to life and think that her seven years’ stay in America has transformed her thoroughly into a strutting peacock” (Sunitha 264). When Tara along with her mother visits to her aunt Jharna, who is in a miserable condition as she has lost her husband in cancer and worse than that she has “saddled with a club footed child” (TD 35). Tara tries to sympathise with her and suggests plasters,

casts and special shoes as a cure, but she is humiliated by the aunt: "You have come back to make fun of us; haven't you? What gives you the right? Your American money? Your mlechha husband" (36). Thus, Tara is completely misunderstood and she is even brutally charged with the allegation "why do you hate us? Tara is unable to express herself and it is her incommunicability which is responsible for the wrong impression of her image among her relatives and friends. She fails to reply her aunt against the allegation. She would have replied: "I don't hate you, I love you and the miserable child, the crooked feet, the smoking incense holder, I love you all" (38).

Tara finds herself incomplete and fragmented due to her incommunicability with her native people and places. Further two more incidents which she comes across make her voiceless. One incident happens during her visit to Darjeeling, when accompanying her mother, she meets a holy woman called Kananbala Mata. Her Darshan makes her speechless and she finds herself in a state of ecstasy; an epiphanic revelations which is inexpressible. Tara's meeting with Mata Kananbala proved to be very effective as it left on her heart an unforgettable impression. "Like her religious mother she too believed in miracles and religious experience" (136). For Tara this incident becomes a memorable one but the second one becomes a traumatic experience, sexual violence inflicted upon Tara by Tuntunwala. Tara visits Nayapur with her friends. It is here that Tuntunwala tries to seduce her in her room. This derogatory act of Tuntunwala makes her cynical about him and Tara becomes disillusioned about India: Tara's first reaction was to complain Sanjay and Pronob, to tell them Tuntunwala was a parasite who would survive only at their expense. But the outrage soon subsided, leaving a residue of unforgiving bitterness. She realized she could not share her knowledge of Tuntunwala with any of her friends. In a land where a friendly smile, an accidental brush of fingers can ignite rumours- even law suits- how is one to speak of Tuntunwala's violence? (TD 199). This incident makes her shocked and she finds

herself voiceless. Her dumbness becomes unbearable for her. She becomes a victim of internal violence but her pain and agony remains with her due to her lack of communication.

Tara finds her inner voice arising from her injured inner self, which is the outcome of internal violence; Calcutta city like herself is a mute victim of violence, who is ready to bear the pain of being torn apart by a violent mob. Under these terrible circumstances Tara finally decides to return to her husband in America. But she is caught in the upsurge of the violent mob and the story remains inconclusive. Tara is, thus, "portrayed as a tigress at bay in the forests of dried up imagination" (Sivaramkrishna 71-87). The abrupt, inconclusive end of the novel is almost like the immigrant who is not sure about his or her destination and existence, swinging in between rootedness and rootlessness. This condition of Homelessness is further aestheticized through the tropes of journey.

Tara considers herself more like an outsider rather than a native, though in her inner conscience she always regarded herself as an Indian who is concerned with the poverty, politics, class-struggle; hierarchies of power and class in India. However, all these social issues at times shocked and baffled her. Her "westernization has opened her eyes to the gulf between the two worlds that still make India the despair of those who govern it" (Time Literary Supplement 736). Tara wants to bridge the gulf between her native country and the new world. She could not fit into that role because to her, "it was impossible to be a bridge for anyone... Bridges had a way of cluttering up the landscape" (TD 201). Despite her efforts of reconciliation, she is not able to maintain the equilibrium due to her 'foreignness of the spirit'. It is this spirit which has gripped Tara making her inaccessible between her own family and her friends. Tara's homecoming symbolically stands for the 'enigma of arrival' which in itself presents the question of belonging. Tara behaves as a part of a new breed of immigrant post-colonials with a conscience. Tara reacts like a foreigner and this feeling of foreignness envelops her completely.

This 'foreignness of spirit' made her realize that she has become rootless and irrelevant not only in India but also in America. Even in her friend circle she feels uneasy. Her westernized friends do not approve of a western husband. One of her friends do not want to lose class-power and a privileged position by becoming an immigrant. "I would hate to be an immigrant... I would not mind giving up the factory, but I'd hate to be a nobody in America. How do they treat Indians, Tara?" (59). Therefore, she feels quite alienated and the trivializing passions and attitudes of her so called westernized friends irritate her. She finds it not only difficult but also impossible to relate herself to her family, friends, city, country and culture. Tara's state is comparable to, though not identical with, that of an expatriate who stands apart from the emotional spiritual tenor of the country that had once been her own. It is also difficult for Tara to communicate with her family. Her parents do not consider her as one of them. "She finds that her father, though slightly disappointed her, had said nothing; of course, but then had never really talked about important things. They had covered up misgiving with loyalty and trust" (TD 29).

Tara even becomes suspicious of her mother. She thinks that her mother no longer loves her for having wilfully choosing a foreigner as her life partner. Thus, offending her more as now she ceases to be a real Brahmin. In such a trying situation, she feels herself caught in the web; the more she tries to come out, the more entrapped she finds herself. F.A. Inamdar observes: "Tara's efforts to adapt to American society are measured by her rejection and revulsion of Indian modes of life" (187-96). Due to cultural displacement Tara's homecoming makes her dislocated. Her husband's face appears to her in bits and pieces as she fails to visualize it fully and whole. She is even unable to write a letter to her husband about her experiences in India because of her incommunicability which makes her voiceless. "Her voice in these letters was insipid or shrill, and she tore them up, twinging at the waste of seventy-five naya paisa for each mistake (TD 65). Her American husband David Cartwright is an American liberal who makes fun of her

friends. He does not believe in the class system and for him clearing bathrooms is general part of daily chores, for which he does not give Tara much credit, as she considers it her wifely duty. She knows it well that all the poverty-stricken sights and scenes of refugees and beggars in Shambazar, that disturbs her will also have a bad impression on David about India. Her love for her husband is not sufficient enough to make him bear all these loathsome realities.

Tara considers herself rootless and irrelevant both in India and America. Her rootlessness and irrelevancy are expressed when David bought books about India. This act of David makes Tara suspicious of his designs, "so David had bought books on India. This innocent information enraged Tara. She thought the latter was really trying to tell her that he had not understood her country through her, that probably he had not understood her either" (50). This revelation gradually leads her to develop a split personality as she makes out that David does not consider her wise or reliable enough to provide him sufficient knowledge about her native country. She even becomes afraid that David, "no longer wanted to make her over to his ideal image, that he – no longer loved her" (50). Tara, Thus, goes through a crisis which further gets more deepens when she thinks herself unwanted and irrelevant among her family and friends.

Tara tries hard to reconcile the two worlds that is the Western one with its secular orientation and the Eastern one with its traditional non-secular orientation. But her efforts are not successful, thus, she tries vainly to reconcile the two worlds in her heart; whereas, Bharati Mukherjee as a writer with that first novel as a writer was very comfortable in both India and North America. She considered herself as a bridge between the two worlds at that time. Mukherjee reveals to Ameena Meer that "both being fully poised in my perfect equilibrium: I would remember my Calcutta with a distance humour and affection and I was functioning" (26).

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