

FRICION AND FRACTION: CULTURAL EXIGENCY AND STRUGGLE FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER*

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Abstract

The present paper quite effectively maps out the fundamental problems of women who with their diasporic consciousness, try to come out from the inevitable and unavoidable clutch of cultural exigency and psychological trauma, triggered by transmutation of mind and the nostalgic entanglement of native culture. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Bharati Mukherjee endeavours to explore the cultural dilemma between America and India incorporating the sense of isolation, rootlessness and violence which the immigrant women experience with their bitter sensibility in course of their psychological and academic journey. The novel, through the central character of Tara, examines the inevitability of proper communication that helps one to achieve the solidarity of identity and cultural uniformity. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, the author creates an unfixed cultural ground for Tara, on the basis of which she can't go further to stabilize her emotional dilemma and cultural identity. Being a 'nowhere person', Tara, the protagonist of the novel, foreshadows the cultural crux of all migrant women who are always set forth by the contemporary diasporic writers in the eternal vortex of struggle for cultural solidarity in the strand of modern globalisation. This paper aims to portray Bharati Mukherjee's innate struggle to display cultural oscillation between two different cultures (America and India), psychological dilemma and fraction of emotional ground of the migrant women through the character of Tara who tries hard to fix-up herself with a certain cultural association in course of her adaptability of new culture.

Keywords: Cultural exigency, Cultural crux, Diasporic, Immigrant women, nowhere person, Cultural oscillation, Psychological trauma, Rootlessness, Transmutation

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian by birth and an American in her present state of living with her husband and two children, has designed her dual experience of Indian and American cultures in her works in a state of clash and friction. The cultural variation in the form of cultural dilemma and crisis of cultural identity finds its room in the fictions of Bharati Mukherjee who with her personal insight and retrospective tenacity portrays the characters in a whirlpool where they struggle hard to overcome the tension and stress regarding the

construction of identity and cultural assimilation. The protagonists of Mukherjee's writings always confront the conflict between the urge of native culture to get back its solid ground and strangeness and discomfort ability of the new culture which they have to accept for their own purposes. Being a diasporic writer, Mukherjee presents her migrants characters in quest of their freedom and cultural identity in their adopted land, which remain to them like a mirage. The characters experience the cultural, religious and psychological exigencies through the lens of their double-consciousness. In an interview with B Alison Carb, Bharati Mukherjee firmly expounds: "The immigrants in my stories go through extremes of transformations in America and at the same time they alter the country's appearance and psychological make-up" (p2).

The geographical displacement posits several critical assessments towards exile, the nature of diasporic writing and the writer's affinity to his culture. The writing always reflects the writer's attempt to avoid the schizophrenic split-personality and his constant oscillation between two contradictory directions. The mixed up sensibility or the third location demolishes the purity of culture and creates a space where the cultural symmetry turns into a mobilised and imaginary essence. Homi. K.Bhaba in his *The Location of Culture*, has remarked that the creation of third space smashes "The logic of Synchronicity and evolution which traditionally authorise the subject of cultural knowledge ... It makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process and destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated open, expanding code" (53).

The novel *The Tiger's Daughter* accounts the rigorous and painful journey of the protagonist Tara who confronted and experienced the voiceless sound of her fractured soul afflicted by cultural exigency and identity crisis. The novel is an embodiment of Tara's, the main protagonist of the novel, marital life with her family in America, recounting her nostalgic vibration of images of her motherland India. After seven years of her marital life with her husband David Cartwright and children, when she comes to her native place and tries to get the grip of native intimation of cultural identity, she finds her in a field of isolation and rootlessness. The novel quite suggestively underscores the inner conflict and psychological stress on the part of Tara at the different spheres such as emotional, cultural and psychological on the ground of two opposite cultures (Indian and American). The novelist has conveyed through the protagonist Tara, the firsthand experiences about life, time and space in different moments of life standing on two different cultural grounds.

Bharati Mukherjee designs the life of Indian immigrants in a strange world of America where they try their best to associate themselves with the alien culture and changed identity with a process of new habilitation throwing aside their root culture in which they used to take breath. The immigrants experience at their heart the tragic result of conflict and tension

between two different socio-cultural environments and also between the nostalgic sensitivity for their native land and their continuous attempt to imbibe new culture as their own. In the novel, there is a cultural, psychological and societal transmutation along with Tara's migration to America and her marriage with an American. The novel shows the constant struggle of Tara to get a concrete identity and tension of cultural belongingness.

The novel *The Tiger's Daughter* showing presence of dual cultures in an individual migrant is an oblique manifestation of cultural dilemma. The plot of the novel surrounds the journey of an elite Brahmin Bengali girl from India to America for academic purpose; her subsequent marriage with David Cartwright and her psychological and cultural conflict. After seven years when she returns to India, she finds herself a stranger in her native land India. Tara ultimately realises her double identity and alienation with double consciousness and feels that neither she belongs to India, nor she belongs to America.

The story of the novel traces back to the year 1879 and the experience and outlook of Hari Lal Banerjee, grandfather of Tara Banerjee and the Zamindar of his village, towards future generation when he finds her daughter married off. He didn't think of the prospect of the future generation as he realises that "the shadows of suicide or exile, of Bengali soil sectioned and ceded of workers rising against their bosses could not have been divined by even a wise man in those days" (6). Then life comes in the form of happiness for Hari Lal after his daughter's marriage. His ultimate death marks the end of all his reputation and respect he earned in his life.

Tara Banerjee, the granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee, is an elated offspring of Bengal Tiger, the owner of reputed Banerjee and Thomas Tobacco Co. Ltd. Tara was sent by her father to America for her academic progress at the age of fifteen. The first hand experience of Tara in America is very awful and something awkward that remains inexplicable. The experience of Tara mixed up with fear and anger is presented thus in *The Tiger's Daughter*:

For Tara, Vassar had been an almost unsalvageable mistake. If she had not been a Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin, the great daughter of Hali Lal Banerjee, or perhaps if he had not been trained by the good nuns at St. Blaise's to remain composed and lady like in all emergencies, she would have rushed home to India at the end of her first week. (10)

The Tiger's Daughter is all about Tara's psychological configuration where two different cultures (Indian and American) clash each other on her emotional and imaginative grounds. Tara comes back to Calcutta after experiencing her seven years of marital life with her husband Mr. Cartwright and her children and finds herself in a nowhere state. She is

neither satisfied nor fascinated by the contemporary socio-cultural scenario and practices of India, nor does she assimilate the values of American culture within. This conflict creates a great vacuum in her mind at the level of cultural, moral and ethical textures. Being inspired and motivated by some great philosophical writers such as Sartre, Camus and James Joyce, Tara has posited a critical view towards the contemporary turmoiling condition, hostility and agony in Calcutta. She tells Pronob, "it's all so very different ... And it's going to be a lot more different ... and tragic." In reply, Pronob says "Don't be silly! We've got to beat this nonsense out of system. Purge our factories of unions and things like that." (45)

In India, though there is some strangeness, still Tara being an Indian Born can claim and feel something as her own. At the same time the newly adopted cultural sensibility pricks and taunts her to go back to this culture. On the other hand, America does not provide any room for her to consider as her own, though she has spent many years there. Bharati Mukherjee has presented Tara in her present novel as one who is not well gratified with Indian culture and sentiments on one hand and one who has lost the grip of accumulating the social and cultural essence of America. The novel quite effectively exhibits the bone of contention in Tara's mind with her cultural and cross-cultural differences. The mental graphs of Tara, tortured by such cultural exigency is reflected in the following –

The house on Camac Street began to exercise its hypnosis on her. New York, she thought now, had been exotic. Not because it had Laundromats and subways. But because there were policemen with dogs prowling the underground tunnels. Because girls like her, at least almost like her, were being knifed in elevators in their own apartment building. Because students were rioting about campus recruiters and far-away wars rather than the price of rice or the stiffness of final exams. Because people were agitated over pollution. The only pollution she had been warned against in Calcutta had been caste pollution. New York was certainly extraordinary, and it had driven her to despair. (33-34)

The nostalgic drive lulls Tara to come back to Calcutta, her home town, to find a sense of solace at heart, but the condition and shabbiness of the town disillusion her with cultural transgression. The breach between her aspiration for her home land, Calcutta in India and the real appearance of it shatters all her hopes and optimisms. The experience of her train journey disappoints her by giving a nasty impression about the surrounding of Calcutta. Her observation of a Marwari family in the compartment is documented in the following –

But the gentlemen in the compartment simply did not interest her. 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. The Nepali was a fidgety older man with coarse hair. He kept crossing and re-crossing his legs and pinching the creases of

his pants. Both men, Tara decided, could effortlessly ruin her journey to Calcutta. (20)

Tara's marriage to David Cartwright gives an immense picture of immigrant experience in American Culture where Tara feels that she is not attributed any credit for her contribution to her family. She could not concentrate on the rites and rituals during the time of prayer. She has conveyed her incapacity of adjusting with the new culture like, "it was not a simple loss, Tara feared, this forgetting of prescribed actions; it was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and centre. But her mother came quickly with the relief of words" (51). She again feels that perhaps the prayer song gradually collapses her moral and cultural ambience of mind and she is reverberated again and again by the culture, buildings and atmosphere of her mother land. Her experience is presented in *The Tiger's Daughter* thus-

The walls of her mind were caving in like black tenement building in Shyambazar. The children near Tara were screaming now, making each Raghupati and Raghava crackle, eyeing the fruits offered to the icons on silver plates. Their bright animal-eyes darted from little table to table. A liveliness or greed settled on the children and quickened their song. Tara had not thought that holy names could seem so abrasive. (53)

Bharati Mukherjee in *The Tiger's Daughter* has quite derogatively exploited the theme of cultural discrepancy and moral and identity crisis through Tara's eternal struggle to find her stabilised with a suitable culture and identity. In the very crucial time of spiritual and moral conflict, Tara invokes Goddess Kali to attribute her strength and courage to face the problematic of life. Circumstances create the space in which Tara falls in love with David and gets married to him. Different points of views and different ways of thinking about life between David and Tara unfurl the cultural cracks between India and America. The value of marriage is different in different cultures. To Americans, marriage is just a union of two bodies and minds and it is sometimes based on the mutual understanding, compromise and social contract without any sentimental association. But, to Indians, marriage is a sacred union of not only two hearts but also two families. Marriage always enjoys a special room in the hearts of all Indians. The novel, it can be said, is an alternative presentation of the struggle and shuffle between two cultures that constitute the fragmented identity of Tara.

The grief, pain and struggle with suffering of Tara gives a clear outline of her expectation for the help of her relatives on the field of her isolation, alienation and cultural disparity. The novel has sketched an ironical presentation of Tara's continuation of the blue blood of Zamindar family. In time of British colonial rule in India, Zamindars were the first to adopt the English culture and helped others to communicate with the British. Being a successor of Bengali Zamindar family, Tara shows her inability to make up her mind to adjust herself with the new culture with changes.

Tara, without finding any other alternative, determines to confront the problems brought by time and culture. She ultimately accords to the fact that the birth place or home town where she once belonged to and could find her a certain identity has finally lost its impression as an ideal world to her. The glory of Calcutta what Tara finds and imagines in New York, finally turns into “the deadliest city in the World” (168).

The cultural clash takes a crucial shape in the form of uneasiness and awkwardness in the course of Tara's life when Tara is persuaded by her family friends and relatives with several unacademic questions regarding life-style, manner, culture and landscape of America. The novelist quite deliberately has presented Tara's relationship with her friends before and after seven years with a sharp contrast that outlines a cultural debate.

Tara tries to ruminate on the past life in India, “seven years ago, she had played with these friends, done her homework with Nilima, briefly fancied herself in love with Pronob, debated with Reena at the British Council (43). The opposite mentality is found after spending the seven years in America, “she feared their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness” (43). Her family members and friends could not approve her marriage with a foreigner because for the sake of such marriage, Tara has discarded her caste, culture and religion. Tara remains unable to expound her heart-felt emotion through writing a letter as her husband does not permit the Indian marital system, “Her voice in these letters was insipid or shrill and she tore them up, winging at the waste of seventy-five naye paise for each mistake. She felt ... the bitterness of slogans scrawled on walls of stores and hotels” (63).

Tara is portrayed as a stranger because of her unequal marriage with a man who is also outside of her caste, race and culture. Her friend circle maintains a distance due to her migration to America and her gradual adjustment with alien culture and tradition. She feels herself isolated, uprooted and disrupted at heart. The novel is a vivid embodiment of her husband's craving for Tara's stay in America and Tara's tenacity to visit India. The novel quite brilliantly captures the glimpses of Tara's visit to India and her utter disillusionment finding nothing whatever she expects on the ground of cultural scenario.

The novelist has skillfully presented the industrialized India in the context of Post-colonial discourse. The novel *The Tiger's Daughter* exhibits the strict control of the government through hegemonic implementation over common mass. When Tara comes back to Calcutta, her native land, after a break of seven years of her marital life, she finds only protests, outrages of the people, demonstration and political chaos. Amidst such turmoil and cultural and political uproar, Tara tries to get back her old traditional ambience and cultural unification which were present in time of her father. Tara, having being experienced with the

discrimination and deception in United States, tries to expose her inner suppressed emotion and her deep love for Johnny Mathis through the medium of letter:

As each atom of newness bombarded her she longed for Camac Street, where she had grown up in a house surrounded by imported furniture that filtered sunlight and unwelcome guests through an elaborate system of coir blinds, rose-water sprays, durwans, bearers, heavy doors, locks, chains and hooks. (30)

For the academic purposes, Tara dared to go America at the age of fifteen and in course of time she adopted the culture and tradition of America, but she always felt a moral and ethnic conflict at her heart, from which he could not escape. She always felt homesickness, but her longing for home became disillusioned due to her inability to cope up with modern, materialistic and mechanic atmosphere of her mother land. Tara's constant attempt to become a typical Indian troubles her on one hand and the depression caused by her inability to adjust with new culture, shakes her entirely. Her pungent experience about her cultural conflict is well presented in *The Tiger's Daughter* thus: "New York was certainly extraordinary, and it had her to despair. On days when 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" (34).

In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara is fated to marry with an American who is totally indifferent Indian ethics and values. She being tortured by her double cultural temperament fails to perform the role of a wife. Her familiar culture and values always contrast the western values of David. Tara faces dual problems of constructing cultural identity, both in India and in U.S.A. The absence of Tara's husband makes her isolated and stranger in the changed world of Calcutta. The gap and hollowness of the relationship between Tara and her husband gives a cultural shock to Tara.

The experience of Tara toward Calcutta is digressing and disheartens one as the city is labelled as the hub of discrimination of caste and class. The fancied ideas of Calcutta are shattered. She feels herself alienated when her relatives call her 'Americawali'. Her conflicted self with cultural clash didn't find any ground to identify herself leading her to the world of confusion. Such dilemma is well reflected in the following-

Perhaps her mother, sitting serenely before God on a rug, no longer loved her either. After all Tara had willfully abandoned her caste by marrying a foreigner. Perhaps her mother was offended that she, no longer a real Brahmin, was constantly in and out of this sacred room, dipping like a crow. (50)

Tara is tightly caught between two horns of cultural dilemma. Religious sentiment becomes crucial issue in her life. All practice of worshipping Gods or Goddesses which is

prevalent in Hindu religion are forgotten by Tara due to her constant effort for new adjustment. All manners are well retained in her faint memories. In America, she turns into a new self sacrificing her all cultural, religious and moral values which she earned in her childhood at the cost of time. The cultural conflict, crisis of identity and inability of singing bhajan gradually forced Tara to the realm of trauma where she tries only to ruminate on her childhood singing, “She had sat on a love seat beside a very holy man with a limp and had sung ‘Raghupati Raghava Rajaram’. But that had been a very long time ago, before some invisible spirit or darkness had covered her like skin” (54). Her constant struggle to take care of her family members in America and to get the solidarity of her identity dissolves all her potentialities and possibilities towards Indian religious belief in Hindu society. The cultural chaos distracts her mind to the ground of imbalance and indecisive.

Tara's poignant suffering is implicitly exhilarated by the inner dilemma and struggle between her two split-selves – one inclined to finding out the past glory of Calcutta that can give her an identity; another one is associated to her attempt to cope up herself with new culture. Being voiceless, Tara suffers severely from her emotional and psychological pangs of distress and despair. She finds herself trapped in a multi-directional state where her cultural identity is at zigzag road. Her assumed glory and dignity of India are immediately replaced by the drabness, dullness, poverty and political uprising that create a chaotic world where a proper identity can never be constructed. Tara's pangs, pain and suffering provides a vivid picture of the life of the migrant women.

Though she has lost her identity in India as she is labelled as ‘Americawali’, still she feels isolated and loneliness due to her deep association with India. Finally she turns into a “no-where person”- neither belongs to India nor to America. The cultural dilemma shatters all her emotional and psychological essentialities. The novel *The Tiger's Daughter* has shown the traumatic experience and pricks of nostalgia of Bharati Mukherjee through the character of Tara. In this novel, Tara through her experiences and troubles gives a vivid account of the universal cultural puzzlement, sense of belongingness and the crisis of identity on the part of the immigrants. Bharati Mukherjee's characters have always reflected her own circumstances and personal concerns and are able to trace her growth, self-confidence and her slowly developing identity as an American. It is better to conclude with Ammena Meer's interrogation to Bharati Mukherjee which is well documented in *BOMB Magazine*, whether *The Tiger's Daughter* which is a story of young Indian girl coming back to Calcutta after having been married to an American, is more autobiographical than others. In reply to Ammena Meer, Bharati Mukherjee remarks –

When I wrote I certainly didn't think of it as autobiographical but my father felt he recognised himself in the portrait and there were other people just as well. In *The Tiger's Daughter* I was writing about my class, certain period in Calcutta's

history about a class and a way of life that's become extinct. Calcutta soon after changed; the government became a communist government. I felt my world was that kind of 19th century world that became outmoded in the 20th century; a class aware of the enormous changes about to come and hoping those changes would not come. (Meer 26-27)

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