

## Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* as an immigrant novel

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### 1. Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee was born in 1940 in Calcutta. She married a Canadian fellow-student, Clark Blaise, at the University of Iowa, in 1963. She lived in Canada from 1966 to 1980. She became a naturalised Canadian, got Canadian citizenship and lived in Toronto and then in Montreal and held teaching positions at McGill University and Concordia University. She migrated to the U.S.A. in 1980 with her family and became a U.S.A. Citizen in 1988. Her remarkable works are *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975) *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (essays) *Darkness* (1985), *The Middleman and other stories* (1988), *The Sorrow and the Terror* (1987), *Gasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the world* (1993). Bharati Mukherjee's novels and short stories often reveal contemporary themes and concerns. One of these is the emotional and psychic consequences of search for self identity and immigrant psyche. Bharati Mukherjee in a recent 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 placed 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 about 200 years of American history and learn to adopt to American society. I attempt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is to explore Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country.<sup>1</sup>

When a person visits the unknown land, he is an outsider in a no man's land and there has to struggle a lot for his survival conquering these new feeling of nostalgia, he carves out a new territory and wraps himself totally with the lure of the west. He recreates himself into a new personality and forms emotional ties with the place he lives in. This discovery of a new self slowly makes him forget his own native culture. When he returns to his native land he finds that his native taste and touch have turned alien to him. His mind is again torn apart between the cultural clash of two environments and split personality.

Same is the story with Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* who comes across a similar kind of bewilderment on her visit to India after seven years. The protagonist named Tara Banerjee Cartwright is an autobiographical presentation of the author herself who is also married to an American. In her Canadian Fiction Magazine interview, Mukherjee mentions that *The Tiger's Daughter* was written on a summer break in response to a request" from an editor from Houghton Mifflin who had been impressed by a story she had published in Massachusetts Review *The Tiger's Daughter* is Tara Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin of Calcutta and daughter of an industrialist known as Bengal Tiger, schooled at Pough keepsie, New York and

married to an American named David who is a writer. After her marriage Tara becomes Tara Banerjee Cartwright. The protagonist's habit of retaining her maiden surname after marriage symbolically reflects her subconscious mind which is still deeply rooted in her native land and has not been able to forget it in spite of the changed identity of a European adopted by her. There is a strange fusion of the Americanness and Indianness in the psyche of Tara and they are always at a note of confrontation with each other. Tara Banerjee Cartwright makes a trip home to India after being there for seven years. When she visits India, the alien western culture which has almost become a second self to her is constantly in clash with the culture of the native soil. Tara finds it difficult to adjust with her friends and relatives in India, and sometimes with the traditions of her own family. She feels loneliness in her own native land. Tara expected that her return to India would remove her displeasure of staying abroad which is described in the following lines:

For years she had dreamed of this return to India. She had believed that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could just return home to Calcutta. But so far the return had brought only wounds. First the corrosive hours on Marine Drive, then the deformed beggar in the Railway station, and now the inexorable rain ride steadily undid what strength she had held in reverse. She was an embittered woman, she now thought, old and cynical at twenty two and quick to take offence. (*The Tiger's Daughter* p. 25)

Her first stepping on the land of India at Bombay fills her with disappointment. It seems that the alien land has become more of a home to her. She repents to have come to India without her husband and she is unable to keep him off her mind:

Perhaps I was stupid to come without him, she thought, even with him rewriting his novel during the vacation. Perhaps I was too impulsive, confusing my fear of New York with homesickness. Or perhaps I was going mad. (*The Tiger's Daughter* p-21)

Tara's journey from Bombay to Calcutta brings an equally disgusting experience to her. She feels that Calcutta too has changed and deteriorated. She finds Calcutta in the grip of violence due to riots, caused by the confrontation between different classes of society. Her changed personality makes her misfit in the company of her friends and relatives and makes her unable to participate in the ritual functions of home. Tara also feels that her mother's attitude towards her has changed and she too appears to be unhappy at her marriage.

Perhaps her mother, sitting severely before God on a tiny rug. no longer loved her either. After all Tara had wilfully abandoned her caste by marrying a foreigner. Perhaps her mother was offended that she, no longer a real Brahmin, was constantly in and out of this sacred room, dipping like a crow. (P.50)

The most important cause aggravating her discomfort and unease is her marriage which hangs on her heart as a burden.

In India she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner and this foreignness was a burden. It was hard for her to talk about marriage responsibilities in Camac Street, her friends were curious only about the adjustments she has made. (P.62)

Tara is bogged down by two personalities one of an Indian and the other of an American. During such critical moments she felt that she should go back to her husband David because she feels that she would be more at ease there. Tara also feels that she has forgotten many of her Hindu rituals of worshipping icons which she had seen her mother performing since her childhood.

When the sandal wood paste had been ground Tara scraped it off the slimy tablet with her fingers and poured it into a small silver bowl. But she could not remember the next step of the ritual. It was not a simple loss. Tara feared, this forgetting of prescribed actions, it was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and center. But her mother came quickly with the relief of words. (P.51)

The phrase 'cracking of axes and center' symbolically points out the psyche of Tara which has come in her due to the loss of her own cultural heritage.

And sad, Tara thought in spite of the promised bhajan. As a child, Tara remembered, she had sung bhajans in that house. She had sat on a love seat beside a very holy man with a lump and had sung Raghupati Raghava Rajaram. But that had been a long time ago, before some invisible spirit on darkness had covered Tara like skin. (P.54)

"Tara's negative reaction at the changed social situation and deterioration of Calcutta makes her friend Reeva to comment about her that she has "become too self-centered and European." (P. 105) Tara makes Reena realize that the life of Calcutta in spite of all the dark spots and drawbacks, has its own life which is found nowhere else and which her husband David would not be able to realize in spite of his vision and knowledge of India through books:

She thought about Calcutta. Not of the poor sleeping on main streets dying on obscure thoroughfares. But of the consolation Calcutta offers. Life can be very pleasant here, thought Tara. (P.132)

Tara also provides a comparative picture of New York and Calcutta.

Tara told him how much easier she thought it was to live in Calcutta. How much simpler to trust the city's police inspection

and play tennis with him on Saturdays. How humane to accompany a friendly editor to watch the riots in town. New York, she confined, was a gruesome nightmare. It wasn't muggings she feared so much as rude little invasions. (P.69)

Tara also feels that the Indians who feel crazy for foreign things, dress and items but they do not approve marriage with foreign people.

They were racial purists, thought Tara desperately. They liked foreigners in movie magazines-Nat Wood and Bob Wagner in faded Photoplays. They loved English like Worthington at the British Council. But they did not approve of foreign marriage patterns. So much for the glamour of her own marriage. She had expected admiration from these friends. She had wanted them to consider her marriage an emancipated gesture. But emancipation was suspicious it presupposed bondage. (P.86)

Tara feels herself as misfit every where she goes. She is forced to look at her inner world consisting of two cultures and the two different ideologies which are two worlds wide apart. Realizing that the reconciliation is impossible, Tara feels to go back to David. Her father Bengal Tiger in order to entertain her sends her to picnic on makes her to go to Darjeeling to spend her summer but Tara gets no consolation anywhere. She goes to Air India office and reserves a seat on a flight to New York. Her journey is decided but after a short time of this reservation Tara becomes a victim of violence, caused by the marchers who were proceeding towards the Catellcontinental in a mob. The end of Tara remains mysterious and there is a suggestion that Tara does not survive in the violence of the mob which does not even spare the old man Joyonto Roy Choudhury. Locked in the car. Tara only thinks about her husband David. This novel ends with these lines:

And Tara, still locked in a car across the street from the Catelli-continental, wondered whether she would even get out of Calcutta, and if she didn't whether David would even know that she loved him fiercely. (P.210)

In conclusion, we can say that in *The Tiger's Daughter* Tara's journey to India proves as a quest for self and quest for immigrant psyche which prove frustrating slowly leading to her illusion, alienation, depression and finally her tragic end.

#### References:

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2. Fakrul Alam: *Bharati Mukherjee*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996, 4. Malashiri
3. Lal: *The Law of the Threshold*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advance Studies,