

(Re)Inventing the Notion of ‘Home’ And the Notion of ‘Identity’: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Tiger’s Daughter*.

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Like diasporic writers Bharati Mukherjee is inclined to dwell in the threshold region of overlapping concepts that define the experience of the migrant and the sense of displacement. Her novels trace the split and slippages in the diasporic subjects, of being at home and abroad. In her novels, Mukherjee has been able to bring to her first hand experience of exile, expatriation and immigration. In her works she recognizes the same translational alternative reality as an insurgent orientation in the contravening zone. Her substantial narrative skills and lively imagination produce memorable tales of the excitement as well as the trauma of adjustment to a new world. She gives shape to the transparently translating moments born out of the difference.

The geographical dislocation raises several questions with respect to the poetics of exile, the nature of expatriate writing, the writer’s relationship to his culture and his work. It’s at one level, a moving out of the expatriate’s dilemma of avoiding a schizophrenic split, of being pulled in two contradictory directions. The creations of this third location, does also at another level, destroy the concept of ‘purity’ of cultures and brings into being a self-reflexive self and a self-reflexive text. As Homi Bhabha has pointed out in the *Location of Culture*, the creation of a Third space disrupts ‘The logic of synchronicity and evolution which traditionally authorize the subject of cultural knowledge.’ It makes ‘The structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process and destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated open, expanding code.’

In Mukherjee’s novels female identity is constructed through such multiple codes, components, language, myth, history, psychology, gender and race. It is directly connected with the subject’s self- image and the unconsciously inherited positioning. The creation of this third space and its cultural locationality reflects these complexities. Space provides in itself a dynamics for history. Space is an important determinant of the kind of relationships which are produced in the intersection of power in the diasporic combination of exclusion and inclusion in global ethnicities. In an out-of-joint situation of space and culture the transplanted must encounter splitting and dislocations. To quote Bhabha- ‘We are now almost face to face with culture’s double bind-a certain slippage or splitting between human artifice and culture’s discursive agency. To be true to a self one must learn to be a little untrue, out-of-joint with the signification of cultural generalizability.’

Bharati Mukherjee with her peculiar sensibility for the cross-cultural crisis in the era of globalization endeavored to dive deep into such ‘slippage’ and ‘splitting’ and the distorted psyche of those immigrants who had been surviving in the conflict of traditional Indian values, inherent in their personality. The uprooted immigrants and their fascination for Western mode of living that they had chosen out of their professional compulsions or for their urge to achieve a greater freedom in liberal and dynamic society of America is also an area of Mukherjee’s interest. In her fiction she has sincerely dealt with multiplicities of home and the recurrence of splitting and slippages in the process of identity construction in an alien country under a specific situation of social transformation

Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1971) emphasizes the need to reinvent and redefine the notion of ‘home’ and the notion of ‘identity’ from an immigrant’s perspective. The term home has the immediate connotation of a natal territory or space that takes love, warmth and security for granted. Though home basically implies a specific geographical locale, in the context of immigrant experience, because of the need to belong in the immediate reality, its parameters are enlarged. Mukherjee 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 my expression of the expatriate consciousness.

Her earlier works, such as the *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and parts of *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977) and later *Desirable Daughters* (2002) are her attempts to search for Indianness. In *The Tiger's Daughter* the protagonist Tara makes an ambitious journey back to India after many years only to discover her home infested with a denuded tradition of poverty, squalor and turbulence. This corresponds with Mukherjee’s sabbatical journey to India with Clark Blaise in 1973, it was marked by similar experience of chaos and political upsurge. The collaborative memoir *Days and Nights in Calcutta* by Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee reveals

the process of adaptation and renegotiation of accepted stance of exile and immigration. They respond in distinctive ways to their shared but different experience of disjunction and dislocation. Holzer traces in these two works by Mukherjee some exclusiveness in her immigrant ethos- 'With The Tiger's Daughter and its arguably autobiographical parallel, Days and Nights in Calcutta, Mukherjee depicts the ethos of a voluntary exile who returns to her mother country only to realize the strength of the pull of the "new world" and return there a resolved immigrant.'

The visit to Calcutta made Bharati Mukherjee realize that India had changed a lot. The colonial attitude still existed among the elite Bengali social circles. The exploited and the downtrodden had reached the precipice of endurance and started agitations leading to chaos and disorder. The changed situation forced Bharati Mukherjee to realize the nuances of the two cultures. Mukherjee writes- 'Of course I had other reasons for going to India. I was going because I had discovered that while changing citizenship is easy, swapping culture is not.' Mukherjee's self-imposed exile created confusion with her life in Canada and a feeling of uprootedness seeped in, after the realization that India of yesteryears had changed beyond recognition. She felt more comfortable in America where life was easy- 'It is, of course, America that I love where history occurs with dramatic swiftness and interest of half-hour television shows. America is a sheer luxury, being touched more by the presentation of tragedy than by tragedy itself.'

The tour to India made her understand that she was more of an immigrant, than an exile, because she was more contented abroad than in India. Bharati Mukherjee at an early stage of life came to encounter the various facets of life of Indian society where a bride commits suicide due to noncompliance of dowry demands. Atrocities inflicted on women moulded her bent of mind: 'To be a woman, I had learned early enough, was to be powerless victim whose only escape was through self-inflicted wounds.' The constant hunger-strikes, violent labour disputes made life pathetic. The helplessness led to irascibility, which she encountered all around her:

My year in India had showed me that I did not need to discard Western education in order to retrieve the dim shape of my Indian one. It might have been less painful if I could have exchanged one locked trunk of ethics for another, but I had to admit that by the end of the year in India I no longer liked India in the unreal and exaggerated ways I had in Montreal.

The illusion and mental construction of India began to wane bit by bit. The clumsy withdrawal of the mirage about Indianness made Mukherjee to resolve not to become a split personality. She doesn't have any native pool or prick of conscience in her assessment about her altered identity. India has thus become an 'other' and just one 'Asian country with too many agonies' to remember. She has built along with Clark their homeland 'out of expectation, not memory.' She says, 'As I prepare to leave Bombay for the slow flight westward, I realized that for me there would be no more easy consolation through India.' In this context, however, Mukherjee's attitude whether escapist or defeatist is subject to debate and further analysis in terms her texts. She says- 'It was hard to give up my faintly Chekhovian image of India. But if that was about to disappear, could I not invent a more exciting perhaps a more psychologically accurate a more precisely metaphoric India: many more Indias?'

In her works Mukherjee creates a vivid, complex world about the disruption and transformation that arises in the face of an intermingling and combination of cultures, the terrain which she has so brilliantly made her own in her acclaimed novels where the immigrants face multiple dislocations in the conflict between location and culture. She has her proposition to clarify her stand- '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.'

The Days and Nights in Calcutta demonstrates the process of embracing and renegotiation of previously accepted stances and position, as well as discourse on location, dislocation and relocation. It is not a mere memoir depicting the sabbatical journey to India but an inherently subjective view of the return to the roots, a route to the root through negotiations of perspectives and shifting power relations, achieved through the structure of a dialogue. In The Tiger's Daughters, the author creates a heroine who, like herself, returns to India after several years in the West to discover a country quite unlike the one she remembered. Memories of a genteel Brahmin lifestyle are usurped by impressions of poverty, hunger and political unrest.

In The Tiger's Daughter she uses the trope of the immigrant's homecoming to India in the hope of recovering her roots and the stability of her cultural characteristics as an Indian. The protagonist Tara Banerjee Cartwright makes a trip home to India after seven years to experience the native hue, but becomes painfully aware that her memories of a genteel Brahmin life style are no more there oriented as they are now by her Westernization. Tara is to discover that the return to her longed for Camac Street where she had grown up, will fail to enkindle the sense of familiarity and belonging which she equates with 'home.' Her visit to India not only fails to correspond with the idyllic memories of childhood and adolescent vibrancies that had sustained her in her lonely room at Vassar; she also becomes aware that her homeland had turned malevolent enough to desecrate her shrine of nostalgia.

What she discovers is that she is more an outsider than a native having an objective anxiety with the complex and baffling web of politics, privilege and the hierarchies of power and class in India. Her traumatized and shattered dream of Calcutta makes her unconsciously perceive how life in America has changed her, but upon deeper reflections Tara reasons- 'How does the foreignness of the spirit begin? Tara wondered. Does it begin right in the centre of Calcutta, with forty ruddy Belgian Women, fat foreheads swelling under starched white headdress, long black habits intensifying the hostility of the Indian sun?'

The Belgian nuns had taught her to inject the correct quantity of venom into words like 'common' and 'vulgar.' For Tara –the daughter of affluent, Bengali Brahmin parents, the 'foreignness' began to a great degree with her privileged Catholic education at St Blaise's, with Belgian nuns in 'long black habits' who taught from a point of racial and moral pre-eminence and with teaching resources from the West.

Thus Tara is trapped between the two socio cultural environments, between the feeling of rootlessness and nostalgia. She feels marginalized and abandoned at the same time. She can neither take refuge in her old home, nor can she take on a hostile attitude. The result of this confrontation is her split personality. Tara asserts: 'There were no definite points in time that one could turn to and accuse or feel ashamed of as the start of this dull strangeness.' But her Western exposure too, does not unravel any definitive answers, leaving her no choice but to merge both the ways as best as she can and making her realize the pathos that lurks under such attempts at amalgamation.

In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Bharati Mukherjee finds the problematic areas in the life of the expatriate and conceptualizes Tara's split-self caught between her inner and outer worlds. The theme of acculturation and adjustment to an alien culture, the slippages, the trials, tribulations, the tremors and traumas that afflict and problematise the immigrants in a foreign soil have been very deftly delineated by Bharati Mukherjee. Here she deals with the in-between spaces of nation, identities, the interconnecting culture and shifting spaces. Mukherjee in this novel labours to reconfigure and restructure the concepts of such shifting identity in the postmodern global context. In a critical and creative career that has spanned over thirty years, Mukherjee has been engaged in redefining the idea of diaspora as a process of gain, contrary to conventional perspectives that construe immigration and displacement as a condition of terminal loss and dispossession, involving the erasure of history and the dissolution of an original culture. In her ability as diasporic writer Mukherjee has produced a counternarrative to re-define the historical terrain in terms of challenged and contested space. She shows her resistance to the dominating and hegemonic colonial construct of ethnicity by venturing out to re-locate oneself through negotiation and reinvention.

Over the last few decades there has been a mass exodus of women from India to the West for different reasons. It has resulted in a new expatriate sensibility because of multiple dislocations and expatriate writing has been able to transform the stereotype of the suffering woman to an aggressive or independent one. The migratory female subject gets involved in an act of sustained self removal from her native culture, balanced by a conscious resistance to total inclusion in the new host society. She is caught between cultures and this feeling of in-betweenness or being juxtaposed poses before her a challenge to maintain a balance between her affiliations. The trauma of displacement and dislocations result in a new narrative of identity and new discourse of female expatriation.

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