

## **SPLINTERED SELF IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER**

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### **Abstract:**

Placeless is a difficult, almost impossible position for anyone. But there are dangers also in belonging too closely. Cultural alienation is a world phenomenon today. The tremendous differences between two ways of life, leads a person to a feeling of depression and frustration. This could be called culture shock. When a person leaves his own culture and enters another, his old values come into conflict with the new ones he finds there and the unreality of having to face the situation baffles and alienates him. Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* deals with the experiences of the immigrant Tara, in spite of her best efforts to adapt herself to the American society. Her sense of rootlessness and alienation increase when she visits her homeland after seven years of estrangement. The strange fusion of Americanise and Indianness in her psyche results in the culmination of the tremendous feeling of depression and frustration she experiences on the widening gulf between the two. This paper focuses on the split-up psyche of Tara and the problems faced by this immigrant Indian in her native as well as adopted land.

**Keywords:** splintered, culture shock, alienates, widening, split-up psyche.

Migration or “cultural transplant” leads to a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice. The immigrants try to assimilate the alien culture and try to accept the changed identity by overthrowing the native cultural heritage in which they take their first breath. What is most important in them is their spirit with which they overthrow their native culture and adjust themselves to the new surroundings. The psyche of an immigrant is always tragic as a result of the tension created in the minds between the two socio-cultural environments, between the feeling of rootlessness and nostalgia. When a person visits the unknown land, he is an outsider in a no-man’s land and there he has to struggle a lot for his survival. Conquering the new feeling of nostalgia, he carves out a new territory and wraps himself totally in the lure of the adopted land. He recreates himself into a new personality and slowly builds emotional ties with the place he starts living in. This discovery of a new self gradually pushes his native culture into hibernation. On his return to the country of his birth he finds his native taste and touch have turned alien to him. His mind, which after a long struggle accustomed itself to the alien country and practices, now faces a similar struggle in reawakening the hibernated native thoughts resulting in the clash of split personalities.

One of the most incessant themes of the writers of the Third World, particularly the writers of Indian origin, is ‘alienation’. Most prominent among these are Kamala Markandeya, Nirad C. Choudhari, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Hanief Kuraishie, Bharati Mukherjee and others. These writers in a hope and expectation of either a better world or prospects left behind their native country and immigrated to the lands of their dreams and fantasies. However, in attempts to adapt themselves they found themselves at cross-roads of rejection and refusal resulting in alienation. As Bharati Mukherjee says,

To be a woman writer in North America, to be a Third World woman writer in North America, is to confine oneself to a narrow, airless, tightly roofed arena. In a dust-jacket photograph such a writer is usually in full dress and appears uncommonly composed, elegant and mysterious by forbearing. But I am not what I want my dust-jacket to suggest what I am (Blaise, Bharati Mukherjee 285-286).

Narrowing down to women writers, the element of the self in the female protagonists is a very important part in their psyche. In recording the development of their characters, the authors tend to reflect the pains of their own process of growing up, as writing for them is a way of self-realization. Bharati Mukherjee’s novels have nothing in common with other immigrant novelists. She does not deal with problems of alcohol abuse of the expatriates like Karter Dhillon. There is a marginal thematic resemblance between **Bharati Mukherjee’s Wife and Free and Equal** of Lalita Gandbir. The novelists have dramatised the protagonists’ search and frustration for employment. Beyond this there is hardly anything common between them.

When comparison is drawn between Margaret Laurence and Bharati Mukherjee, it is found that both fall back upon their early experiences which they use as raw material for their literary style. This is established when one goes into the origins of the **Manawaka series** of Margaret Laurence and the first two novels of Bharati Mukherjee – **The Tiger's Daughter** and **Wife**. The similarity of origins however does not imply any commonality of theme and approach in the two novelists. Hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds, the novelists present their stories in totally different patterns; though a common trait of alienation runs through the plots unobtrusively.

In **The Diviners** Margaret Laurence projects the self through Morag Gunn, as a woman who seeks and achieves physical fulfilment by becoming the mother of a daughter and also attains intellectual fulfilment by gaining recognition as a writer. Bharati Mukherjee projects the self in **The Tiger's Daughter** as someone who encounters a double culture shock – the first on going abroad to the USA for higher education and the second on return to India as the bride of a Canadian writer. The priorities are different, the concerns altered and the emphasis individual. Both Margaret Laurence and Bharati Mukherjee, emancipated feminine novelists are two individual personalities with divergent social, cultural and geographical backgrounds. Moreover they reflect two variant experiences of life. Their contribution reflects the rich variety of the rhythms of life in a woman's world.

The variety of contribution is particularly true of **The Tiger's Daughter**. "Suspended between two worlds and rooted in neither" (Shils 6) aptly describes Tara's predicament of a divided self. **The Tiger's Daughter** is the story of Tara Banerjee Cartwright, the great-granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee, a renowned Bengali Brahmin. The story is about the perception of the central character, born in India and married to an American. The psychic as well as the physical Indianness affects the personal before it turns political. It is the underlying central issue which influences the path of the story. Returning to India to find some peace, Tara ironically yet passionately realises her own detachment to the Indian culture which she unconsciously starts comparing with her adopted American style. Having returned home after seven years to rediscover the lost world, Tara instead witnesses a fractured Calcutta.

Not the Calcutta of documentary films – not a hell where beggars fought off dying cattle for still warm garbage – but a gracious green subtropical city where Irish nuns instructed girls from better families on how to hold their heads high and how to drop their voices to a whisper and still be heard and obeyed above the screams of the city (Mukherjee, *Invisible* 36).

The culture shock she undergoes, when she first goes abroad, is repeated on her return to the native land. She is astounded to notice the change that has enveloped the city of her birth. If carefully observed, it can be noticed that duality and conflict are not mere features of

immigrant life in America. They also form a part of Indian culture too. The characters in Mukherjee's novels are nurtured in ambiguous climate where discrepancies begin right from the childhood. The rich culture, religious traditions, native language learning which actually begin early undergo a tremendous change due to their confluence with the new learning imposed by British colonialism. The variety of influences involves them in the torturous process of self-recognition and self-assimilation which ultimately creates confusion.

**The Tiger's Daughter** is also drawn on similar lines. Having been sent abroad for further studies, Tara reminiscences nostalgically on her native country and is unable to adjust in the adopted land. But in order to overcome the pangs of separation from one's near and dear ones, she tries to divorce herself from her past. The alternating feelings of the need to forget and the desire to remember her own roots result in guilt and pain. This is very much similar to the traumatic experiences put aside by the author Bharati Mukherjee to find a voice of her own.

In Montreal I was simultaneously a full professor at Mc Gill, an author, a confident lecturer and (I like to think) a charming and competent hostess and guest – and a housebound, fearful, aggressive, obsessive, unforgiving queen of bitterness. Whenever I read articles about... women committing suicide....I knew I was looking into a mirror (Mukherjee, Invisible 39).

Tara visits her homeland alone, after seven years of stay in America. She looks forward to the fond reunion with her parents, relatives and friends. But surprisingly she notices that her attitude towards the Indian way of life has changed drastically during her seven years of stay in America. She is simply startled that she does not experience happiness on returning to India after all the longing she underwent for it, in America. The roots of the potted plant might be rooted in the native soil, but the environs have changed and this does not foster flowering. So also Tara, rooted in her native thoughts, had been transformed to a different climate. For seven years she struggled to adjust to the foreign environment. Now on being brought back to native climate, she finds it immensely difficult to readjust to the original surroundings. She finds herself a stranger in her own country. The feeling of foreignness is an inbuilt feature in every immigrant, irrespective of the country he/she has immigrated to. Sindi Oberoi, protagonist in Arun Joshi's **The Foreigner** comments on his mode of life,

I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter? ....My foreignness lay within me and I couldn't leave myself behind wherever I went (Joshi 65).

On reaching Calcutta, Tara is received warmly by her family. But she feels outraged by the squalor and confusion at the Howrah station. She is almost knocked down when some of the

coolies rush into the compartment to carry her suitcase. She experiences loneliness even amidst her kith and kin. The sophisticated American life she led had changed her outlook drastically that she perceives a changed Calcutta. While in fact, Calcutta basically remains the same.

Tara's memory has played tricks on her during her prolonged expatriate experience in America – as memory is wont to do. She had been homesick and lonely in her early years abroad, then grown wistful and romantic with faint longings that nudged her consistently through her changing lifestyle to the extent that she hung Indian scarves around her apartment and curried hamburger desperately despite her American husband's protesting stomach. As Mukherjee comments elsewhere Tara is yet to learn that as long as she clutches at "souvenirs of an ever-retreating past" she will "never belong, anywhere" (Mukherjee, *Darkness* 2). What is ultimately important is belonging – even if it means discarding nostalgia in order to wholly embrace the New World.

Reflecting on the word belonging, Salman Rushdie's words in *Imaginary Homelands* provide a wider base. "It's my present that is foreign and that the past is home, albeit a lost home is a lost city in the mists of lost time" (Rushdie 9). This obvious nostalgia towards one's native place is what Mukherjee seems to be working against. According to her Tara is bound to experience frustration and dejection as long as she feels alienated. This tends to continue as long as she perceives India as the only country she belongs to. She can begin to become an exuberant immigrant only by burying the ghosts of the past.

The natural tendency to compare the native and alien cultures resulted in the culture shock. Craving for the lost culture resulted in alienating herself from the adopted culture. After having been exposed to seven long years of different culture espousing liberation, Tara's return to India is punctuated with disappointments. "Tara's westernization has opened her eyes to the gulf between two worlds that still makes India the despair of those who govern it. This is really all that Miss Mukherjee succeeds in doing." (Vaid 155-157). She has not foreseen the changes that are likely to take place in her native country and is unable to digest the transformation that has taken place. Her hopes at returning to the same, old native country are thwarted by reality and the changes that have occurred thence. The dawn of realism, the bitter truth, indeed proves to be beyond her comprehension. Jasbir Jain notes that the novel *The Tiger's Daughter* in what ever way is discussed, the main concern is the relationship of the protagonist towards India.

The attempt to understand India is clouded by the desire to interpret foreigners, to judge India by their standards and value systems and this, results in a kind of vacuum surrounding the protagonists. They belong nowhere (Jain 18-19).

Her mind that was tuned to a Bengal of Satyajit Ray feels outraged watching too many people sprawled in alleys and storefronts and staircases. She hates the present Calcutta because it has

given her kids eating yoghurt off dirty sidewalks. Every small incident is taken as a personal affront, which pains her very much. The cultural shock that Tara experiences is too gigantic for her to bear though she is a native of India. She is unable to come to terms with the changes that have enveloped India. After her exposure to American life for a considerable period of time, Tara finds it impossible to adjust to the changed conditions of the Indian society. She is a 'middle' woman, a sort of sandwiched, in the cross-cultural turmoil. Failing to secure the consolation, peace, love etc in her native land, she hastens to return to her husband. She reserves her flight ticket to New York on an Air India flight.

She calls upon her friends as a matter of obligation to bid them farewell and Pronob picks her up from Camac Street. She gets into the car and along with her friends drives out of the Catelli Continental when the car is caught up in the midst of the uncontrollable crowd with no trace of escape whatsoever. Unfortunately, Tara who had survived racial discrimination in a foreign land becomes a victim of a tragic end in her native soil. The author interlinks the events like Tara's visit to a funeral pyre at the river bank, her meeting a small beggar girl afflicted with leprosy, the vision of beggar children eating off the street, the superficialities in the lives of her friends, the riots and demonstrations and her claustrophobic rape by the politician Tuntunwala – to bring out the trauma of Tara's visit to India.

A thorough analysis of the women caught in a cultural conflict in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee brings to light certain truths. The disillusionment the women undergo of America as well as India is gradual and occurs over a period of time and that too in stages. They take drastic decisions to escape from the cultural misappropriation that throttles them. The author's message is very clear. Whether the woman has traditional Indian education or so-called prestigious, western education, she faces problems with unpredictable digressions. No philosophy can offer help to her under any circumstances. Being all alone and having nobody to fall back upon; she has to tackle her own problems. Bharati Mukherjee ultimately points out that caught up in a cross-cultural dilemma, an Indian woman has to be her own saviour. According to Jasbir Jain, "Tara is rejecting India and her Indianness unable to grasp its meaning and equally unable to understand the America she is going back to" (Jain 15).

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