

Ethos of Voluntary Exile in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter***Dr. M. Divya**

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Abstract

Mukherjee's first published novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), is the only fictional text in Mukherjee's oeuvre which foregrounds the process of national construction through the trope of the immigrant's return to the ancestral homeland. The immigrant's return to India in the hope of recovering her roots and the stability of her cultural identity as an Indian is not equated uncritically with an unexamined sense of what 'Indianness' means or constitutes. Thus the text foregrounds and often overlooked dynamics that structure the immigrant perspective that the material and ideological implications of the immigrant writer's in between location necessitates not only an interrogation of the presumed unities of the new homeland but also a dismantling of the nationalist narrative of a unitary homeland. The novelist not only projects the women characters like Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter*, whose mind is filled with cross cultural crisis but also longs for describing the sufferings of the women for their autonomy, identity, feminine sensibility, liberty and equality with the men. In this study the novelist portrays Tara, whose psyche is ultimately affected with discomfort caused in the mind due to the different socio – cultural environment.

Key words: immigrant, identity, autonomy, cross cultural.

Tara Banerjee belongs to an upper class Bengali Brahmin. Being a daughter of an educated and upper class family, she is sent to the U.S.A. to pursue her higher education. When she lands in America, she faces the music. She feels that she is not able to keep herself accustomed with the culture of her host country. Tara who is fully ignorant faces complete dissonance. Hence, she decides to visit her mother country India after seven years. She has such hope that her visit may perhaps diminish her anxiety, anger and disappointment and she will refresh her mind to her entire satisfaction. Other hand reality looked very different. Tara happens to meet utmost disappointment. She hardly feels that she cannot throw herself to adjust the Calcutta atmosphere. Totally the novel *The Tiger's Daughter* deals with all her possible efforts to assimilate with her motherland, India. She could be neither an Indian nor an American but she tries her level best to regain her identity. Tara finds much conflict between her perception of an American life and observation of the reality because, "She was a sensitive person sensitive especially to places" (TD, 15). She finds that the American way of life is full of frustration and fear because, "As each atom of newness bombarded her" (TD, 15)

This paper addresses the issue from the perspective of the diaspora about the women characters who were living in U.S.A. not only far away from them or their original

homeland but also hail from a cultural ethos that is obviously Non-American. As for the novelist, the modern woman tries to free herself from the dependent syndrome and so she brings out her self-identity. The novelist highlights the cultural situation of Tara who aspires for the self-identity. Her characterization wins the favour of the readers. It makes others feel to accept her role-model in such a way that any women like her should not involve with the Americanization.

America creates a different environment which affects the sensibility of an individual. As she is humble, pious and fragile, she finds difficulty to cope with the new landscape and environment in the U.S.A. She finds difference between her real self and the ideal life. Tara generally develops a sense of non-belonging which makes her become suspicious of even silly matters. She retells an incident where in her roommate, an American in Poughkeepsie, does not like sharing of mango chutney by her roommate as racial discrimination. "Little things pained her. If her roommate did not share a bottle of mango chutney she sensed discrimination. Three weeks in Poughkeepsie and I am undone, thought Tara" (*TD*, 14).

This rootlessness is the cause of creating conflict of emotions in her mind (fear and anxiety). As the fear is preoccupied in her subconscious mind, she foresees the sense of non-belonging in her dreams. She finds solace from nobody in U.S.A. She happens to marry David. David always appears in Tara's thought in the whole novel. Tara thinks differently that David is a westerner. Marriage makes a first cleavage from the family. She dreamt that she would find a new world with him. She had a broad vision. Due to the cultural disparity, Tara faces an inexpressible clash between expectation and reality of her ideal husband. She is not able to communicate anything to her husband, David Cartwright, an American. She finds much difficulty to discuss any domestic affairs like her mother's insurance policy with David because he is a foreigner. So, she wants to avoid it because David questioning about her tradition or culture or anything for that matter.

She cannot satisfy him and she feels that he cannot understand easily because of the cultural difference between them. The novelist pinpoints that a contract between Tara's outlook and David Cartwright's western attitude is used to illuminate the cultural differences. After her wedding with him, Tara lost her spirit and hope that she would manage with him. A certain day she feels very dejected.

On days she had thought she could not possibly survive she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make the apartment more "Indian". She had curried hamburger desperately till David's stomach had protested. (41)

While she contemplates visiting India thinking that it would rejuvenate her mind, a need arises to refashion. As long as Tara is alienated in America, she undergoes a lot of trials and tribulations. Unfortunately she gets into an uncomfortable adjustment in her relationship because she learns a lot from her experience in America, her sense of discrimination as her roommate does not share her mango chutney, her loneliness resulting in taking out all silk scarves and hanging them around the apartment so as to expose more Indian outlook;

her piousness to pray to Goddess Kali to give her strength to keep up mental attitude well before the Americans. All these show the cultural resistance borne by this immigrant in an alien land.

Tara returns to her mother country after seven years with high hope and desire that her fearful or threatening foreign experience would not stand in her memory. She felt awesome to see India that she has never imagined before. The new Americanized Tara is not able to tolerate anything which has gone against her expectations and she hardly sees India as an Indian. She wants to behave as if she were a foreigner. Her attitude totally remains changed. She finds India in the narration of Somdatta Mandal. As an immigrant woman is away from home, she wants to feel at home to see her home country and freshen nostalgic memories of it.

She is astonished witnessing the fracturing of her Calcutta. She feels that she looks unfit for the Indian society where no change has happened. In Calcutta, Tara feels that she is trapped between the two worlds that she has understood India of her childhood and the new country that she would like to call home otherwise, she feels excited in her own native land. Believing that all fears, frustrations and rootlessness with which she struggled in America, would disappear, she visits to Calcutta. But she finds that there are a lot of changes in Calcutta. She longs for seeing a new and developed Calcutta. On contrast with her expectation, she finds Calcutta which is suffering from poverty – stricken life. Never has she expected that it would be in the worst condition. She hardly becomes accustomed with it. She feels alienated from her relatives. Her relatives come forward to admire her identity that she is an American with traditional values of India.

Her friends make her feel that she is the foreign spirit. Her mental suffering goes beyond endurance. Her kith and kins crowd around her. She feels left alone. “Surrounded by this army of relatives who professed to love her, and by vendors ringing bells, beggars pulling at sleeves, children coughing on tracks, Tara felt completely alone” (*TD*, 35). When Tara reaches the railway station, she develops in her mind “a nauseating feeling of isolation” (*TD*, 35).

Tara suffers from dissonance in America because of her foreignness and homesickness. She could not be a jubilant in India. The environment affects her badly. The novelist portrays the sensibility of the immigrant which stands torn between two socio-cultural environments. Through projection of this protagonist, Tara, Bharati Mukherjee raises her voice that a social reform has to be felt in positioning of women in the society.

Tara meets her aunt Jharna. She sees an ailing child of her aunt. She suggests a scientific and medical remedy to the problem, when she sees her aunt using religious methods to cure her child. It annoys her aunt and the latter accuses Tara for being overbearing because of Americanization. She understands that she is at rootless stage. Wherever she goes or whatever she sees, everything could be observed with American outlook. Bharati Mukherjee makes us understand that Tara neither adapts to the American culture nor disinherits her Indian culture too. She is in the middle course (in-betweeness). Mukherjee creates another situation for Tara where she is unable to manage.

There she absolutely forgets the Indian ritual practices. When Tara is in puja room with her mother, Tara forgets what to do in the ritual of God. She is thrown into confusion of her true self. Question arises about identity. Forgetting religious rituals makes Tara feel she has ultimately lost the Indian culture.

At all costs, Tara takes much effort to maintain her identity. Americanization makes it fade away but it does not happen. Her migration from one's own former self lays foundation for an imposed self. Migration from country to country creates conflict and throws her in diasporic situations to face the society boldly. Tara's sufferings spring from her own 'unstable self'. But she never loses her spirit to maintain her identity. Despite all. She visits her native place armed with a stronghold and changed perspective and discrimination. She keeps up her dignity and identity before David, proving an ideal Indian Woman. The foreignness of Tara's spirit refuses to establish an emotional kinship with her old friends and relatives. At the end of the novel, Tara is caught in the midst of a rioting mob where presence of her husband is invisible. Tara has deep desire to behave like an ordinary Indian but her rerooted self in America made such common rituals alien to her, she realises very much that she is rootless now. She feels alienation inside her wherever her relatives call her 'Americanwali' and her husband 'Mleccha'. She knows pretty well that Calcutta has become a chaos. So, everything seems to be abnormal to her sight. Apart that, Tara is not only physically foreign in India but also experiences foreignness in spirit too. She is faithful to David and she remains true to her feelings, thought, attitude and action for David. The commitment she made to live as she does is appreciable.

She has to tolerate and manage both psychological and cultural identity crisis but she never loses her "Self". She succeeds at keeping it up all along. One can see that Bharati Mukherjee has cleverly explored the inner psyche of an immigrant woman, cognitively and strongly dissonant, owing to her cultural conflicts. But the Trauma of her inner self to make adjustment is reflected in her action and thought, such tremendous and eligible character is Tara. Her identity is dual. Tara is, in the critical situation fortunately or unfortunately, unable to be neither an Indian nor an American, finds success at exposing herself to all very visibly.

Although she in the lurch, never fails to enrich identity. The novelist portrays how the novelist herself projects her own self through the heroine of the novel. The fusion of Americanness and Indianness in the mind of Tara and acquiring split personality due to the cultural conflict is nothing but the theme of the novel. She could not brush off her profound attachment with her motherland.

Bharati Mukherjee as a social realist describes changes as accurately as she did when the memory about India was fresh in her mind. She exercises a creative power in delineation of her characters. She handles a technique that she lets the characters themselves do what they say. Character and human relationship are inter-dependent and independent. The novelist throws light on inter cultural and intra social relationships and striving of the protagonist to demystify her identity.

At this junction, mention about the colonial encounter is felt necessarily. The transculturalism become an important factor in the Imperial society's constitution.

Understanding of 'self' is inevitable. Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* is an exploration of the transition period of dilemma and chaos's which persists in the lives of the female characters so called the protagonists when they migrate to U.S.A from India and settle down in their life. Of course, there was an uncertainty of the future of returning the homeland and struggling for demystifying the identity in the society the turbulent period of social, cultural, political and economic unpredictability.

The novel is open-ended as the reader is left wondering whether she could succeed in returning to her husband. The ending of the novel is used as a paradigm to question and discover – rediscover the new ways of defining reality in a world standing on the brink of the glorious mountain consisting of cash and pebbles.

Tara caught in the midst of the rioting mob marking the invisible presence of her husband David, leaves the reader stunned and wondering as the novel ends there. In a sense the turmoil outside is but an external manifestation of Tara's inner state of mind and by leaving her amidst that turmoil, perhaps, Mukherjee hints at the irreconcilability of such conflicts. *The Tiger's Daughter* then, is designed to capture the predicament of someone returning to her homeland after a period of self-imposed exile: to such a person, home will never be home again, and life in exile, bitter draught though it often is, will be preferable to what home has become.

The discovery that Tara makes at the end of the novel is that the greenery and the forests she had associated with the India of her childhood –her version of pastoral–were no longer there, something or the other had "killed" them (*TD*, 207). In New York she had dreamed of coming back to Calcutta, but "the return had brought only wounds" (*TD*, 25). Particularly galling for Tara is her finding that by choosing exile she "had slipped outside" the parameters of a world in which she belonged by birthright, and that even after only seven years outside it, "reentry was barred" (*TD*, 110). And so although the novel ends with Tara trapped in a car that is surrounded by rioters, wondering "whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she didn't whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely" (*TD*, 210).

Tara's mental progress in the novel leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that if she did get out of the car, it would be to take the next plane back to the United States. Nevertheless, Mukherjee's first novel is an impressive achievement. It announces a bold new voice in literature in English coming out of India to represent the predicament of the Indian who has opted to settle in the West and must now redefine her ties to her homeland. *The Tiger's Daughter* is the book Mukherjee had to write before she could sever her ties with the country of her birth and cast her lot with countless expatriates in North America to come to the point from where she could ultimately celebrate immigrant lives and immigration to the United States.

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