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Expatriate Sensibility in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels: *The Tiger's Daughter and Wife*

J. Kavitha, M.A., PGDELT, M.Phil.



Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharati_Mukherjee

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Bharati Mukherjee's Life and Novels

The novel, as a literary form, has the scope to depict human condition in all its varied aspects. Bharati Mukherjee's fiction very effectively depicts the current social and cultural scenario of the American society as experienced by the immigrants. Her novels are praised for their representation of the plight of Indian expatriates in North America.

The early years of Bharati Mukherjee's sheltered life were spent as the dearly loved daughter of an upper class family of the metropolitan city of Calcutta. She had the advantage of convent schooling, followed by higher education at a prestigious institution in the U.S.A. She got her M.F.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Iowa and worked for some years as Assistant Professor of English at McGill University, Montreal, before moving to New York along with Clark Blaise, her Canadian husband. Her fourteen years stay in Canada was some of the hardest of her life, as she encountered racial prejudice – a different kind of caste system. In an interview, she says:

In Canada, I experienced an awful lot of racial discrimination – there were a lot of violent incidents... Canada was a very hard place to be a dark-skinned Asian in. After five years we moved to New York and I have never regretted that decision. (qtd. in Pandit 35)

The culture-shock experienced by Bharati Mukherjee was bound to change her as a woman and as a writer. In her opinion, Canada is a country that is hostile to its immigrants and also opposes the concept of cultural assimilation. The initial problems of an expatriate Indian wife and writer in Canada are assuaged by the recognition of her literary talent in the U.S.A.

Problems of Expatriates

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1973) and *Wife* (1976) deal with two different problems of expatriates. They concentrate on the cultural conflict of the East

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and the West. Each has a heroine of Indian origin, who suffers culture-shock by going to the United States. There is a similarity of approach to the main theme in both novels, but the author adds a touch of novelty in the second by reversing the position of the protagonist from that of the first. Basically, both present an imaginative rendering of Bharati Mukherjee's personal experience in going West and the after-effects of the culture-shock felt by her personally. Through her diverse characters, Mukherjee reflects the different perspectives of immigrants in America with reference to cultures, life and adjustment.



Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter*

Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* is eager to make her return- journey back to India which reveals her eagerness to return home. But a series of adventures that Tara encounters makes her realise gradually that she is different from other Indians. Her memory of India is distinct from the present unfamiliar India. Calcutta begins to “exert its darkness over her” (*TTD* 30) and in her journey, she is flooded by old memories.

However, Tara's foreignness of the spirit sets her apart from her past history when she witnesses the medical treatment in the house of Aunt Jharna; when she sees the beggars and refugees in Joyonto's villa; and when she is in the prayer room with her mother, Tara cannot remember the next step of the ritual. It is not a “simple loss”, as her forgetting is a “cracking of axis and centre” (*TTD* 51). Prayer plays an important role in her Indian family and the family assumes it is blessed by sanity and religious rituals.

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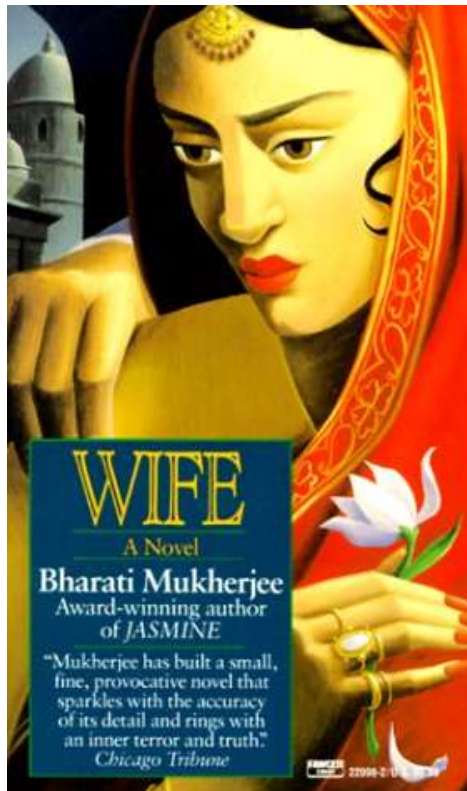
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On the surface, Tara is in India but there is a discontinuity between herself and India. Through a visit to India, Tara realises that the real India is different from her recollected imagination. Her determination to go back to America implies her cutting off her ties to India, and her desire to become a true part of the American life.

Dimple in *Wife*



Dimple is the protagonist of the novel *Wife*. Marriage teaches her “the virtues of sacrifice, responsibility and patience” (*Wife* 27). At first, she is renamed without her approval. Although Dimple wants to resist, her family rearing teaches her to be pleased and docile. Being a good wife is her responsibility, which is to obey Amit’s rules. In the Basu family, Dimple is a vassal who needs to serve her husband and her married family.

When Amit and Dimple emigrate to America, Dimple wants to be free from the so called “Indianness”. Ina who is an Americanised woman becomes Dimple’s model.

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For Dimple, learning to enjoy the American freedom is a challenge to both herself and Amit who represents Indian authority.

During her stay in the Indian ghetto, Dimple takes a step out to try for herself the freedom of the American life. Milt, a White American, teaches her, but she is a wonder to him. Milt tells her, “Everything about you is shocking and exciting and a little sad” (*Wife* 201). Her “borrowed disguises” represent that she is like “a shadow without feeling” (*Wife* 200). There is a home-like Indian ghetto, but Dimple wants to embrace America where she feels at home. Her dilemma is shifting between what is India and Indian tradition. Dimple’s struggle reveals her conflict in seeking a new identity in a new location along with the memories of the past.

Yearning to Escape from Constricting Atmosphere

Tara and Dimple yearn to escape from the constricting atmosphere in India and embrace the freedom offered by life in the U.S.A. Tara’s decision to marry an American and Dimple’s decision to live at a distance from the mini-India created by the insular group of Indian families in Queens, New York are symbolic acts of autonomous thinking and indicate a rejection of the past by the two women.

Mukherjee appears to be making a clear distinction between the oppressive socio-cultural traditions of India and the individual freedom characteristic of American society.

Complicated Freedom

By rejecting the former and embracing the latter, these two women are able to develop an independent selfhood. But this freedom is complicated by the addition of isolation and guilt. Tara is unable to communicate her feelings during her Indian vacation either to her American husband or her Indian friends, while Dimple experiences psychological problems as she faces the conflicting demands of Indian tradition and American liberation.

Expatriate Protagonists

In *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*, the protagonists are expatriates, geographically, physically, mentally and in spirit. They share the expatriate characteristic of being ill at ease both in the native culture and in the alien one. They represent the dilemma faced by expatriates. Sivaram Krishna remarks that in Tara and Dimple, the “retention of their identity as Indian is in constant tension with the need for its renunciation if they have to acquire a new identity as immigrants”. (33)

Tara returning to India after seven years in the U.S.A. experiences the alienation of an expatriate who finds a gulf between herself and her native people and traditions. Dimple also experiences an intense loneliness. There is a progressive and total estrangement from the environment, from herself and from existence itself. Despite Western education, upper-class living and a Western husband, Tara fails to assimilate the culture she is exposed to, because her sheltered background has not provided her the required maturity. Hence, she remains rootless both at home and abroad. In fact, there is no home for her.

Dimple Basu with all her dreams of a liberated wife in America fails as a cultural transplant due to various reasons. The gulf between expectation and reality both in the limited domestic space and in the larger cultural space, lack of emotional support and loneliness coupled with a neurotic sensibility obstruct her attempts at assimilation. Trapped by the worlds they have left behind, Tara becomes a ‘nowhere woman’ and

Dimple transgresses into the extremity of alienation ending up as a murderess. Without the strength to fight their own battles, Dimple and Tara fail. Incapable of interrogation and integration they become unrealistic and misfits at home and on the exciting new land.

Expatriation as a Metaphor

In both these novels, not only is expatriation a major theme, but it becomes a metaphor for deeper levels of alienation like existential alienation and self-estrangement. This is revealed in some significant images used in the two novels.

In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Hotel Catelli-Continental described as the “navel of the universe” becomes an important symbol of a rootless existence, a symbol of Tara’s “expatriate sensibility”.

In *Wife*, the cage is an important symbol. It stands for a comfortable but restricted existence, for isolation and a denial of freedom. It is significant that she kills her husband after watching a television programme in which a bird cage figured prominently.

Bharati's Transformations

Mukherjee vindicates her position as an American in the Asian immigrant history with her various transformations – an Indian girl, a Canadian wife and a naturalised American. There are struggles Mukherjee addresses in the cultural differences of her characters. In order to diminish the cultural conflicts, Mukherjee releases her characters into a free land without the Indian confinements. Therefore, her characters construct their new selves through a series of experiences. As an expatriate, Tara neither belongs to her native land India nor her adopted country America, while Dimple, as a neurotic woman, stands isolated.

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