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Fractured Self of Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter*

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In this paper I will be discussing about the problems of cultural dichotomy limned in the novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1973), written by Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian born American novelist. Her own disillusioning diasporic experience, her feelings of fear and crisis of identity in her efforts to acculturate herself in the new world has been sculpted in the form of Tara. My focus will be on Tara's fractured self who is caught up between "the schematic and metaphysical polarity of the east and west" (Mukherjee 175). I will also be scrutinizing how Mukherjee started detaching her identity from India and desired to be seen as a North American writer. An attempt will also be made to accentuate her endeavors to shake off her Indian identity and "the burden of India" (Mukherjee 176) that she still had to carry.

Bharati Mukherjee, a renowned American writer of Bengali origin, after getting her earlier education from India had to go to US and then she settled in Canada in 1972. The fourteen years that she spent in Canada were the most challenging time of her life as "she found herself discriminated against and treated, as she says, as a member of the visible minority" in a country that "sees as hostile to its immigrants and one that opposes the concept of cultural assimilation" (Soderberg). She found herself caught up in "a no man's land between the country of my past and continent of my present" (Mukherjee). And there commenced the whole process of ruination of her identity. And it affected her so much that she consecrated most of her works to the delineation of the quandary and the plight of diaspora.

Bharati Mukherjee, torn between her two identities, preferred being called American over Indian and has resolved to unburden herself from her ties to her homeland. Even being an Indian by birth she never longed to be called as an Indian writer and affirmed her identity as naturalized U.S. citizen in "American Dreamer" which published in 1997 in a magazine named, *Mother Jones*. And this desire she has irradiated in an interview, given to Ron Hogan in 1997, in following words:

I'm a woman who was born in Calcutta, but I've lived in America my entire adult life and consider myself an American. My literary soul was formed by literature from around the world, but especially American literature. I'm an American writer of Indian origin. (Mukherjee)

In another interview with Ameena Meer in 1989, when she was asked if she considered herself an American writer, she opined that:

I totally consider myself an American writer, and that has been my big battle: to get to realize that my roots as a writer are no longer, if they ever were, among Indian writers, but that I am writing about the territory about the feelings, of a new kind of pioneer here in America . . . India has been the source, and home.

Whereas I'm saying, those are wonderful roots, but now my roots are here and my emotions are here in North America. (Mukherjee)

In the same interview she even admits that most of the Indian English writers don't get the acknowledgement in America when she says:

The only writers of Indian origin that American writers know are the ones who happen to be credentialized by magazines like the *New Yorker* and, of course, published in America. Very often, the writers who are picked up and given that attention by the American publishing industry are minority writers who are expatriates. They've lived outside India for much of their lives, and Indian writers in India don't necessarily see any affinity with them. It's sad to me that Americans aren't as interested in reading translations of some of these Indian writers. (Mukherjee)

She professed it again and again that she is an American writer but still she could never get India out of her head and it is the Indian immigrant experience that is paramount in most of her works. In his book *Bharati Mukherjee*, Fakrul Alam also argues that "although the author may see herself as an American writer, the circumstances of her birth, upbringing, and education in India ... are the contexts indispensable to an understanding of her fiction" (Alam). Bharati Mukherjee's continuous effort to shake off her ties to her homeland did not prove much successful. India was constantly in her head and her illustration of her perspicacity of such an experience was first delineated in words through her novel *The Tiger's Daughter*.

Her first manifestation of her fractured self and alienation in the world of immigration is through *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) which can also be considered as her oeuvre. This novel evinces the uprooted condition of Tara, the protagonist of the novel and the emblematic of the trials and tribulations of Mukherjee herself, who is caught between the two worlds of blurring boundaries. Commenting on her first novel in an interview with Sybil Steinberg in 1989, Mukherjee says,

It is wisest of my novels in the sense that I was between both worlds. I was detached enough from India so that I could look back with affection and irony, but I didn't know America enough to feel any conflict. I was like a bridge, poised between two worlds. (33)

Although, Bharati Mukherjee, an apostle of immigrants, denies that this is not an autobiographical novel but it is conspicuous from the story itself that Tara's life is parallel to Mukherjee's in many ways. *The Tiger's Daughter* is the story of a girl, Tara, who migrated to New York and experienced cultural shock by her adjustment travails in a new land. She there married an American called by her relatives as "maleecha" (36). When she returned back to India after seven years she is full of turmoil and disgust for India. Her outlook for India has changed drastically. She was struggling to assimilate her multiple dislocations and dual affiliations. Intended to draw an image of cultural dichotomy she is "pushed to the edges of her old world yet exiled from the new" (Tondon 36). Her identity has split between two cultures. In her book *American Dreamer* while commenting about her first novel 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 an expression of the expatriate consciousness. (Mukherjee)

Dr. K.T. Sunitha in her essay "Cross-Cultural Dilemmas of Indian Women In Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction" suggested that "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" (263). She further says that "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" (264). She is misunderstood, and her sympathy towards her ailing cousins is simply dismissed as one of contempt "You have come back to make fun of us, haven't you? What gives you the right? Your American money? Your mleecha husband?" (36). Tara relatives are so contemptuous of her condescending behavior and attribute it to her new formed American attitude which has transformed her completely into a strutting peacock.

Her trip back to India has something to do with Mukherjee herself as Manju Sampat in her essay "Bharati Mukherjee: The Fiction Of Alienation and Identification" says that "Mukherjee seems compelled to work out her old country from her psyche, and in order to do so, makes a metaphorical trip back to Calcutta through her protagonist, Tara" (142). Tara ambivalence is further illustrated when Mukherjee talks about Tara that "in India she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner and this foreignness was a burden" (62). Which means that "in her own land, with her Western outlook and education, Tara/Mukherjee felt alien, as she did in North America where she was racially and outsider" (Sampat 142). She is, here, stuck between her identity as an Indian and her identity as an American because she feels resemblance to both and at the same time feel alienated in both the worlds. "In the end, the two worlds cannot be reconciled, and since the alienation from the mother country seems stronger, Tara chooses to return to David and America." (Sampat 143)

Tara, dangling in an embroiling state, seems unable to attune with India again. She found the scenery of India, as abominable but she was not happy in America either:

New York... had been exotic... there were policemen with dogs prowling the underground tunnels... girls like her... were being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings.... 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. (34)

Mukherjee herself talked about her bitter experience in Canada in *Darkness* (1985) while speaking on her expatriation :

In Canada, I was frequently taken for a prostitute or shoplifter, frequently assumed to be a domestic, praised by astonished auditors that I did not have a "sing-song" accent. The society itself, or important elements in that society, routinely made crippling assumptions about me, and about my "kind." (2-3)

Her predicament is best sketched in K. T. Sunitha's words when she says, "Indian expatriate writers do not write from the position of a distinct foreign community, such as the exiled black or white Indian novelists, but their writing reflects the perspective of someone caught between two cultures." (270) When a person lives in an unknown land the internal conflicts commence to locate his identity. Out of this conflict is born a new person who has assimilated himself much to the new land. But when he comes back to his natieland his recreated self is again disjunctured. In Laxmi Sharma's words, "When he returns to his native land he finds that his native taste and touch have turned alien to him. His mind is again torn apart between the cultural clash of two environments and split personality" (Sharma).

Tara's attitude towards the Indian modes of life is of rejection and revulsion which is directly proportional to her acceptance of American society. On seeing Aunt Jhama she is torn between her contradictory emotions. On one hand she does not approve of her ways of healing her child and on the other she thinks, "I don't hate you... I love you, and the miserable child, the crooked feet, the smoking incense-holder, I love you all" (38). She even started watching things around her in India in a satirical manner: "The Marari is a circus animal who has gotten the better of his master... the Nepali was a fidgety older man with hair... Both men, Tara decided, could effortlessly ruin her journey to Calcutta" (20). Her dreams of coming back to India were ruined:

For years she had dreamed of this return to India. She had believed that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could just return home to Calcutta. But so far the return had brought only wounds. First the corrosive hours on Marine Drive, then the deformed beggar in the railway station, and now the inexorable train ride steadily undid what strength she had held in reserve. She was an embittered woman, she now thought, old and cynical at twenty-two and quick to take offence (25).

In Calcutta she found everything deteriorated and frustrating when she confronted riots and conflicts because of religion and caste. She now missed her new found land and her husband David and regretted for coming without him when she says, "Perhaps I was too impulsive, confusing my fear of New York with homesickness or perhaps I was going mad." Her feeling of alienation is further reinforced when her relatives called her "Americawali" and her husband David as "maleecha" (36). The worst thing that could happen to her was when even her mother doesn't seem to be the same to her. Her mother's attitude towards her has changed when Mukherjee tells,

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

Tara's bewilderment has been illustrious in many passages. Her way of looking at India has also been splitted when she says "Calcutta was the deadliest city in the world" (168). This change in her was noticed clearly by her Reena when she says, "you have changed too much Tara... become too self-centered and European" (105).

On one side she thinks of India as an Indian and then she looks at India from the eyes of a foreigner. And at this moment her double personalities take clearer shapes. She has been entangled in a state where she has not fully accepted the new land and not even fully left the old one. Somewhere in the middle she is stuck feeling miserable. "Tara feels completely alone"(Stephen 22). At one time she finds herself closer to her Indian relatives and on another moment she is found remembering her husband whom she thinks she loves the most. Tara in India is an insider and outsider at the same time not being able to feel at home again. Her way of looking at the world is full of chaos. So chaotic has become her mind and her soul that she finds home nowhere. She herself admitted it in "American Dreamer" when she said, "the experience of cutting myself off from a biological homeland and settling in an adopted homeland that is not always welcoming to its dark-complexioned citizens has tested me as a person, and made me the writer I am today."(35) Her relatives were also a cause of great disappointment to her as "she had wanted them to consider her marriage an emancipated gesture. But emancipation was suspicious it presupposed bondage."(86) It seems that Tara here fails to make a balance between these two worlds. Contrary to it she has herself become imbalanced and depressed.

Conclusion:

The novel *The Tiger's Daughter* ends with an open end leaving Tara in a dangling state without being suggested any solution for it. This end in itself is illustrious of the fractured self of Tara which has not been treated or may be which cannot be treated. Mukherjee herself could not shake off her Indian identity and she still had to carry the burden of India. Bharati Mukherjee has successfully depicted her disillusionment as an immigrant through the character Tara. Moreover it has also been cleared that fame of such immigrant writers like Bharati Mukherjee "is on the basis of their relationship with India" (Mukherjee 175).

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