

Unravelling the Diasporic Tapestry: Exploring Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*

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Abstract

*This paper delves into the rich tapestry of diasporic literature through the lens of Bharati Mukherjee's seminal work, *The Tiger's Daughter*. Embracing the quintessential themes of alienation, displacement, and quest for identity, Mukherjee crafts a narrative that mirrors the immigrant experience with poignant realism. Through a meticulous analysis of Mukherjee's narrative strategies, this study elucidates the complexities of diasporic emotions and the nuanced portrayal of cultural dislocation. Central to Mukherjee's exploration is the character of Tara Banerjee Cartwright, a Bengali-American protagonist whose journey epitomizes the struggle for belonging in disparate cultural landscapes. *The Tiger's Daughter* emerges as a seminal contribution to the canon of diasporic literature, offering a poignant exploration of identity, belonging, and the perennial search for home. Mukherjee's narrative prowess, coupled with her keen insights into the immigrant psyche, positions her as a luminous voice in contemporary literature. Through her nuanced portrayal of diasporic experiences, Mukherjee invites readers to confront the complexities of cultural hybridity and the enduring quest for selfhood amidst the shifting tides of globalization.*

Keywords: Diaspora, Alienation, Displacement, Quest for Identity, Cultural Dislocation, Cultural Hybridity

The spectrum of diasporic literature, in the normal sense, encompasses the characteristic features of alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity. These five elements of diasporic emotions dominate the psyche of those who undergo the trauma of diaspora. The literary output by those who are experiencing a sense of loneliness deals with problems concerning the incorporation or crumbling of cultures. These writings mirror the immigrant experience that emerges from the immigrant situation.

It is clear that immigrants share similarities as well as differences, regardless of the reasons for their journey. The purpose of these migrations, or immigrations, is usually to better one's social and economic status, even though there is a very real possibility that one will suffer along the way. Individuals relocate for trade and commercial reasons, independent of the financial and social ramifications. Because they are seeking better possibilities, they are ready to work as laborers, religious preachers, expatriates, or refugees. Being uprooted from their homes has caused the refugees to experience physical and mental hardship. They are traumatized by recollections of their own nation and naturally feel anguish at leaving everything behind.

The people who migrate due to these circumstances experience dislocations and end result is that they either become volatile or achieve victory due to them getting absorbed in the adopted land. Diasporic writers have a double dilemma in being true to their native and the alien lands. The women diasporic writers find themselves in even more delicate predicament. Bharati Mukherjee is no exception but for the fact that she was able to intelligently come out of the quandary of being neither here nor there. This can be seen from her writings which have come of the real world and from her own personal experiences. She likes herself to be identified with the Bengali Indian ancestry but with the American outer cover. She has the ability to write about the chaos of the diaspora but by carefully keeping herself away from its implications.

Mukherjee has thus clearly outlined her vision of writing. And as a woman writer she has developed a keen interest in dealing with woman characters. She makes the woman characters as representatives of her own self – reflecting her own ideas, hopes, beliefs and perception. Under her diasporic eye she delineates the churning emotions of alienated masses. Discussing about the diasporic writings, Bhikhu Parekh reflects:

The diasporic Indian is like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up - Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and this is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world (106)

The sense of homelessness that Parekh talks about is seen in plenty in Mukherjee's writings. And her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is no exception.

Through her novels and short stories, writer Bharati Mukherjee determines the meaning of existence and suggests feelings of dual alienation, solitude, and reflective memory for the terra firma of genesis. She has achieved a notable position as a mouthpiece of immigrant America in a relatively short creative time. She was regarded as an Indian writer of English literature during the earlier stages of her literary career, but she has since declared that she is just an American writer and not a colonist. Mukherjee depicts the struggles and opposition faced by Indian colonist women in her works, especially her novels.

The Tiger's Daughter was the first of Mukherjee's novels to be published in 1972. It is the lone novel in the firmament of Mukherjee's literary output that centers on the process of general creation of the immigrant's revisit to the ancestral homeland. The immigrant's coming back to India in the anticipation of picking up her "roots" and the firmness of her civilizing identity as "Indian" has not been compared unsuspectingly with and unobserved sagacity of what "Indianness" signifies. It should be noted that the text focuses and repeatedly ignored ambulation that constructs the immigrant's point of view. The substance and philosophical connotations of the immigrant writer's in between location warrants both an estimation of the deduced unities of the present homeland and the decimation of the patriotic substantiation the original place of birth.

The time when Mukherjee started writing was tumultuous for her as Canada as a nation was unleashing brutal form of extreme racism. In India the struggle was of different kind. There was a tremendous and dangerous uprising of the Naxalite movement and Mukherjee's novel showcases her finely tuned alertness of the volatility of the indications of national identity. Even though Canada as a nation does not accept her considering the nation her home, she commits herself to the cause of that nation. Canada, ironically, does not accommodate her to its world citing that she does not conform to the white identity.

Tara Banerjee Cartwright, the protagonist of the novel, is the daughter of a Bengali industrialist who is married to an American named David. Tara's encounters experiences of being estranged from her own native land when she comes back to India after seven years, only to encounter a tragic end. Mukherjee delineates the psyche of Tara as an immigrant's psyche wherein a person is treated

as an outsider in her own land. Tara here is a kind of representation for Mukherjee herself who is preoccupied with Calcutta. Mukherjee very stunningly portrays the protagonist's experiences as though of her own. After coming to Calcutta, she feels uncomfortable as she is unable to bond herself with the place of her ancestors which she very much wanted to see.

A theme used in *The Tiger's Daughter* is the voluntary exile in a foreign land followed by a return home. The expatriation that results is ultimately more beneficial than staying at home. In this story, an upper class Bengali Brahmin lady who wishes to pursue higher education in America is the subject of an intriguing study. Although she initially feels intimidated by American customs and culture, she manages to adapt by being married to an American. Seven years later, when she goes back to India, all she finds is herself. She finds herself totally perplexed by the customs of her new country and culture.

Mukherjee has the knack of portraying the festers of modern day Calcutta which she considers as doomed. She is also highly critical of the debauched life of its upper class people. Her lucid descriptions of Calcutta include the city's widespread violence, unending political strife, economic stagnation and poverty, disease, overpopulation and class conflicts. The supposedly high society people of Calcutta behave as though "the real Calcutta, the thick laughter of brutal men, open dustbins, warm and dark where carcasses were sometimes discarded, did not exist." (41)

Tara's loneliness and the known feeling of displacements are first and foremost because to the negated vacuum between the experience she had in India and the present experience she is possessing in America. She bears in mind the Calcutta of the days gone by; yet she is powerless to carry herself with the existing condition. Tara's longing to perceive a bright and augmented Calcutta miserably ends only in disappointment and disillusionment. She is not able to accept the fact that the present day Calcutta is full of poverty and unpleasantness.

Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* has abundant autobiographical incidents in it. She herself was in exile from India, expatriate in Canada and an immigrant in the United States. Her personal resistance for want of identity has alluring power behind her endeavors to discover identity for her protagonists. It is her vision and mission to uncover her identity in her native heritage. In one of her interviews, she has confessed about her aim of writing:

Mukherjee has skillfully and confidently shared her experiences from her travels to Canada and India. She possesses almost no peers in writing on the New World in America. She also recognizes and accepts her place in the group. She presents her experience as an immigrant and American as a two-way process in which both parties are developing by interaction and experience. She is a remarkable writer with an unmistakable flair, undeniable substance, and unwavering sense. She is a model for multicultural and immigrant literature in the United States. Despite being categorized as fiction, *The Tiger's Daughter* is really Mukherjee's autobiographical account of her early married years and her return home to see a new world.

The ending of novel leaves the readers to surmise for themselves the fate of Tara. The question that arises in their minds is this: Does she succeed in returning to her husband? Does she have a happy life afterwards? Is she able to overcome her memories and succeed in keeping them aside? The readers are also worried if she had fallen a victim to the rioting mob. To quote Mukherjee's own words would be ideal here: "It is the wisest of my novels in the sense that I was between both worlds. I was detached enough from India so that I could look back with affection and irony, but I didn't know America enough to feel any conflict. I was like a bridge poised between two worlds."

Mukherjee's words possess a fierce form of sincerity and fervor at the backdrop. She is fully qualified to talk about the rootlessness and the crisis towards assimilation in that she has also married an American. Her life is a standing example that qualifies to be a good spokesperson with authenticity.

Anyone who reads this novel would vouchsafe the fact that Tara Banerjee is squeezed in between two cultures. On the contrary to her imagination and wish, she finds America to be a land of crime and ruthlessness. She realizes that it has failed to a land of fulfilling promises. It takes a long time for her to accept the fact that the assimilation that is needed would be denied because of her otherness. At the beginning Tara does not believe that her wishes would become untrue. Unable to decide what is best for her, she cuts the shackles off the family bond and marries David Cartwright, an American. She does this with a fanciful idea that she would be protected well in a foreign land. Instead her marriage demonstrates a failure because the marriage that took place between them was a marriage of convenience and not of conjugal oneness. The idea of marriage decided by Tara was due to her immaturity. Her understanding of her husband happens to be totally wrong as she not able to fully fathom David. She is always anxious, edgy and doubtful. Tara is such a naïve girl that in the process of becoming a pseudo American, she fails to safeguard and retain her Indian identity. Added to being a woman, she has the daunting task of overcoming immigrant psyche. In the Indian milieu, a woman's fate is decided by the parents who view a male child and a female child with different yardstick.

In this book, Mukherjee starts to explore what it's like for a fifteen-year-old girl to leave a wealthy and well-protected home, return to it as a mature young woman, and then return home after breaking all social norms by getting married to someone outside of her family to see if she can find her place at home once more. As she continues to witness the group's use of its numbers to encompass or gherao, incapacitating development, political exhibition, road and bustee (vagrant) life, from the beginning from the security of the overhang of the stylish Catelli mainland Hotel to the end of being marooned in a vehicle in a furious crowd, she believes that all the questions that prompted answers at Vassar would be answered. That being said,

Mukherjee's debut book is an amazing achievement. It heralds a fearless new force in English literature emerging from India. Before Mukherjee could cast off her links to her native country and join the multitude of expatriates in North America, she had to compose *The Tiger's Daughter*. Only then could she finally celebrate her migration to the United States and émigré lives.

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