



AN EXILE IN HOME: AN ANALYSIS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER*

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee, a key post-colonial writer, wove her novels around the disillusionment of the exiles and the exultation of the immigrants, particularly South Asian Women. Mukherjee's entire fiction is characterized by variations on the themes of immigration, displacement, and re-creation of identities. The characters, their locale, and their quests vary, but each case she is concerned with "making of Americans". In her first novel, The Tiger's Daughter, Mukherjee, exposes the exiled condition of the protagonist, Tara Banerjee Cartwright. Tara, an Indian student from Calcutta, marries an American and returns home for a visit. Life in Calcutta, beset by labor unrest and political upheavals, is no longer what she cherished when she was in America. Her experiences lead her to shed the romantic vision of India that had sustained her during her periods of homesickness in foreign. Realizing that she no longer fits in the old environ, she longs to return to her adopted land, America. Through this analysis, it has been observed that Tara's inability to respond to the cultural differences makes her an unaccustomed exile in her home, Calcutta.

Key Words: Exile, Alienation, Homesickness, Longing, Disillusionment.

INTRODUCTION

The economic and cultural globalization exiled millions upon millions of people from their homes. The experience of exile not only draws the subject from his homeland, from all that is familiar, it also breaks the once solid orientation of identity. This shattered identity emerges with many new layers and facets that modulate each other, and invariably cause the subject to wonder who he really is, where he belongs or should belong, culminating in difficulties with understanding his place in the world. The experience of exile, whether imposed or voluntary, is by no means rare through the course of human history. Exile plays a significant role in

M. MYTHILI

1Page



shaping Indian English sensibility. It is a complex evolutionary process entailing cross-cultural shifts, loss of mother tongue, native ethos combating with the militating elements of new environment and the dual pull of cultural loyalties. Indian English writing, due to its cross-cultural origin, has intrinsically been revolving time and again around the theme of the compelling and challenging encounter between two cultures, apparently antagonistic in their attitudes, approaches and values.

As an imaginative representation of reality, literature is fraught with works focusing on exile, from Homer's *Odyssey* and *The Old Testament* of the Bible to V.S.Naipaul's *Way in the World*, to name but a few. Naipaul had seen the migrants as "lost souls, put upon and pathetic." (Huang 206)

As a Calcutta-born writer who now calls the United States her home after having spent many bitter years in Canada as an exile, Bharati Mukherjee is part of a variety of rich literary traditions. Her works can certainly be read in the national context of Indian Writing in English and in the international context of the literature of the Indian Diaspora. The predominant theme in Mukherjee's fiction is the South Asian immigrant's exiled condition and their search for identity amidst the alien culture of North America. Mukherjee's immigrants from South Asia encounter self-division, alienation, even madness as they seek to define themselves anew in their transition from the Old World to the New World. "Mukherjee's art of characterization depends heavily upon contrasting the public and private selves of her principal characters"(qtd. in Wong and Hasan 49). Mukherjee's diasporic South Asians encounter the 'anarchy of self' as they seek to reconcile their Old World paradigms of respecting traditions, of humility, of collective values, and of the renunciation of material desire with their New World pursuits of individualism and material success.

Mukherjee's first autobiographical novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, is the failure of homecoming. It vividly narrates the exiled experiences of Tara Banerjee Cartwright, who is visiting Calcutta. Tara, an Indian immigrant returns home full of nostalgic dreams to find a chaotic Calcutta in which political unrest and explosions of violence are common and in which even relatives see her as an out-caste because she has married a foreigner. Like Mukherjee herself, she has been educated in a nun's school in Calcutta under British supervision, to which fact she traces her endemic foreignness of spirit. Maya Manju Sharma states, "That Tara is the alter ego of the author is clear from the autobiographical details in *Days and Nights*; the testings of Tara are also battles in the growth of the author's sensibility from that of the expatriate to that of the immigrant"(qtd.in Wong and Hasan 52). Although the novel has an omniscient narrator, Tara's dissociated viewpoint dominates, focusing on grotesquerie, madness and chaos. She is doubly estranged as an individual by her upper class education and as a member of the Brahmin caste.



Tara comes home to find the niche she left behind seven years ago. Instead she witnesses the fracturing of her 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 hoe 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 (qtd. in Mandal 36).

In Calcutta, Tara feels trapped between the two worlds that she has known- the India of her childhood and the new country that she also likes to call home- and this third new India which emerges more vividly in Tara's narrative. She ponders this plurality and the effect it might be having on her: "How does the foreignness of the spirit begin?" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 37). The greatest irony of her return is that she feels exiled in her own native land.

In the presence of family and friends, Tara finds herself quite cut off, unable to connect with those around her. Although she had often reminisced in America about performing prayers with her mother, she finds, back home, that she cannot remember the next step of the ritual in the prayers she performs: "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 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 center" (51). She even fails to recall bhajans. Tara remembers that "as a child, 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 Raghava Rajaram'. But that had been a very long time ago, before some invisible spirit or darkness had covered her like skin" (54). Tara is not yet accustomed to American culture and at the same time finds herself estranged from the morals and values of her native land.

Foreignness in Tara made her forget her mother tongue 'Bengali'. She has also forgotten some Indian- English words and the common idiom of her friends. This results in break in communication. Tara finds herself as an alien in her own clique, as she cannot share their language. It seemed to Tara that her hostility in the native soil is due to her marriage with a foreigner. She felt that by marrying David she had committed all the seven deadly sins:

"In India she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner, and this foreignness was a burden. It was hard for her to talk about marriage



responsibilities in Camac Street; her friends were curious only about the adjustments she made.” (62)

Tara's aloofness gets aggravated further, when she is exposed to many terrible scenes which she never imagined in her home town. In the slums of Calcutta, Tara sees a girl whose arms are covered with muddy bandages. Tara sees "blood spreading on the bandage. There were sores on the little girl's legs, sores that oozed bloody pus with each shiver of hatred. How horrible, thought Tara, the kid's got leprosy, she's being eaten away!" (122). Tara's visit gives exposure to "[...] ugliness and danger, to viruses that stalked the street, to dogs and cows scrapping in garbage dumps" (115). In India, Tara finds everything bizzare. She sets out again and again to understand and to discover, but Calcutta predictably bursts into chaos. She panics periodically, when a tantric wants to read her palm; when at a picnic she notices a snake in the pool. Finally, because of her failure to comply with Hindu norms of behavior, she is assaulted and raped.

Thus, Tara finds Calcutta disappointing and she suffers from a sense of immigration, shattered by the culture and social shock. The disintegrated Tara plans her departure from India. "Tara feels herself, as misfit everywhere she goes. She is forced to look at her inner world consisting of two cultures and the two different ideologies which are two worlds apart. Realizing that the reconciliation is impossible, Tara feels to go back to David" (qtd. in Sharma, Ram 70). According to 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" (15). The worst humiliations and sufferings in Calcutta make her feel herself as a misfit in India. She suffers from a psychological and cultural identity crisis. She becomes drifting, enervated shadow echoing vague dissatisfactions in hollow voice. The unsatisfied mental gaze traps her in a morbid position. Finally, her failure to confront the changed circumstances and respond to cultural differences makes her a stranger in her native soil.

In conclusion, Bharati Mukherjee has deliberately avoided the immigrant writer's temptation to fall within the trap of glorifying the native country and to belittle and degrade the adopted country. She has presented a fascinating study of a displaced person in America whose homecoming is futile. Tara is caught between two contrasting cultures-American and Indian, and realizing that the gap between the two worlds cannot be bridged together. Tara finds herself at home nowhere. Tara finds alienated and irritated by the trivial and trivializing persons and attitudes. The psychological, social and cultural displacement that she suffers from makes her estranged. Thus, Tara Banerjee is a disheartened Exile in her home.



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