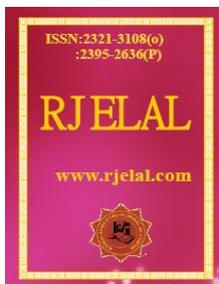




DOUBLE BIND - A TREATISE OF CULTURE CONFLICT IN BHARATHI MUKHERJEE'S 'THE TIGERS DAUGHTER'

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ABSTRACT

Bharathi Mukherjee is an erudite, Indian born American writer whose literary career started as early as 1970. Calcutta born, She migrated to the US to do her M.F.A in Creative Writing, in 1963. She is presently a professor at the University of California, Berkely. She is married to Clark Blaise, an American writer. She is an ardent admirer of the writings of Malamud and V.S.Naipaul. Shashi Deshpande, Jumpha Lahiri, Anita Desai and Shoba De are some of her contemporary writers. This paper deals with a critical analysis of "The Tiger's Daughter" the first novel written by Bharathi Mukherjee. It is an aesthetic portrait of the immigrant experiences. The predicaments of cultural displacement are outlined vividly. Her narrative is candid and highlights the stress or dissonance caused due to culture clash. It reflects the emotional strain caused due to immigration. Adjusting to the new culture and letting go of the old, is a difficult task, like shedding the past and merging with the present. Thus the unique and complex experiences offer much detail for a complete story. It analyses the cultural confrontations faced by the protagonist in a new country.

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Bharathi Mukherjee's novels mainly focus on the immigrant experiences of women. Her writings mirror her own life, in which she has suffered hostility in Canada, first as an exile and

later on as an expatriate. Finally she settled in the US as an immigrant. Breaking free from the shackles of her rancour experiences she has emerged as a much touted writer in the US. Mukherjee confesses "Attitudes in the sixties and seventies was that if one had n't played in sorrow and grown up eating oat meal one did n't have anything relevant to Canadian readers. The seventies were horrendous for Indian origin; especially in Toronto..Toronto made me a civil rights activist. I wrote about the devastating effects of racism" in an Interview with Alison B.Carb.

Bharathi Mukherjee has a number of short stories, novels, and travel memoirs to her credit. The

Tigers Daughter, (1971), Wife (1975), Jasmine (1989) The Holder of the World (1994) Desirable Daughters (2002) Miss New India (2011), are some of her popular novels. Her short story collections include Darkness (1885), Days and nights in Calcutta, The Middleman and other stories. Known for her expressive writings that appeal to all classes of people in the society, Bharathi Mukherjee stands second to none in the literary world of Indian Diasporic writers. Her collection of short fiction, The Middleman and Other stories won the famous National Book Critics Circle Award in 1988.

In her interview with Ron Hogan Bharati Mukherjee emphasises the point that she is a "woman who was born in Calcutta, but I've lived in America my entire adult life and consider myself an American writer of Indian origin. I am not doing an exotic ghetto" this clearly throws light on Bharati Mukherjee's dilemma as a creative artist. After settlement in USA the artist in Bharati Mukherjee is caught in the web of cultural complexities. Bharathi Mukherjee herself suffers a cultural and identity crisis in her early life in Canada. Though an Indian born writer, she does not want to be called as one. She claims to be an American and Neo-Colonial writer. Meena. T. Pillai, in her article "The Quester Maiden in Flight" asserts "By denying her motherland, the writer cuts herself from her moorings and bereft of an anchorage, is left adrift. Her characters reflect this mood and they too become drifting, enervated shadows echoing vague dissatisfaction in hollow voices" One can not deny the fact that the protagonists of her novels are her mere shadows. Her novels can be said to be autobiographical. Her expressions are nothing but a vent to her deep rooted emotions. In the words of Meena Pillai "The female protagonists in her novels too is preoccupied at the root of her psyche with the banalities of either cultures and a desperate attempt to deny and subvert either cultural codes, is caught in the nauseating dilemma of her essential rootlessness"

This paper deals with a critical analysis of "The Tiger's Daughter" the first novel written by Bharathi Mukherjee. It is an aesthetic portrait of the immigrant experiences. The predicaments of cultural displacement are outlined vividly. Her narrative is

candid and highlights the stress or dissonance caused due to culture clash. It reflects the emotional strain caused due to immigration. Adjusting to the new culture and letting go of the old, is a difficult task, like shedding the past and merging with the present. Thus the unique and complex experiences offer much detail for a complete story.

Tara Bannerjee, is an upper class Bengali Brahmin. As is the case of all rich families, she is being sent to the US to study, without her consent, at a young age of fifteen. Tara, faces immense difficulties in the new country. Unable to accustom herself to the culture of her host country, Tara faces utter dissonance. She decides to leave to her motherland, after seven years. This she decides, will diminish her anguish and refresh her mind. But reality seemed very different, for Tara, after reaching India, faces utmost disappointment. She is unable to come to terms with the dirt and squalor of her city, Calcutta. The novel deals with all her attempts to assimilate with her native land. She struggles to regain her identity. She is neither Indian nor American. Midway, Tara is lost.

Kroeber a sociologist defines culture as "Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action."

Most post-modern writers, like Bharathi Mukherjee have taken up the struggles and complexities involved in adapting to a different culture. Through her own imagination and narrative style, Bharathi Mukherjee transports the reader into the third world and gives them a first hand experience of culture conflicts. This is her special ability for which she is hailed as a world class writer.

At the very entry into America, Tara faces a bitter conflict between her perception of an American life and the reality. "She was a sensitive person, sensitive especially to places" (15). She even feels it was a mistake to have gone to study in

America. Her response to the American way of life was frustration and fear.

"For Tara, Vassar had been an almost unsalvageable mistake. If she had been a Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin, the great grand daughter of Hari Lal Banerjee, or perhaps if she had not been trained by the good nuns at St Blaise's to remain composed and ladylike in all emergencies, she would have rushed home to India at the end of her first week".(13)

Thus Tara's psyche is affected due to the discomfort caused in the mind due to different socio-cultural environment. The fact that Tara wants to return home the very first week, reveals her desperation and gloom. But she surrenders and learns to settle down in the new cultural environment. At the very beginning of the novel Bharathi Mukherjee writes "Changes in the anatomies of nations of continents are easy to perceive. But changes wrought by gods or titans are too subtle for measurement. At first the human mind suffers premonitions, then it learns to submit".(7)

As Sunita Sirohi in her paper "Problematizing the Culture of Adjustment" says "This fact underlines the profound link between the structuring of sensibility vis-a-vis the structuring of landscape." So a different environment affects the sensibility of an individual. Unable to cope with the new landscape and environment of America, Tara gets frightened. She is meek and fragile. But the life in America demands an individual to be bold and strong. This difference in her real self and the ideal self causes a lot of fear and tension in her mind as a sign of dissonance.

"As each atom of newness bombarded her"(13) Tara settles down in Poughkeepsie. Her roommates are Americans and Tara does not find anything common between them. She never feels at home in Poughkeepsie. She feels fish out of water, and could not find interesting things to tell them, she could only speak of her grandfather Hari Lal Bannerjee, "But such remarks she found made a bad impression and soon she gave up"(14). Ultimately she develops a sense of non- belonging which leads her to become suspicious of even trivial matters. She attributes even a small incident like not sharing of Mango chutney by her roommate as racial

discrimination. "Little things pained her. If her roommate did not share a bottle of chutney she sensed discrimination. Three weeks in Poughkeepsie and I am undone, thought Tara (14). This rootlessness in her caused conflicting emotions in her mind. This causes fear and anxiety in her. This fear is deep seated in her subconscious mind and is manifested in her dreams. The constant nag of a sense of non-belonging makes her see terrible things in her dreams.

"She saw herself sleeping in a large carton on a sidewalk while huddled men made impious remarks to her. Headless monsters winked at her from eyes embedded in pudgy shoulders...she suffered fainting spells, headaches and nightmares..She complained of homesickness in letters to her mother, who promptly prayed to Kali to save Tara's conscience, chastity and complexion"(13)

Thus nothing seemed to offer solace, in her relocation to America. She meets David and marries him. David only appears in Tara's thoughts in the whole novel. Tara is always uptight about the fact that David was a westerner. Tara also faces a clash between her expectations and reality of her ideal husband, when she could not communicate to her husband David Cartwright, a westerner. This is due to the cultural disparity between them. She finds she cannot discuss her domestic concerns like her mother's insurance policies to David as he was a westerner and may not be able to understand it.

"Tara, trying to explain and share her background with David had found "those things"(insurance policies) embarrassing. She had feared a foreigner would not understand such devotion to insurance terms and payments. It was the one detail in her life she deliberately misrepresented"(60). When David questions her about the Indian traditions and customs she is unable to respond. She feels he cannot understand due to the cultural differences between them. As pointed by Sunita Sirohi "The sharp contrast between Tara's outlook and David Cartwright's wholly western point of view is used creatively by the novelist to highlight the cultural differences and the complex problem of communication"

Tara loses her grounds in America, even after being wedded to an American. Certain days she feels very depressed and "on the days she had thought she could not possibly survive, she had shaken out all silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make the apartment more "Indian". She had curried hamburger desperately till David's stomach protested"(41). Tara decides to pay a visit to India expecting it would rejuvenate her mind.

As stated by Aparajitha "Tara's early experiences in America, her sense of discrimination if her roommate did not share her mango chutney;her loneliness resulting in vehemently taking out all rher silk scarves and hanging them around to give the apartment a more Indian look; her attempt to stick to Indian ways of praying to Kali for strength so that she would not break down before the Americans; all portray the cultural resistance put forward by an innocent immigrant who refused to be completely sucked into the alien land"

Tara returns to India after a spell of seven years, with hopes and aspirations that her fearful foreign experience would be rubbed off from her memory. Tara is shocked to see an India she never imagined. The deformed beggars,the sick people and the dirty atmosphere shattered her dream of India. This caused dissonance in her. The new American Tara is unable to discern India as an Indian. She views it like a foreigner. Her attitude has undergone a major shift. Shoba Shinde calls this as "expatriate weakness, An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it"Similarly Tara had visualized Indian in her fantasy and is shocked to see a very different India. The American life has changed her very perception of her native land and her childhood memories have turned to be night mares.

For five 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.(5)

S.Trisha asserts this view in her paper "The Rootless Search for the Roots in Bharati Mukherjee's Novel The Tiger's Daughter when she writes "Tara's alienation is chiefly due to the hiatus between her memory and desire. She had remembered Calcutta of the past but now, on her revisit after a seven sojourn in the states,she expects a lot of changes. 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 sidewalk"(84). The dirt and filth and relatives crowding around her feigning love and care caused more trauma to Tara who felt utterly desolated. "Surrounded by this army of relatives who professed to love her , and by vendors ringing bells, beggars pulling at sleeves, children coughing on tracks , Tara felt completely alone."(35)The moment Tara arrives at the railway station, she develops in her a nauseating feeling of isolation"

In America Tara suffers utter dissonance due to the stress caused by being homesick and conscious of her foreignness. She returns to India, hoping to get some comfort but her visit proved futile. She did not feel at home , in her homeland. The environment affects her badly and so does her relationship with her friends.When Tara goes to visit her friends, she is startled by their indifferent attitude. As "they studied Tara with obsessive attention as if she was not present"(53) She feels a complete stranger,even at her hometown. "Some instinct or intuition told her to stay away from these people who were her friends, only more, much more, for they were shavings of her personality. She feared their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness"(54)

Tara expecting admiration and love from her friends , receives only mock and tease. This she feels is due to her loss of identity due to immigration. She is not treated as one among them.

Tara visits her aunt Jharna, who has an ailing child . Tara offers a scientific and more appropriate remedy to the problem when she sees

her aunt using religious methods to cure her child. This angers her aunt who despises her for not being empathetic towards her physically challenged child. She accuses her for being overbearing because of her foreign return.

Tara feels very embarrassed and wonders "How does the foreignness of spirit begin? Does it begin right in the corner of Calcutta, with forty ruddy Belgian women, fat foreheads swelling under starched white headdresses, long black habits intensifying the hostility of the Indian sun? (45)

She is astonished at having not able to establish an emotional bond with her relatives. She feels rootless and too conscious of her foreignness. The culture of America has slowly sunk into her psyche even without her being aware of it. She looks at all the happenings in India with an American eye. While Tara feels she has not adapted to the culture of America, she is surprised to find she had disinherited her native culture too. She is in a state of 'in-betweenness'. Another incident which confirms this is her forgetfulness of the Indian ritual practices. While in the pooja room with her mother, Tara forgets the next step in the ritual of Gods. Tara faces a situation which confuses her of her true self. It questions her identity. She forgets her religious rituals, which she has been trained in since an infant. Tara feels she has lost the Indian culture and heritage.

When the sandalwood paste had been ground Tara scraped it off the shiny 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)

E.T.Saranya in her article "Cross Cultural Encounters quotes Mathew Arnold's famous lines to describe Tara's perplexity. " Wandering between two worlds, one dead, and the other powerless to be born, with nowhere to rest my head"

Finally, one can see that Bharathi Mukherjee has very skillfully explored the inner psyche of an expatriate woman, cognitively dissonant, due to her culture conflicts. The trauma of the inner self due to maladjustment is reflected in

the character of Tara. Her identity becomes dual and Tara is unable to neither be an Indian nor an American. She is not only physically foreign in India but she experiences foreignness in spirit too....Aparajitha calls this state as "dual affiliation". Tara is caught in the riots, due to political disturbances. The novelist as left the end of the novel, open to the readers imagination, whether Tara will get back to her husband in America or continue to experience her dissonance in India.

"And Tara, still locked in a car across the street from Catelli-Continental wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she did not whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely"

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