

Expatriate Sensibility in Bharti Mukherjee's The Tiger's Daughter

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Abstract

Expatriate sensibility is an offshoot of Diasporic Writings. It voices the agonizing experiences of the immigrants and expatriates. Bharti Mukherjee who belongs to the Indian Diaspora marvelously vocalizes the feelings and experiences of expatriate women. In this paper, an attempt has been made to voice Bharti Mukherjee's expatriate sensibility in her first novel, "The Tiger's Daughter" which probes the condition of being an Indian Woman Expatriate. The protagonist of the novel, Tara's experiences as an expatriate has been analyzed here.

Keywords: Expatriate, Uprooted, Identity, Americanized, Belonging, Cultural conflict

Bharti Mukherjee is a prolific diasporic writer who has acquired admirable critical attention internationally. She is an Indian settled in America. She is worthy of an honorable place in the luminous galaxy of Indian authors, who are writing abroad with native ethos. She may be acknowledged as a voice of expatriate-immigrant sensibility. She articulates the agonizing experiences of the expatriates which they undergo in the midst of cultural and racial discrimination in an alien country. Her fiction truly reflects the temperament and mood of the contemporary American society as experienced by expatriates and immigrants in America. She depicts the problems of the expatriates like alienation, nostalgia; their psychological turmoil and cultural conflicts with incredible understanding and amazing sensitivity.

Expatriation is the experience of Mukherjee's life and leitmotif of her writings as well. In her prize-winning essay *An Invisible Woman*, she explains with great passion about her dreams of settling in Canada and making a place for herself in the country's cultural life and how her dreams were shattered by her experience of racism in Canada. Her decision to shift to the United States proved beneficial for her. During the course of an interview with Geoff Hancock, she confessed, "Moving out of Canada gave me back my voice." The last seven years or so in Canada I felt I was constantly being forced to see myself as part of an unwanted visible minority" (Tandon 24).

At first, she finds America also quite complex and wishes to penetrate deep into it. In an interview, Mukherjee clearly expresses her aim in her writings:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries ... when we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must... learn to adapt to American society 1 attempt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voice of new settlers in this country (Dhawan 11).

In the opinion of Nagendra Kumar, Mukherjee's fictional writings have been analyzed in three well-marked phases. The phase of expatriation, the phase of transition and the phase of Immigration. "There has been an 'on-going quest' from expatriation to immigration in her writings" (Kumar 16). The first phase of her development from 1971 to 1979 is termed as expatriation. During this period, her two early novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* were published and they deal with the trauma of an uprooted identity. Her fiction dealt not only with uprooted individuals, the anguish of expatriation and the frustrations felt by immigrants trying to cope with loneliness but also with the excitement of immigration, the sense of rebirth and the expectations of a better life.

In this paper an attempt has been made to voice Bharti Mukherjee's expatriate sensibility in her very first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* which explores the condition of being an Indian Expatriate. It introduces the themes of belonging, identity, tradition and change. When a person visits an unknown land, he has to struggle a lot for his survival. Gradually he conquers the feelings of nostalgia and recreates himself into a new personality and makes emotional bondage with the place he lives in and this discovery of a new self slowly makes him forget his own native culture. On his return to his native land he finds that his native taste and touch have changed.

In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Mukherjee has shown the story of Tara Banerjee Cartwright, a twenty two years old Bengali Brahmin, who returns to her native city Calcutta after seven years in the U.S. where she married an

American. Tara is an expatriate, geographically as well as in mind and spirit. She shares the expatriate characteristic of being ill at ease both in the native culture and in the alien one. She represents the dilemma faced by expatriates.

The novel "is set in the 'no man's land' of the expatriate who manipulates the concept of home in order to achieve a sense of identity" (Dalaska 8). The protagonist's decision to retain her maiden surname after marriage symbolically reflects her subconscious mind which is still deep-rooted in her native land and has not been able to forget it in spite of the changed identity of an American adopted by her.

Tara tries to get acclimatized to the new surroundings and culture while she was at Vassar. But she lacks the capacity to probe into the differences between the two cultures and accept the merits of both or one and then adopt the necessary changes. Hence, she fails to feel at home, in spite of her best intentions and efforts. She tries a lot to feel at home in New York, "New York was certainly extraordinary, and it had driven her to despair. On days she had thought she could not possibly survive, she had taken out all silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make the apartment look more Indian" (Tiger's 41).

When this young Indian girl, Tara comes to terms with the American life her reactions are of fear and anger. "For Tara Vassar had been an almost unsalvageable mistake. If she had not been trained by the good nuns of St. Blaise's to remain composed and ladylike in all emergencies, she would have rushed home to India at the end of her first week" (Tiger's 13). As a typical Indian she is proud of her family and genealogy and defends her family and her country. It was Tara's upbringing and family prestige which gave her strength to endure the pangs of homesickness.

Through the character of Tara, Mukherjee has projected the experiences of an expatriate who has gone to America to seek education and what she feels after marrying a foreigner who is different in culture. She marries David Cartwright, who is wholly western and she is always apprehensive of this fact. She feels completely insecure in an alien atmosphere because "Madison Square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner" (Kumar 31). Through the marriage of Tara, Mukherjee shows a clear picture of cross-cultural marriage and cultural conflict.

Tara considers herself a victim of a mismatched marriage. She thinks that she will never be able to bridge the cultural abyss between her husband and herself nor find in an

American marriage the comfort of home; "the security of a traditional Bengali marriage could not be explained, not to David Cartwright, not by Tara Banerjee" (Tiger's 151). With a sinking heart Tara realized that the New World offered no substitute for the Tiger's protection (her father's), it only offered more education and compromised love. When she finally accepts that there is "no heroism for her in New York" she returns to India only to find out that "there would be no romance, no admiration in Calcutta either" (Tiger's 107).

In spite of the charisma of the west, in spite of an American husband, Tara fails to experience a sense of belonging in the west. Plagued by a sense of rootlessness and homesickness. Tara visits India. But the alien western culture which has almost become a second home to her is constantly in clash with the culture of her native soil. She finds in India nothing according to her perception.

For years Tara had dreamed of her return to India and thought that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the stay abroad would be erased quite magically if she returns home to Calcutta, but it never happens. "The new Americanized Tara fails to bring back her old sense of participation and views India with the keenness of a foreigner" (Kumar 31). Her entire outlook has been transformed. Shobha Shinde describes the expatriate weakness in the following words, "An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it" (Krishnasastri 58). But when he comes back to his motherland, he is unable to readjust and reorient and becomes a misfit in his own native place.

Tara also has similar experience. She had come to India in search of the "solidity of her background" (Tiger's 40). "Immigration to America has already rendered questionable her status and personal history which is why she has returned to India in order to boost her sense of self which has lost its contours in the American melting pot" (Dlaska 33). But this turned out to be a futile exercise for her.

The changing outlook of an expatriate is very clearly indicated by Bharti Mukherjee through Tara's return to India. When Tara lands at Bombay airport she is greeted warmly by her relatives but her response is very cold. When she is addressed by her nick name, Tultul, it sounds strange to her Americanized ears. Seven years ago she had admired the houses on Marine Drive "she had thought them fashionable, but now their shabbiness appalled her" (Tiger's 22). In the train she had to share her compartment with a 'Marwari' and a 'Nepali'. She thinks that both will "ruin her journey to Calcutta" (Tiger's 25).

After her seven years' stay in America when Tara comes to India, her old sense of pride comes back to her. "She had not thought that seven years in another country, a husband, a new blue passport could be so easily blotted out" (Tiger's 30). Mukherjee describes that an expatriate has a different way of looking at his own country soon after returning from abroad. But after a few days stay the views change. Tara also just feels momentary peace of mind after reaching home (her father's house).

Soon Tara feels rootless in India too. Like any other expatriate, Tara was under stress in America and always conscious of her foreignness. She had felt rootless, but things do not appear better in India also. Tara herself wonders at the foreignness of her spirit which does not permit her to establish an emotional kinship with her old friends and relatives. When she prepares to worship with her mother she forgets the rituals, it upsets her because she at once realizes what America has done to her. Now she has become foreign to her native values also and it fills her with a sense of rootlessness. Tara's position is very critical she is a foreigner for her husband, David with whom she cannot share her feelings. For her Indian friends and relatives she is a sinner who has polluted herself by marrying a foreigner. She is branded as a 'Westernized' woman. Tara realizes that she has become rootless and out of place both in India and America.

America has transformed Tara completely. She has now started looking at the ugly aspects of India. In her mind there is conflict between her old sense of perception and outlook on Calcutta and her changed outlook. Like the people of the west she has also started looking at India as a land of poor people living in hostile, unhygienic conditions and suffering from starvation, decay and disease. "Tara's westernization has opened her eyes to the gulf between two worlds" (Kumar 35).

There is a strange fusion and conflict between the Americaness and Indianness in the psyche of Tara. Sometimes she makes futile efforts to establish herself as an American. But she can neither take refuge in her Indian self nor in her newly discovered American self. Matthew Arnold's famous lines from his poem Stanzas form the Grande Chartreuse aptly describe Tara's condition, "Wandering between two worlds/ One dead, the other powerless to be born, / with nowhere to rest my head."

The novel *The Tiger's Daughter* represents Tara's eventual realization that her future is not in Calcutta but in expatriation. Her Journey to India, her own native land ironically proves frustrating gradually leading to her illusion, alienation, depression and finally her tragic end. Tara's visit to her native land is best represented in these words, "it was so vague, so pointless, so diffuse, this trip home to India" (Tiger's 130). The alien land had become more of a home to her. She regrets to have come to India without her husband, "Perhaps I was stupid to come without him.... Perhaps I was too impulsive, confusing my fear of New York with homesickness. Or perhaps I was going mad" (Tiger's 26).

The Tiger's Daughter like most of the novels of Bharti Mukherjee is a representative of expatriate sensibility. It gives a perfect picture of the feelings of an expatriate. It offers a fine example of the changing outlook and attitude of an expatriate through the character of Tara. Tara's efforts to adapt to American society are measured by her rejection and revulsion of Indian modes of life. "Tara's state is comparable to, though not identical with that of an expatriate who stands apart from the emotional and spiritual tenor of the country that had once been her own" (Tandon 30). This novel announces a bold and new voice in English literature articulated by an Indian to represent the predicament they face in the west. Bharti Mukherjee has very deftly and authentically portrayed the picture of an expatriate woman.

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