

DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS: A STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER*

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Abstract:

Diaspora carries a sense of displacement of a community or an individual who, for whatever reason, are separated from their national territory, and usually diasporic people have a hope, or at least a desire, to return to their homeland at some point, if the "homeland" still exists in any meaningful sense. In recent times, there has been a tremendous growth and popularity of Indian writing in English due to the writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Kiran Desai, and Jhumpa Lahiri etc. In her novels Bharati Mukherjee exhibits diasporic consciousness through the negotiation of identities by her women protagonist. In 'The Tiger's Daughter' the woman protagonist strives to resuscitate her identity through the act of adapting, nostalgia and establishing of a home culture through material and non-material forms of belonging, by creating transnational identities and by ensuring continuity with the homeland.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Diasporic Consciousness, Bharati Mukherjee Identity, Homeland.*

Introduction:

Diaspora often leads to a sense of displacement, homesickness, cultural nostalgia, alienation, rootlessness, loss, identity crisis, and cultural amnesia etc. Indian English writing is replete with diasporic concerns and consciousness. Most of the Indian English writing is rooted in the postcolonial situation. It is governed by an urge to relocate, to reconstitute, and most importantly, to establish and examine cultural identity. Cultural identity *per se* being a derivative of historical and political circumstances, it naturally follows that diasporic writing be densely interwoven with journeys to one's roots. To be a part of diaspora is to trap within complex personal circumstances; and to be a writer in addition is to have one's imagination shackled to the collective forces of history, culture and tradition. This complexity emerges as a marked pattern in the creative forces at work in diasporic writers. (Sing) Bharati Mukherjee is one of the first diasporic writers who created a territory for others women writers. Her writing displays many hues of deracination, rootlessness, quest for identity and diasporic exotica having a global appeal and cosmopolitan outlook. She tries to describe the condition of women immigrants in North America in the aspects of cultural collisions and in their control of their destiny.

Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* is a story about a young girl named Tara who ventures back to India after many years of being away only to return to poverty and turmoil. This story parallels Mukherjee's own venture back to India with Clark Blaise in 1973 when she was deeply affected by the chaos and poverty of Indian and mistreatment of women in the name of tradition. In this novel Mukherjee shows that memory and nostalgia act as a tool for a migrant who tries to recreate an 'imaginary home' in the adopted land. However, in the process of assimilation and acculturation the alteration comes in to effect. The migrant then finds it difficult to adjust to the ways of life and habits in the 'home' country s/he has left years ago. In *The Tiger's Daughter* Tara, a convent educated Calcutta girl, goes to America for higher education, and is married to an American, David Cartwright. She returns to India after seven years of stay in America. Returning to India Tara feels more alienated as she faces cultural clash. Her impersonating American

culture leads to identity crisis. She feels like an alien in her own country. Therefore, in the end she decides to return to her husband David in America. Her mental anguish is rightly described by Aparajita Ray: "The protagonist Tara Banerjee Cartwright makes a trip home to India to soothe her ruffled feathers but becomes painfully aware that her memories of a genteel Brahmin lifestyle are usurped by westernization." (Ray)

The novel is divided into four parts. Part I deals with the part of Tara, her family background, and the process of her settlement in New York. Part II deals with Tara's arrival at Bombay, her journey to Calcutta, and her reaction to India. Part III concentrates on Tara's life at Calcutta and her Catelli-continental friends. Part IV of the novel deals with her visit to Darjeeling with her friends to spend summer vacation, her coming back to Calcutta, her boredom and alienation, her victimization in a mob, and her tragic end which remains mysterious. Diasporic consciousness is expressed in the recurrent pattern of cultural shock, loss of identity and alienation experienced by the protagonist Tara. Even when Tara is totally unprepared for it, she is sent abroad for a degree by her father, who assumes that Calcutta is no longer as safe as it once was because of its "constant ghraos and coke bottles filled with urine and vulgar men leering at them" (Mukherjee, 1971: 45). She is unable to find connections with the American culture and she experiences a 'double shock' with her return to India. The novel illustrates how cultural belonging of an individual is important as it assures his/her identity. But due to transnational mobility, the dislocated individual understands that s/he is in a new cultural space which is not familiar, and where s/he has to relocate the self. Moreover, as the individual moves across the border, a longing for home becomes active inside the self. Cultural memory of his/her 'place of origin' stays quite inseparably with him/her like a shadow within the self and it helps to ignite his/her urge to look back towards 'home'. There is a sense of dilemma of 'staying or going home.' Home has a significant function in our lives. Thinking of home, we associate notions like shelter and comfort and when we come home we want to feel safe and welcome. John McLeod argues in this sense that "to be 'at home' is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves." (McLeod) According to him home can be imagined in diaspora communities as "Mythic Place" or an "Imaginary Homeland."

Migrants see their home country as idyllic place of security and shelter where they are welcome and where the people are like them (race, nationality, religion etc.). Migrants often experience discrimination against them in their host country. One way to deal with this experience is to idealize their home country and to see their host country only as a place of temporary residence. As Avtar Brah puts it: "Home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" (Brah). At the very tender age of fifteen Tara is sent to America for education. There she suffers the problems of adjustment, racial discrimination, nostalgia and homesickness. She tried hard to assimilate to the changing situation but fails due to her 'othernesses'. In her attempt to adapt herself with the new surroundings and culture, Tara "stayed up till two in the mornings discussing birth control with her dormitory neighbours....cycling blithely from class to class, rubbing Nivea cream on her face to protect it from the hostile weather." (Mukherjee, 1971:11) Though the desire to become part of her new milieu is strong, Tara's attempts appear very superficial. During the vacation, all her friends go to their homes. Tara is all alone in her hostel. She experiences a deep anguish of homesickness. She feels lonely and insecure in the alien atmosphere. For Tara, Vassar has been an almost unsalvageable mistake: "Long after on homesick afternoons at Vassar, or after misunderstandings with David, or when things went badly She thought of Camac Street, especially of her mother" (Mukherjee, 1971: 49).

The above example shows the nostalgic feelings of Tara as she remembered Camac Street and remembered her mother praying to Gods. According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia bears an intrinsic connection to spatiality: tracing the concept's origins in the enlightenment medicalization of homesickness or *maladie du pays*, she argues that the feeling classically relates to some kind of 'elsewhere': 'Nostalgia (from *nostos* return home, and *algia* longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.' Past homes, neighbourhoods and countries are the prime objects of this retrospective longing.

According to Boym, however, the yearning of the exile or the nostalgic for another space is a reprocessing of a more insoluble feeling of *temporal* dislocation. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement. (Boym)

Through migration, diaspora members have lost their material relationship to the home country but they can still preserve their cultural or spiritual relationship through memory. Tara falls in love with an American, David Cartwright, and marries him. Although her parents think that she would marry an upper class Bengali boy as her husband. She weds David to erase the stamp of 'other' on her and to attain an identity in the American society. After marriage with David, sometimes Tara feels that their ideas don't match in certain matters. She feels that there is a big mental gap between them as they due to their upbringing in different country and being brought up in two contrasting social values. She finds herself helpless as she could not explain her Indian social traditional values, customs and her nostalgic feelings for her home in Calcutta to her husband: "It was hard to tell a foreigner that she loved him very much when she was surrounded by the Bengal Tiger's chairs, tables, flowers, and portraits. She made several beginnings seizing the specific questions he had asked as anchors against her helplessness" (Mukherjee, 1971: 63).

She tries all possible ways to transform her from an Indian girl to an American wife but fails due to her nostalgic memory for her native traditions. Her refusal to lose her Indian self and mars her newly discovered American self. Thus, she seems to be trapped between her two selves.

Tara wants to overcome this situation but never gets much support from her husband. David likes to see her as a caring Indian wife who would accomplish her domestic services without any questions. Tara does her domestic works and does the works such as "cleaning bathroom" that she never did in her father's home but never gets any appreciation from the part of her husband. She is puzzled that whether she was happier in her father's home than in the house of David. She wondered if she made a mistake in marrying a person of outside her caste: "New York was certainly extra-ordinary and it had driven her to despair. On days she had thought she had thought she could not possibly survive, she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make the apartment more 'Indian'... She had burned incense sent from home" (Mukherjee, 1971: 49).

According to Tweed, religious artifacts have a particular significance for migrants who are experiencing a sense of dislocation. Religious artifacts are both tangible and symbolic. They can function to transport people emotionally to the imagined homeland. Artifacts because they occupy space, can also be a means through which displaced persons and groups form emotional attachments to a new place. (Tweed) These images and artifacts bring a bit of the homelands into the new geographic place and help people crave out a sense of cohesion in the new cultural place. (Moschella) The construction of commemorative monuments, sanctuaries, monasteries and other symbolic things is an essential means, for the members of a diaspora, of a re-rooting in the host country. For Tara burning of incense from India is an act of "constructing a symbolic dwelling" in which she may have her own space and identity. It is very clear to her that she has lost her identity of an individual woman in her utmost attempt to become an American wife. Her sensibility alters under the stress of circumstances while she is desperately trying to change the situation around her by fighting. In his article 'Alien Gods', A. Sivanandan comments: "On the margin of European culture, and alienated from his own, the "coloured" [...person] is an artefact of colonial history, marginal man par excellence. He is creature of two worlds, and of none. Thrown up by a specific history, he remains stranded on its shores even as it recedes. And what he comes into is not so much a twilight world, as a world of false shadows and false light" (Sivanandan).

Tara feels that she has no independence in the house of her husband. She becomes depressed by thinking that before marriage her life was governed by her father and after the marriage her life is dominated by her husband in the name of bondage of marriage. All this trauma makes her to return India to find out her lost roots. (Datta and Verma)

To conclude, Mukherjee's novel *The Tiger's Daughter* provides an insight not only into the pain of

migrant experience manifested in nostalgia, loss of identity, homesickness and alienation, but also into the complexity and diversity of the experiences of those who return to their home country and find themselves in a place which is vastly different from the place of their memory. The novelist has shown both the internal and external struggle of the immigrant. Assimilation and acculturation is accepted as a necessary phenomenon but at the same time the process of acclimatization causes emotional and psychological changes in the immigrant. Similarly, after assimilating into a new culture, regaining connections with the native culture is difficult. Americans take pride in their “melting pot” society (a term coined by an immigrant, Israel Zangwill) (Israel) that encourages newcomers to assimilate into the American culture. But as said by Douglas Rivlin “Immigrants come and change America and are changed by America.” Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* experiences that change in her personality when she left India before marriage and when she comes back.

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