

Bharati Mukherjee's The Tiger's Daughter: Conflicting Space Between Location And Culture

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ABSTRACT

In The Tiger's Daughter Mukherjee creates a stunning, intricate world about the commotion and alteration that arises in the face of an intermingling and combination of cultures, the diasporic topography which she has made in this novel clears many issues of multiple dislocations in the clash between location and culture. Bharati Mukherjee as an Indian by birth and her embracing of new identities as citizen of both Canada and the United States is a very significant point of negotiations between gender, race and culture in the post-colonial condition. In the essential trans-national and translational diasporic change cultural slitting and ruptures are most common results. Mukherjee, with her fondness of conflictual absorption and integration has paid short shrift to any fixed concept of identity and psychological fixity of oneself. In The Tiger's Daughter, Tara's alienation is due to her consciousness of dislocation in a diasporic condition and her inner conflict between her root and uprootedness. Her remembered memory of Calcutta differs far from what she watches now, full of complications, dingy politics, poverty and filth which seems inhabitable and very difficult to negotiate. There is an utter confusion in Tara as she visits her home city from the glitzy and glossy New World.

[Key Words: location, dislocation, conflict, space, border, translation, diaspora, root, splitting, ruptures.]

Bharati Mukherjee as a writer of diasporic condition has outlined the need and reality of a diasporic component - '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.'ⁱ

The Tiger's Daughter and The Days and Nights in Calcutta demonstrate on the ways and methodology to belong and survive in a diasporic space embracing the real facts of location, dislocation and re-location. It is not a simple memoir on the trip to India but a very strong contextualization of the return to the roots through negotiations of perspectives and identity change.

Basic social changes in the present context America required re-orientation of the linking logic with the the people around the world, specially the exilic and the migrants. The development in science and technology America has become the most attractive country in the whole world and has become supposedly the world's strongest economy and service provider. In the new cultural medley the search of the third world immigrants demands ready and steady absorption into the foreign culture to accept hybridity and translation. Mukherjee leads us to believe in the reality of *hybrid signifier*ⁱⁱ in America and embrace translation as a method of a new identity formation.

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian by blood, but she grew up in an American ambience under its sun and above its soil. She also underwent a pathetic experience of racism in Canada. She is thus ideally positioned to address herself from post colonial point of view. She sees everything from the prismatic light of gender race and culture. In her novels there is clear statement favouring non fixity of identity, as the world is much too shifting now due to globalisation and globalism as a new movement of International politics.

A few critics like Brewster have accused Bharati Mukherjee as an escapist and Americanized by the Western neo-colonial machine. For Mukherjee, America is the global medley, it is a place of assimilation and re-location of human settlement. Now America as a

nation is culturally and politically constructed by the immigrants since. It is historically true and a very basic fact about the country.

Mukherjee's characters perform unevenly in the bewilderment of inbetweenness and absorption. But Mukherjee seems to be emphatic on such hyphenation as a necessary precondition which is greatly associated with dislocation and disjuncture. The maxim of the time is fusionism and hybridity rather than exclusive identity in a diasporic condition. She seems to suggest a new discourse of a diasporic condition which is rooted and substantiated in the faculty of decentering. In Mukherjee's fiction, flux of "home" is a diasporic symptom. She is centered on the complex mechanisation of displacement and on the discrete and evicted destiny of the displaced nomads going towards a fruitful ambivalence in search of identity. Said's observations on such uneven ground of "otherness" is noteworthy. 'No one today is purely one thing' he says '(l)abels like Indian [...] or American are no more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Cross border or transnationalism in Bharati Mukherjee's fictions represents a vital affiliation that exists between herself as a migrant subject, and the nationality or the location of her native culture and destination countries- first Canada, and finally America. This meeting point of culture creates in due course the new location of culture and identity. The quandary of identity is due to the forces of globalization which include transnational journey of the immigrants and exiles. The consequence is either cultural mosaic or melting pot and in such global confluence the sense of a exclusive self-contained character is something that is barely feasible. In such postcolonial state a person on the foreign coast is composed of all sorts of contradictory rudiments.

However, in Rushdie's works, such mongrelization of identity has an unambiguous historical perception. It is related to the condition of postcoloniality, a condition where unpolluted space and crucial identities have ceased to exist, and where the diasporic subject is unavoidably infected by varied cultural practices. For example, the postcolonial 'immigrant other' is a potent figure of 'in-betweenness' contaminated by history. Likewise the (un)homed 'immigrant other' is disjointed by time, which challenges and perturbs the Western Enlightenment's belief in steady heroic and united identities approaching relentlessly towards

some identifiable Goal. The whole discursive process undergoes distinct phases of contamination and then mongrelization. Comparing the mongrel nature of post-mutation state he notes:

We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork and as a result [...] We are now partly of the West our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools [...] Having been borne across the world, we are translated men.^{iv}

It is these mongrel identities and ‘painfully divided selves,’^v operating within the matrix of an equally hybridized space and plural social practices that Mukherjee’s novels have been set. In her novels Mukherjee explores the disjointed plural and partial nature of post colonial identities, the inter-subjective and inter-cultural experiences, hybridity and hyphenation. She deals with the liquefied diasporic identities and the cognizant compromise and contestation before the cultural translation. Mukherjee problematises and questions the myth of rigid and static identities in expatriation and forced exile and the quandary in immigrant experience while negotiating multiple challenges on one’s identity and displacement that one suffers. Tara likewise, opens many aspects of the immigrant experience of the novelist in America. The experience of her characters in their homeland and in a foreign country echoes her own tensions, her attitude and trust. Concurrently they also mirror her growing and transforming uniqueness as an American.

In *The Tiger’s Daughter*, Tara’s estrangement and the cognizant feelings of dislocations are primarily owing to the unfilled space between reminiscence and longing. She had remembered Calcutta of the past but now, on her revisit to the metropolis after a seven years’ sojourn in the States, she expects a lot of changes. In other words, She desires to see a new and better Calcutta but shockingly all her anticipation are frustrated when she sees Calcutta in a wretched plight — full of poverty and squalor. She had seen three children eat rice and yoghurt off the side walk. The moment Tara arrives at the railway station, She develops in her a nauseating feeling of isolation: ‘Surrounded by this army of relatives who professed to love her, and by vendors ringing bells, beggars pulling at sleeves, Children on tracks, Tara felt completely alone.’^{vi} Her estrangement and isolations escalates when she feels ill at ease while moving away from the ‘brutal atmosphere’ of Howrah Station:

For a moment she thought she was going mad. For she felt that the Bengal Tiger, set apart from the smell and noise of the platform, had in her moved out of the private world of filial affection. He seemed to have become a symbol for the outside world [...] a pillar supporting a balcony that had long outlived its beauty and its functions.^{vii}

Bharati Mukherjee connects the events in the novel like Tara's visit to a funeral pyre at the river bank, her meeting a small beggar girl afflicted with leprosy, the nerve-racking riots and demonstrations and the worst of all claustrophobic outrage by the politician Tuntunwala, to evince the terror and trauma of Tara's visit to India.

Thus, what Tara finds in Calcutta is purely repulsive and repelling. Everything has undergone a radical alteration and simultaneously a full descent. Class and caste war has brought the city to the grasp of aggression and confrontations. Her dreams for a better Calcutta are thus shattered and she becomes estranged from the freezing and embarrassing environment. Her estrangement is provoked when her relatives welcome her as an *Americanized* Indian and her husband as a *foreigner*. She has a feeling within her as if she has a terrible subsistence in Calcutta and that none loves her any more not even her own dear mother:

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.^{viii}

In Camac Street, it was 'hard for Tara to talk about marriage responsibilities' and 'her friends were curious only about the adjustments she had made.'^{ix} Wavering between two poles of her existence, she had become oblivious of many of the Hindu rites and rituals, especially the practice of idol worship, widely prevalent among orthodox Hindus. She had herself witnessed her mother's worshipping icons since her childhood. But now she doesn't remember these

rituals. There seems to be partial loss of her religious self, leading to the disintegration and fragmentation of her identity:

When the sandalwood paste had been ground Tara scraped it off the slimy stone tablet with her fingers and poured it into a small silver bowl. But she could not remember the next step of the ritual. It was not simple loss, Tara feared this forgetting of prescribed actions; it was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and center.^x

In not being able to remember the rituals, Tara seems to have been alienated from her own experiences of childhood. This loss of self is not a simple one. It was a splitting of periphery and hub. It had pushed her to the periphery of her existence and marginalized her, splintered the axis of her self. Thus Tara has become estranged from her society and the cultural values it carries within. Her estrangement as a result of the loss of her own cultural heritage is revealed in her failure to sing 'bhajans' which she sang in her childhood days: 'As a Child, Tara remembered, she had sung 'bhajans' in that house. She had sat on a love seat beside a very holy man with a limp and had sung 'Raghupati Raghav Rajaram'. But that had been a very long time ago, before some invisible spirit of darkness had covered her like skin.'^{xi}

The American culture had enveloped Tara like an 'invisible spirit of darkness'^{xii} thereby obliterating a part of her Indian self. It is the American culture that had made such common rituals like singing 'Bhajans' everyday alien to her. Her friend Reena justly remarked that she (Tara) has 'become too self centered and European.'^{xiii} The 'Occident' had become an inalienable part of her self. Tara's hopes for a peaceful and unruffled stay in India are dashed to the ground. A victim of riot-torn Calcutta, everything to her appears frustrating and horrifying. There is a note of suspense at the end of the novel as to whether Tara survives in the violence or not. Locked in the car she thinks of David, thinks of her own predicament: 'And Tara still locked in a car across the street from the Catelli Continental, wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she didn't whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely.'^{xiv} She came to India in quest of peace, but ironically. She had to make peace, with the city, to compromise with its raucous and violent nature, its intolerably menacing reality: 'She felt she

had made her peace with the city, nothing more was demanded. If she were to stay, she thought, there would be other concessions, other deals and compromises, all menacing and unbearably real, waiting to be made.’^{xv}

Tara fails to recognize that self is an insubstantial hub and that it is not possible on the part of one to go with one’s moorings and one’s roots with an ‘other’. This is a misapprehension, and scarcely could she be at tranquility with the disordered milieu, to compromise with the disorderly metropolis and find love and security for her anguished and nostalgic self, she rants disgustingly: ‘It was vague, so pointless, so diffuse, this trip home to India.’^{xvi} Tara stands at the point of disjunction and feels ruptured. She belongs neither to the ‘Occident’ nor to the ‘Orient’. Her roots are speckled and dispersed in both America and India. The Hotel Catelli–Continental serves as the representation of her ‘pointless’ and ‘rootless’ survival. Existential estrangement and self-estrangement vexes her both in America and India. Cut off and denied the right to be mentally liberated, her being becomes controlled and restricted.

REFERENCES:

ⁱ Bharati Mukherjee. *Darkness*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1975. p.3

ⁱⁱ Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. op.cit., p. 77.

ⁱⁱⁱ Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. op.cit., p.407.

^{iv} Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Vintage, 2010. pp.15-16.

^v *Ibid.*, p.397.

^{vi} Bharati Mukherjee. *The Tiger’s Daughter*. op.cit., p. 28.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p.29.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p.50.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p.62.

^x *Ibid.*, p.51.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p.54.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p.54.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p.106.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p.210.

^{xv}*Ibid.*, p.202.

^{xvi}*Ibid.*,p.130.