
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:2 February 2014
ISSN 1930-2940

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Sandwiched Between Personalities – A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*

T. Sathyakala, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate



Bharati Mukherjee

Courtesy: http://www.indianetzone.com/16/darkness_bharati_mukharjee.htm

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014

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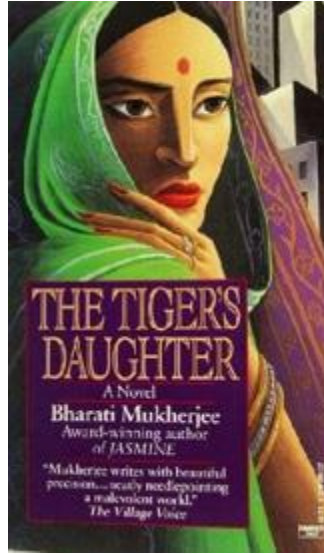
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Problems of Immigrants

Mukherjee's novels deal with the problems of immigrants. As an immigrant she feels and realizes the real problems of immigrants. Born in India, she lived as daughter in India, but she became a wife in America. During the the time in-between, she was shuttled between identities like many of her protagonists. She was feeling like an alien in Canada, but this experience made her a good writer. Bharti Mukherjee in an interview has clearly stated her aim in her novels. "We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries which are plagued by civil and religious conflicts.... When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adopt to American society(1)(Quoted in Sunday Review, The Times of India, October 1, 1989, P.1)

***The Tiger's Daughter* – The Dual Cultural Conflicts**

In her novel *The Tiger's Daughter* Mukherjee deals with the dual cultural conflicts. Tara Banerjee the protagonist of 'The Tiger's Daughter' returns back to India after seven years' stay in America. Tara the protagonist had married an American and settled in America. She had a prolonged expatriate experience in America. She had been homesick and lonely for many days in her life abroad. During her time away from her home-land, "The immigrant, alienated from his hom-eland, his people and family, feels the wrench of separation. He had been pushed violently out from the nest of his birth. It proved a shattering experience and he longed to be back,. yearning for the security and warmth of the feathery place". (2) Tara's relatives receive her at the Bombay Airport, and she feels comfortable with them. Tara leaves India in search of her dream. This migration to Acculturation leads her to search for her identity. After Tara met her relatives in Bombay, she decided to leave Bombay and move to her homeland Calcutta. Her uncle asked her to travel by train and said that would be comfortable, and tried to arrange for AC Coach, but at the last minute all the AC tickets were booked and they could not get a ticket for her in the AC Coach. "Tara, is anxious to get started on the last lap of her journey home" (19).



Traveling in Unreserved Compartment of Indian Train

Tara travels in the general unreserved compartment and feels irritated because of the co-passengers like the Marwari and the Nepali families, who were quarrelling with each other for occupying the seats. “Before the train had made its first stop the Marwari and the Nepali were starting to beat each other. It began with a quarrel over luggage space” (P 20). Tara felt irritated with their quarrel and wanted to avoid the situation; and so she started looking outside the window. Such instances and situations forced her to realize that she is in India. She says “I have returned to dry holes by the sides of railway tracks, to brown fields like excavations for a thousand homes. I have returned to India.”(P21)

Getting Irritated and Disillusioned

Tara likes India and likes to visit India her mother country, but the circumstances and atmosphere make her irritated and she starts to think about the American way of life and its atmosphere etc. She often thinks about her mother’s warning about the Indian public places; on her journey from Bombay to Calcutta she recalls all the incidents and things related with her mother and feels that she is alienated from the both the cultures. She thinks that she is an Indian and her inner heart says that was not so. During her travel the Nepali co-traveler asks her

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“Madam, are you new here? “ Yes and No” says Tara, preparing to hide behind a Time magazine”. (22)

At the Howrah Railway Station and Among the Relatives

Tara reached the Howrah station she was surprised by the coolies and beggars, "coolies in red shirts broke into the compartment and almost knocked her down in an effort to carry her suitcase....” A Blind beggar who had slipped in and had begun to sing and rattle his cup was thrown bodily out of the train by Junjunwala (P 27). After experiencing all these things Tara meets her relatives, where she expected that they would welcome her very happily, but they did not do so; and Tara feels her loneliness and her alienation increases. For days they had chattered about welcoming little “Taramoni”, whom they claimed to remember vividly. But now that they were actually in front of Tara, they had nothing to say to her. Surrounded by this army of relatives who professed to love her... Tara felt completely alone. (P.28)

Mother Land versus Alien Land

Instead of rejoicing, she becomes saddened on taking her first step on the soil of her motherland India. It shows that the alien land has become far better as a real home, than her home-land. She repents she has come to India without her husband. She is unable to keep him off her mind, while another bitter experience for her is her travel from Bombay to Calcutta. She feels that Calcutta has totally changed and has become a place in the grip of violence due to riots caused by the conformation between different classes of society. Her changed personality often tells her that she is a misfit for this missed culture; it makes her unable to mingle with her relatives and the ritual functions at home. She herself feels that her mother’s attitude towards her has changed and she too appears to be very unhappy. Because her marriage to a foreigner is still unacceptable to her relatives, she cannot easily interact with them. In India she feels she was not married to a person, but to a foreigner and this foreignness is a burden. On many s occasions she compares her life in New York to the one in Calcutta; it makes her alienated from her relatives and at the same time she feels she missed the many rituals followed by the Hindu traditions.

Two Personalities Mingled into One

Tara has two personalities mingled into one: an Indian one and the an American. She is sandwiched between the two personalities and suffering between the cultures, shuttled between Indianness and Americanness. All these things make her feel isolated and alienated between ‘others’ and make her the ‘other’ person. After returning from America, Tara realizes she has lost her own cultural heritage. Tara provides a comparative picture of Calcutta and New York. She says “how much easier to live in Calcutta”; she wants to mingle with her relatives, but is always insulted by her relatives, because she was not behaving like an Indian Brahmin. She had also married a foreigner, and especially now, she had come without the company of her husband.

On her return from America, Tara finds it not only difficult, but impossible to communicate with her family.” (3)(P.32). She loves to visit her homeland after seven years. But in India she feels uncomfortable; all her friends also treat her like a foreign lady. She feels that Indians are very crazy to use foreign things, dress and items, but they do not accept marriage with foreigners. “Tara’s Indian re-education consists in breaking the barriers of her detachment, so that she is compelled to move beyond the circle of aristocrats and acknowledge the poverty-ridden, riot torn city.”(4)

Totally Alienated

Tara feels herself fully alienated; wherever she goes she is forced to look at her inner world consisting of two cultures and two different ideologies, which are worlds wide apart. She is unable to understand how those two cultures could become one, and knows it may be impossible. Tara wishes to go back to her husband David. But, towards the end Tara remains mysterious and there is a suggestion that Tara does not survive in this violence of the mob which does not even spare the old man Joyob Roy Chawdhury locked in the car, and ends her novel with these lines. “Still locked in a car across the street from the Catelli Continental, wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she didn’t, whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely” (210)

“A close experience of both the worlds – the Western and the Indian – gives Bharati Mukherjee an authentic and objective perspective with a delicious combination of malice, charm, irony and sympathy” (5)

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1. Quoted in Sunday Review, The Times of India, October 1, 1989, P.1
 2. Tandon, Sushma, “Bharati Mukherjee’s Fiction A Perspective”. Sarup & sons, New Delhi, 2004.p13
 3. Ibid p32
 4. Ibid p 31
 5. Ed. R.K. Dhawan “The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee – A Critical Symposium”. “Cross-cultural crisis in Jasmine and The Tiger’s Daughter, Shobha Shinde”. Prestige books, New Delhi, 1996. P51.
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T. Sathyakala
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Arulmigu Palaniandavar College of Arts and Culture
Palani – 624 601
Tamilnadu
India
ktsathyamathi@gmail.com