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## **Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*: The Woman Protagonist's Strange Trepidation in the Homeland**

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Bharati Mukherjee has emerged with a postmodern counter narrative of assimilative and celebratory American citizenship. This new perspective preserves essential Indianness to be exotic but merge gleefully into American materialism. From this category of experience Mukherjee wishes to carve her own exclusiveness within the broader genre of American Literature.

She insists on her separation from Indian writers of English in particular the prominent names such as Anita Desai or R.K.Narayan. She equally refuses an affinity with V.S.Naipaul's expatriate fiction.<sup>i</sup> She has thus created an altogether new perspective to define the immigrant sensibilities. The age-old instinct of being accepted in the new environment while still retaining the old ideas and culture, leads to a life of duality, a split personality, which seeks to emerge as a survivor in the New World but preventing the normative point of unproblematic identity. They need to counter not only the entire self; they need to fight the colonial sensibilities after the interstice between dislocation and relocation in order to submerge into the 'American Dream.'

My rejection of hyphenation has been misrepresented as race treachery by some India born academics on the U.S. campuses who have appointed themselves guardians of the 'purity' of ethnic cultures. Many of them though they reside permanently in the United States and participate in its economy, consistently denounce American ideals and institutions. They direct their rage at me because by becoming a U.S. citizen and exercising my voting rights, I have invested in the present and not the past: because I have committed myself to shape the future of my adopted homeland; and because I celebrate racial and cultural mongrelization.<sup>ii</sup>

Migrancy and dislocation, either consensual or conflictual, is a global and trans-cultural necessity. Mukherjee's protagonists are all sensitive and are differently trained in the new ethnic imagination. They are tossed in an environment of ambivalence regarding their identity, racism, sexism and other social oppression. They negotiate displacement and face the multicultural reality in the process of cultural differentiation and assimilation. The multiculturalism ethos with which they are confronted leads to the struggle for a new life and a near break with the past. They are shown at an emotional transit point and from their dual and bicultural perception they attempt to measure the disjuncture and persecutory paranoia.

Mukherjee's writing largely reflects her personal experience of such febrile subjectivity in crossing cultural boundaries. In novels such as *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife* and *The Desirable Daughters*, as well as in her award winning short stories, Indian born Mukherjee adds

to her character's multicultural background a delicate undercurrent of translational upsurge which sometimes expresses itself through violence and existential disorderliness. Mukherjee's women characters such as Tara Cartwright, Dimple, Jasmine or Tara Chatterjee, all quest for a location and show a subaltern dread and anxiety to be visible. They are not concentric to adopt racial stereotype at the cost of identity. They accept a mutative change through displacement and replacement of culture.

The process of abandoning the old order is explored most fully in the novel *The Tiger's Daughter* and her first non-fiction book co-authored with Clark Blaise, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. The conversion then rests upon the discarding or abandoning of the old order and the embracing of the new: 'I was (bicultural) when I wrote the *Tiger's Daughter*; now I am no longer so and America is more real to me than India [...] I realized I was no longer an expatriate but an immigrant that my life was more here [...] I need to belong. America matters to me. It is not that India failed me- rather America transformed me.'<sup>iii</sup>

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) emphasizes the need to reinvent and redefine the notion of 'home' and the notion of 'identity' from an immigrant's perspective. The term home has the immediate connotation of a natal territory or space that takes love, warmth and security for granted. Though home basically implies a specific geographical locale, in the context of immigrant experience, because of the need to belong in the immediate reality, its parameters are enlarged. Mukherjee says:

My first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, embodies the loneliness I felt but could not acknowledge, even to myself, as I negotiated the no-man's land between the country of my past and the continent of my present shaped by memory, textured with nostalgia for a class and culture I had abandoned, this novel quite naturally became my expression of the expatriate consciousness.<sup>iv</sup>

Her earlier works, such as the *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and parts of *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977) and later *Desirable Daughters* (2002) are her attempts to search for Indianness. In *The Tiger's Daughter* the protagonist Tara makes an ambitious journey back to India after many years only to discover her home infested with a denuded tradition of poverty, squalor and turbulence. This corresponds with Mukherjee's sabbatical journey to India with Clark Blaise in 1973, it was marked by similar experience of chaos and political upsurge. The collaborative memoir *Days and Nights in Calcutta* by Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee reveals the process of adaptation and renegotiation of accepted stance of exile and immigration. They respond in distinctive ways to their shared but different experience of disjunction and dislocation. Holzer traces in these two works by Mukherjee some exclusiveness in her immigrant ethos- 'With *The Tiger's Daughter* and its arguably autobiographical parallel, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, Mukherjee depicts the ethos of a voluntary exile who returns to her mother country only to realize the strength of the pull of the "new world" and return there a resolved immigrant.'<sup>v</sup>

In *The Tiger's Daughter* Mukherjee examines the reception of the Indian expatriate returned home and there is the same practical feeling of disjuncture and dislocation expressed in

*Days and Nights in Calcutta.* On her return home, she laments at the low condition of the Bengali-Indian society: ‘What is unforgivable is the lives that have been sacrificed to notions of propriety and obedience.’<sup>vi</sup> Blaise, her husband, however becomes very much intrigued by the magic of the myth and culture that surround every part of Bengal. He realizes that in India family is all, and in the structure of an Indian joint family, nothing is a bigger issue than going against the family. He notes how in the West identity is shaped by maturity and self-independence, whereas in India ‘identity (is) never to be sought, it’s the lone certainty that determines everything.’<sup>vii</sup> He has likened their stay in Bharati’s father’s house as ‘a closet drama of resentment and dependence.’<sup>viii</sup> He complains, ‘If in the West we suffer from the nausea of disconnectedness, alienation, anomy, the Indian suffers from the oppression of kinship.’<sup>ix</sup> Speaking from his privileged position of the enlightened Western sojourner he was trying to understand his wife’s culture which naturally could not be a comprehensive account of Indian society as a whole.

Mukherjee’s attempt to find her place in the family, to reconnect with the past and her frustration at being taken to be a foreigner marks her initial disappointment. She experienced subjugation and othering in Canada while in India she is looked upon as a sojourner from an alien shore. She sees herself through the eyes of others; she rues ‘as if I had no history prior to going abroad.’<sup>x</sup> Her looks seem ‘too progressive, too westernized, and therefore too rootless, to be a predictably middleclass Bengali woman born on as exceptionally middle class Ballygunj street.’<sup>xi</sup> She is treated differently as an exceptional Indian woman married to a foreigner. As she meets Meena, the wife from the Marwari household, who is discouraged to read in her home, Bharati is saddened by the plight of women in Indian society. It is inexplicable to the West ‘that a young Bengali woman could rebel by simply reading a book or refusing to fast.’<sup>xii</sup> The sabbatical years in Calcutta make her realize that she is more of a misfit in the old world and though she is unable to reconcile with her new world, still it is the world which she prefers- ‘There was surely nothing ignoble in our desire to better our condition. In a city that threatens to overwhelm the individual who is passive, there was nothing immoral in self protection. But we had refused to merge with the city.’<sup>xiii</sup>

The visit to Calcutta made Bharati Mukherjee realize that India had changed a lot. The colonial attitude still existed among the elite Bengali social circles. The exploited and the downtrodden had reached the precipice of endurance and started agitations leading to chaos and disorder. The changed situation forced Bharati Mukherjee to realize the nuances of the two cultures. Mukherjee writes- ‘Of course I had other reasons for going to India. I was going because I had discovered that while changing citizenship is easy, swapping culture is not.’<sup>xiv</sup> Mukherjee’s self-imposed exile created confusion with her life in Canada and a feeling of uprootedness seeped in, after the realization that India of yesteryears had changed beyond recognition. She felt more comfortable in America where life was easy- ‘It is, of course, America that I love where history occurs with dramatic swiftness and interest of half-hour television shows. America is a sheer luxury, being touched more by the presentation of tragedy than by tragedy itself.’<sup>xv</sup>

The tour to India made her understand that she was more of an immigrant, than an exile, because she was more contented abroad than in India. Bharati Mukherjee at an early stage of life came to encounter the various facets of life of Indian society where a bride commits suicide due

to noncompliance of dowry demands. Atrocities inflicted on women moulded her bent of mind: 'To be a woman, I had learned early enough, was to be powerless victim whose only escape was through self-inflicted wounds.'<sup>xvi</sup> The constant hunger-strikes, violent labour disputes made life pathetic. The helplessness led to irascibility, which she encountered all around her:

My year in India had showed me that I did not need to discard Western education in order to retrieve the dim shape of my Indian one. It might have been less painful if I could have exchanged one locked trunk of ethics for another, but I had to admit that by the end of the year in India I no longer liked India in the unreal and exaggerated ways I had in Montreal.<sup>xvii</sup>

The illusion and mental construction of India began to wane bit by bit. The clumsy withdrawal of the mirage about Indianness made Mukherjee to resolve not to become a split personality. She doesn't have any native pool or prick of conscience in her assessment about her altered identity. India has thus become an 'other' and just one 'Asian country with too many agonies'<sup>xviii</sup> to remember. She has built along with Clark their homeland 'out of expectation, not memory.'<sup>xix</sup> She says, 'As I prepare to leave Bombay for the slow flight westward, I realized that for me there would be no more easy consolation through India.'<sup>xx</sup> In this context, however, Mukherjee's attitude whether escapist or defeatist is subject to debate and further analysis in terms her texts. She says- 'It was hard to give up my faintly Chekhovian image of India. But if that was about to disappear, could I not invent a more exciting perhaps a more psychologically accurate a more precisely metaphoric India: many more Indias?'<sup>xxi</sup>

In her works Mukherjee creates a vivid, complex world about the disruption and transformation that arises in the face of an intermingling and combination of cultures, the terrain which she has so brilliantly made her own in her acclaimed novels where the immigrants face multiple dislocations in the conflict between location and culture. She has her proposition to clarify her stand- 'It's possible with sharp ears and the right equipment to hear America singing even in the seams of dominant culture. In fact, it may be the best listening post for the next generation of Whitman. For me, it is a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration.'<sup>xxii</sup>

*The Days and Nights in Calcutta* demonstrates the process of embracing and renegotiation of previously accepted stances and position, as well as discourse on location, dislocation and relocation. It is not a mere memoir depicting the sabbatical journey to India but an inherently subjective view of the return to the roots, a route to the root through negotiations of perspectives and shifting power relations, achieved through the structure of a dialogue. In *The Tiger's Daughters*, the author creates a heroine who, like herself, returns to India after several years in the West to discover a country quite unlike the one she remembered. Memories of a genteel Brahmin lifestyle are usurped by impressions of poverty, hunger and political unrest.

In *The Tiger's Daughter* she uses the trope of the immigrant's homecoming to India in the hope of recovering her roots and the stability of her cultural characteristics as an Indian. The protagonist Tara Banerjee Cartwright makes a trip home to India after seven years to experience the native hue, but becomes painfully aware that her memories of a genteel Brahmin life style are no more there oriented as they are now by her Westernization. Tara is to discover that the return

to her longed for Camac Street where she had grown up, will fail to enkindle the sense of familiarity and belonging which she equates with 'home.' Her visit to India not only fails to correspond with the idyllic memories of childhood and adolescent vibrancies that had sustained her in her lonely room at Vassar; she also becomes aware that her homeland had turned malevolent enough to desecrate her shrine of nostalgia. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Bharati Mukherjee finds the problematic areas in the life of the expatriate and conceptualizes Tara's split-self caught between her inner and outer worlds. The theme of acculturation and adjustment to an alien culture, the slippages, the trials, tribulations, the tremors and traumas that afflict and problematise the immigrants in a foreign soil have been very deftly delineated by Bharati Mukherjee. Here she deals with the in-between spaces of nation, identities, the interconnecting culture and shifting spaces. Mukherjee in this novel labours to reconfigure and restructure the concepts of such shifting identity in the postmodern global context. In a critical and creative career that has spanned over thirty years, Mukherjee has been engaged in redefining the idea of diaspora as a process of gain, contrary to conventional perspectives that construe immigration and displacement as a condition of terminal loss and dispossession, involving the erasure of history and the dissolution of an original culture. In her ability as diasporic writer Mukherjee has produced a counternarrative to re-define the historical terrain in terms of challenged and contested space. She shows her resistance to the dominating and hegemonic colonial construct of ethnicity by venturing out to re-locate oneself through negotiation and reinvention.

What she discovers is that she is more an outsider than a native having an objective anxiety with the complex and baffling web of politics, privilege and the hierarchies of power and class in India. Her traumatized and shattered dream of Calcutta makes her unconsciously perceive how life in America has changed her, but upon deeper reflections Tara reasons- 'How does the foreignness of the spirit begin? Tara wondered. Does it begin right in the centre of Calcutta, with forty ruddy Belgian Women, fat foreheads swelling under starched white headdress, long black habits intensifying the hostility of the Indian sun?'<sup>xxiii</sup>

The Belgian nuns had taught her to inject the correct quantity of venom into words like 'common' and 'vulgar.' For Tara –the daughter of affluent, Bengali Brahmin parents, the 'foreignness' began to a great degree with her privileged Catholic education at St Blaise's, with Belgian nuns in 'long black habits' who taught from a point of racial and moral pre-eminence and with teaching resources from the West.

Thus Tara is trapped between the two socio cultural environments, between the feeling of rootlessness and nostalgia. She feels marginalized and abandoned at the same time. She can neither take refuge in her old home, nor can she take on a hostile attitude. The result of this confrontation is her split personality. Tara asserts: 'There were no definite points in time that one could turn to and accuse or feel ashamed of as the start of this dull strangeness.'<sup>xxiv</sup> But her Western exposure too, does not unravel any definitive answers, leaving her no choice but to merge both the ways as best as she can and making her realize the pathos that lurks under such attempts at amalgamation.

*The Tiger's Daughter* is a fictionalized story drawing on Mukherjee's own first years of marriage and her return home for a visit to a world unlike the one that lives in her memory. At the historical conjuncture, the protagonist, Tara Banerjee, returns to India after marrying an

American and faces a different India than the one she remembers as it was seven years before. The novel addresses Mukherjee's personal difficulties of being caught between two worlds, homes and cultures and is an examination of her identity in terms of society and nation.

Similarly, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, co-authored with her husband, is a shared account of the first trip the couple took to India together after being married. Each offers a different India through their separate journals, and ultimately, the two tell the tale of a relationship that faces the daily difficulties of cultural barriers that have been drawn and separate pasts that linger. 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.<sup>xxv</sup> Her own struggle with identity first as an exile from India, then 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.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Like her characters in diaspora, 'with sentimental attachments to a distant homeland but no real desire for permanent return,'<sup>xxvii</sup> Mukherjee locates the trajectory of her identity and cultural politics in the course of crossing and re-crossing the multiple borders of language, history, race, time and culture. Disrupting the constraints and stringencies of nationalist boundaries, her poetics of Diaspora embodies her sense of what, as in her case, it means to be a writer who was born and raised in India, been a citizen of Canada and the United States, and shaped and transformed by the cultures of India and North America.

Mukherjee herself explains her aesthetic position on the identity reformulations made possible by diaspora and its contexts in terms that involve a trajectory from de-location to re-location, a practice that entails 'breaking away from the culture into which one was born, and in which one's place in society was assured' and 're-rooting oneself in a new culture.'<sup>xxviii</sup> 'In this age of diasporas,' she argues, 'one's biological identity may not be one's only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration.'<sup>xxix</sup>

Tara of *The Tiger's Daughter* has been educated in Western ways and differs from the traditional Indian thought pattern. In her position it is hardly possible to internalize the traditional role-playing of an Indian woman whose task is restricted within the four walls of the house. The prim nuns of St. Blaise's in Calcutta have taught her all about decency and femininity. She has been trained to be different from the traditional Indianness while maintaining the conscious adherence to Western ways. Despite her Westernization, she however, is not totally split and severed from the past. The cultural heredity still discloses itself in a critical moment. While facing the harsh conditions and unexpected turnaround, Tara, sitting in her lonely room at Vassar remembers the collection of little gods and goddesses her mother used to worship at home and prays to Kali, the Hindu goddess of power, to tide over her many awkward moments with the polite and inscrutable Americans.<sup>xxx</sup>

She marries an American, and when she visits India years after, she experiences a strange trepidation to accept her homeland in the same spirit. Her Westernization has done diasporic alteration of her already split self. She is attracted to the native hue painted in memory, but in reality she encounters a problem to belong to her motherland. She has been re-inscribed and translated and suffers dislocations, both psychic and geographical. Brinda Bose observes:

Even as those symbols and icons that had struggled to sustain her from afar become real all over again, she realizes that the return is no idyll, and there are reasons for her to feel trapped and abandoned both at the same time. [...] The immigrant experience, Mukherjee firmly believes, may be analogized as a series of reincarnations, deaths of earlier existences followed by rebirths full of promise; this is borne out consistently by the tales of Tara, Dimple, and Jasmine.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Mukherjee insists on the formulation of a survival strategy for the transplanted subjectivity amid splitting and dislocations that are to be 'reabsorbed into the base-superstructure division'<sup>xxxiii</sup> and gradually emerge into 'the third space of representation'<sup>xxxiii</sup> of their splintered self into the 'broken mirror of its new global unconscious.' According to Jameson, as Bhabha insists, the extraordinary demographic displacements have resulted in the schizophrenic social imaginary of the postmodern subject<sup>xxxv</sup> and this is how the newness enters in the world which is pluralistic altered and hybridized.

Mukherjee is suggestive of this 'newness' which can be the survival strategy that Tara adopted rejecting her alienated state in that educated Bengali society and returning to her adoptive country and American husband. Tara's traumatic experiences, her predicament as a marginalized self, pushed her to the rim of her native world, her old world of India. Her failure to adjust to the new world of her choice has been graphically portrayed by the novelist in a typical out-of-the-joints diasporic existence. Tara endeavors to reconcile these two diametrically opposite worlds in her mind and heart but fails. Like Bharati Mukherjee's other female protagonists, she is torn between her two socio-cultural identities, between her anchoring in an alien soil and her nostalgia for India her home country and homeland.

The central theme of *The Tiger's Daughter* is the woman protagonist's strange trepidation in the homeland. It is about the aggressive rediscovery of Tara Banerjee Cartwright, and her increasing knowledge about her 'foreignness of spirit.'<sup>xxxvi</sup> In the process of the fast changing identity shift she eventually realizes that her future lay not in it but in expatriation through mutation and translation. The psychological, social and cultural displacement that Tara suffers from, makes her nervous and excitable. Tara finds it difficult to relate herself to her family, city and culture. She observes the volatility of the city- '[C]ity Calcutta caught in the rhythm of a perforced change; belching with dirt and squalor and poise between disgusting bureaucracy on one side and the aimless, wantonly violent, strongly politicized youth and workers on the other.'

Tara finds Calcutta in a precarious condition where near naked people sleep on pavements with rats and cockroaches all around. To her the city of joy seems simply inhabitable and suffocating. Mukherjee manages to present the decay of Calcutta and the decadent life of its upper class at the background of social and political chaos. The city seems to be falling apart at its seams because of a number of factors; endemic violence, chronic political unrest, economic stagnation and poverty, disease overpopulation and class conflicts.



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