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BHARATHIMUKHERJI'S 'THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER':A STUDY OF IMMIGRANT SENSIBILITY

Dr. V R Dalavai

Associate Professor, Department of English, Government First Grade College, Hunnur,, Karnataka, India

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ABSTRACT

BharatiMukherji is a prominent Indian woman novelist focused on different facets of diasporic experiences. BharatiMukharji, an exponent of immigrant sensibility, exemplifies the ambivalences caused by the sudden transplantation from the familiar to the exotic. The immigrant perspective may involve an increased awareness of the mother country and is always torn between the two differing socio-cultural environments. Mukherji's novel The Tiger's Daughter portrays a fascinating study of displaced person in native as well as alien soil. The present paper endeavors to throw light on the inner crises and confusions of the protagonist Tara who is caught in the void between two contrastive worlds.

***KEYWORDS**: Diaspora, Immigrant, Ambivalence, Alien, Displaced, Familiar, Exotic*

INTRODUCTION

Diaspora literature is all about the theme of native and foreign encounters with respect to the author's identical experience. In fact, it is the negotiation between home and host countries. The author is caught between the live and trying hard for the creation of new identities so that he could find space for his growth. Diasporic literature, a post-colonial scenario elaborates issues such as marginalization, social disparity, racism, cultural insularity and ethnicity etc. The writers are left with a constant conflict between 'home and host experiences. It is a battle with lists of complex issues. His home signifier myth and tradition whereas the new world orders pre-liberate with thirst for freedom and independence. Hence, it is always a dilemmatic issue for the writers as to whether he should remain in a ghetto of old values with least intuition with the majority or break the barriers and get involved with the overwhelming new culture. Spatial complexities in postcolonial literature related to locale, dislocation and relocation transcend the mere geographical terrain to project a disturbed or distorted mindscape of the people involved. The history of removal, either enforced or voluntary, from the place of origin is as old as human history

The history of immigration is a history of alienation and its repercussions. The effect of the transfer from the land of origin to an alien domain will leave indelible marks on the individual rather than on the society they enter. It transports people from traditional environments and transplants them into strange grounds where strange customs and climate prevail. The customary modes of behaviour become inadequate to confront the challenges of the new atmosphere. With the duress to readjust and redefine themselves, men face "the enormous compulsion of working out new relationships, new meanings to their lives often under harsh and hostile circumstances" (Handlin, 1952).

In transplantation, between the snapping of old ties and the establishment of new moorings, the immigrant exists in an extreme situation, the shock of which sometimes reaches down to generations. The immigrant, like an uprooted and replanted plant, sometimes faces an instant death in an uncongenial soil, or withers away, or has a hollow or bare existence

while a few survive and rejuvenate getting firmly rooted. Uprooting and transplantation to a new locale place the person amidst shifting images of the self, between a yesterday which is always alive within and a today in a new country and culture which is now termed as the host society. Each immigrant, regardless of sex and nationality, passes through a traumatic transitional stage. Loneliness, despair, estrangement, nowhereness, and an existential angst haunt the migrants..

While exile or expatriate writing is more immersed in the situation at home rather than the relationship with the host society, immigrant writing indicates a forward looking attitude. Bharati Mukherjee, an exponent of immigrant sensibility, exemplifies the ambivalences caused by the sudden transplantation from the familiar to the exotic. Drawing a distinction between expatriate and immigrant, Mukherjee opines that an expatriate works hard to hang on to his past while immigration is a process of transformation and net gain. Her life itself is a transformation from the "aloofness of expatriation" as the coloured wife of Clark Blaise in Canada to "the exuberance of immigration" (Mukherjee, 1985) in America.

Migratory experience, though a common contemporary phenomenon, varies from individual to individual depending on his background, education and nationality. It is not a mere physical or geographical journey from one land to another shore, but a severing of the "spiritual and symbiotic ties with his mother country" (Kirpal, 1989). Moving from one culture to another he often finds it hard to relocate him in relation to the centre. The quest to belong to a space to which one can relate emotionally is indeed an excruciating endeavor. The transition from the familiar frame of reference and relationship to an exotic environment demands a break up with the past. The uprooting and absorption is a continuing process passing through various stages of rootlessness, enchantment, bewilderment and nostalgia. Immigration is an involvement with the present though one cannot shed his past completely nor can he be nurtured solely by it

Commenting on the theme of expatriation VineyKirpal strikes a difference between Third World émigrés and their western counterparts (Kirpal, 1989) Originating from societies where bonds with family, community and religion are strong, the Third World émigré carries his ethnic roots with him. Migration from a developed country to another is different from a colonised or once colonised country to the land of the colonised. The feeling of nostalgia is intensified in the coloured immigrant because of marginality emanating from his visibility of colour, race and religion. The theme of identity atrophy in Kamala Markandaya's*Nowhere Man* stems from transplantation of Srinivas from the colonised country to the land of the coloniser and his position as an outcast or unaccommodated alien

The three factors that collectively determine expatriate adjustment in the host country, according to Kirpal, are the immigrant's reason for migration, his own ability to adapt to the new environment, and his experience in the host country. The merger becomes complex for the host often fails or refuses to understand the problems of an expatriate. Yet the immigrant nurtures hopes of assimilating with the host culture as in a melting pot. Maya of Mukherjee's "A Woman's Story" voices the awkwardness an Indian feels in his pre-assimilation period: "First you don't exist. Then you're invisible. Then you're funny. Then you are disgusting. Insult, my American friends tell me is a kind of acceptance. No instant dignity here" (Mukherjee, 1988).

The customary thematic core of expatriate writing, the conflict between the native and the alien, the self and the other, has acquired luxuriance and complexity in the fictional landscape of Mukherjee owing to her "singular dovetailing of the narrative line with diverse perspectives: Indian, feminine and immigrant" (Padma, 1993). The immigrant perspective may involve an increased awareness of the mores of one's mother country and culture besides a critique of the same which

the experience of alienation may bring. Affiliation to the culture they have come to "alienates from that which they had left" (Handlin, 1952). Through Tara Catright Banerjee, the protagonist of *The Tiger's Daughter,* Mukherjee powerfully portrays a fascinating study of a displaced person in native as well as alien soil.

Cultural dislocation impacts significantly on the immigrant's psyche. Culture comprises a prescribed value system or behaviour pattern including rituals and customs. A person's cultural base becomes virtually a second nature to him which bestows on him an identity. Identity is defined as "a quality that is partly given to us by others, through their affection, respect and feedback concerning the behaviour in which we engage (Brislin& Kenneth, 1986). Confrontation with another social mores and the compulsion to assimilate into an alien culture sharpen one's hitherto dormant attitude to his own culture and it stands as a hindrance to his assimilation

The immigrant sensibility is always torn between the two differing socio-cultural environments. Like every other immigrant Tara too finds it difficult to adapt to the new culture for confrontation with another society demands the process of de-structuring and restructuring of the self. Faced with two heterogeneous environments which are conditioned by the intrinsic value systems of the East and West, Tara sent to Vassar at the age of fourteen for higher education, experiences the initial restlessness. The third section of the novel is devoted to Tara's early experiences in America and the gradual acculturation leading to a "foreign" marriage. She stumbles into her alien life with doubts, homesickness, fears and a sense of discrimination. The picture of young Tara clutching to the unopened suitcase as her only anchor conveys the bewilderment of the immigrant. Estranged from the familiar moorings of her comfort zone, the Tiger's daughter "longed for Camac Street" (Mukherjee, 1971). To her Vassar had been an almost unsalvageable mistake which makes her think of her father's decision to send his only daughter abroad as ruthlessness. Yet the status of a Banerjee and her training under the Belgian nuns to remain composed and lady like prevent her from a return home in shame. She finds no way to confide in her parents the new pains. Stretched beyond her limits Tara fails to relate to her dorm-mates. She is forced to defend her country before the Americans. None of her pre-journey examinations had prepared Tara for this. Alienated and withdrawn, Tara seeks the help of Kali to provide her strength not to break down

When external pressures become unbearable the immigrant, inorder to overcome psychological crisis of his identity, often clings to his past, to his community. With no one to alleviate her tension Tara clings to her India when the extraordinary nature of New York drives her to despair: "On days when she had thought that she could not possibly survive, she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make the apartment more Indian" (Mukherjee, 1971). Her later metamorphosis to a pseudo intellectual is only an offshoot of her attempt at overcoming the mounting sense of estrangement and inferiority. To prove her modernity she attempts at discussing population control methods though refrains from any discussion on the harsh realities of life.

America introduces her to novel experiences: the milk cartons and the food vending machines, instead of enchanting her, only create ripples of terror. Mukherjee skillfully compares Tara's initial embarrassments in America to the panic of the Australian visitors in India during Tara's childhood when they were asked to use water instead of toilet paper. The sight of beggars in the streets, which is contrary to her expectation of a foreign country, makes her physically sick. Her sickness can be attributed to signs of depression indicating a sense of insecurity at Vassar alone during the vacation. Life in New York intensifies her fears and drives her to despair. The xenophobia which an Asian feels abroad is experienced by Tara in her loneliness for she has heard of girls like her being knifed in elevators. With no wish to get acculturated Tara

desperately seeks to preserve her ethnic identity

In immigrant fiction the recurring motif of assimilation as an ideal isrepresented as the marriage of two cultures: the coloured immigrant and the white partner (Kirpal, 1989). The socially, emotionally and spatially disturbed psyche caught between the pulls of different polarities harbours all hopes on marriage. But the deliberate attempt of appropriation of a new space does not totally annihilate the cultural difference. Essential difference emanating from their inner territory cannot be soothed by a fluidity of texture. Despite a love marriage Tara fails to function as a bridge between the two worlds, for she is incapable of communicating the finer nuances of her culture, family and life in Calcutta to David. Further, marriage does not mitigate her feeling of insecurity: "Madison Square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner" (Mukherjee, 1971). The ideal relationship does not endure because what begins as great passion dwindles to disaffection and estrangement.

With the passage of time, the memory of the mother country becomesincreasingly romanticised and idealised. Oscar Handlin opines that as the passing years widen the distance, the land the immigrant leaves acquire charm and beauty (Mukherjee, 1971). Tara too envies her more stable, more predictable pre-American life. She places all her hopes on her long preplanned trip back to India to ease all hesitations and shadowy fears of time abroad. But returning to the country after a gap of years only accentuates the feeling of rootlessness as the difference and distance between the westernised Tara and her people and country dawn on her. The immigrant remains rootless despite having experienced two cultures, two countries, two homes and two men

Ideally though the expatriate should be able to write objectively and accurately about both countries, Mukherjee often becomes satiric in her portrayal of Tara. Juxtaposition is a technique that is adopted by the novelist to bring the two countries together. "The idea of the *home* country becomes split from the *experience* of returning home" (McLeod, 2000). Tara's response to the same Indian sight both before and after her exposure to the West shows the attitudinal change in her. Seven years ago she was full of admiration for everything Indian. The real India on her return becomes discontinuous with the illusionary India imprinted in her mind. The journey back home becomes an occasion for registering the sliding of identities experienced by the expatriate

Westernisation has made Tara a critic of India. Her first stepping on the native land fills her with disappointment. The deteriorating social changes coupled with her own attitude to poverty and filth aggravates her discomfort. The corrosive hours on the Marine drive and the inexorable train journey make her "an embittered woman she now thought, old and cynical at twenty two and quick to take offence" (Mukherjee, 1971). Even the scenery outside becomes alien and hostile. Tara's experience in Calcutta is no less discomforting. The squalour and confusion of the Howrah station outrages her. Surrounded by the army of relatives who profess to love her, vendors ringing bells, beggars pulling at sleeves and children coughing on tracks Tara feels completely disoriented

Mukherjee analyses the anatomy of change in the city of Calcutta to comment on Tara's "search of an Indian dream" Seven years have changed Calcutta from an oasis of peace to the centre of political turmoil. Her earlier experience with strikes, which definitely lacked the melodrama of the present, does not equip Tara in any way to get in tune with the violent demonstrations. Instead of the much longed for "Satyajit Ray film like Bengal" she confronts a drab, dirty, disturbed city. The romanticised notions of the émigré about his native land gradually wane when confronted with reality.

In the process of assmilation and recreation of a new personality demanded by the new culture, the immigrant

often becomes alien to his native culture. The institution, rituals and even language becomes strange, meaningless and obscure. Tara's sense of alienation is deepened by her inability to participate in the religious ceremonies at home. The fact that she cannot remember the next step of the ritual is considered as her severance from the cultural heritage: the inherited racial, religious and cultural practices. Caught in the void between two contrastive worlds Tara feels a spiritual death: "It was not a simple loss, Tara feared, this forgetting of the prescribed action, it was like a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and center" (Mukherjee, 1971). An invisible spirit or darkness has altered her. Yet the term darkness for American culture hints a deep yearning to be an Indian despite the restructured self. Marriage has made her an intruder into the puja-room for she sees herself as the unwelcomed Australian who had been successfully prevented entry into that room during her unadultered stage.

The culture shock that Tara experiences as a westernised Indian woman is influenced by her gradual disillusionment with the Calcutta of her early youth. Mukherjee leads her protagonist, with the precision of a newspaper reporter, "through a series of adventures and misadventures" (Shinde, 1994) in her homeland. Her sudden resolve to leave Calcutta is determined by four interlinked incidents: the visit to the burning Ghats with Joyonto Roy Chowdhari, the picnic to the factory, the unpleasant experience at the summer resort in Darjeeling and finally seduction by Tuntunwala. The trip to the funeral ghats shows her inability to adjust with the unfamiliar. The depression which fails to be immersed in the delicacies of the Kapur's restaurant is only amplified by the trip to the factory. It augments her awareness of segregation. Even her tongue has got conditioned to the taste of the West. Because of her hypersensitivity the picnic arranged to boost her spirit turns to be disastrous.

CONCLUSION

The visit to a busteein the company of Joyonto reiterates the hiatus between home envisioned "in fragments and fissures, full of gaps and breaches" (McLeod, 2000) and the tormenting reality. The encounter with the leper girl who almost touches her takes away all her carefully trained discipline of mind and body. The summer journey to Darjeeling further intensifies her misery because of the rude and impudent attack on her by some Bengali tourists who make advances to her with obscene remarks. Unaccustomed to such violence, the incident marks her holiday dismal despite the magnificence of the mountains. The seduction at the hands of Tuntunwala at the Nayapur Guest House hits the last decisive nail to her decision.

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