

A STUDY OF DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOVEL THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER

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Abstract:

The notion of identity formation consists of various aspects like religion, gender, caste etc. In terms of identity formation in Diasporic milieu, it happened to be observed from twentieth century when the people in abroad of Indian origin began to acquire global identity. No doubt, that identity is a most significant aspect of human rights. Particularly in case of country like India where the caste hierarchy system prevails in the society, identity becomes very important aspects. Thus, we see that there are different dimensions of identities, but this paper particularly focuses on Diasporic identity which is reflected in Bharati Mukherjee's novel, The Tiger's Daughter. The paper focuses on the struggle of the protagonist Tara to search her diasporic identity in the context of Indian Society. Finally, the paper highlights on the opinion that even after the diasporic crisis of dual identity, Tara is trying to balance both the identities of homeland India and the alien land.

Keywords: *Diasporic Identity, cultural contradiction, multicultural society, unsettlement.*

Introduction:

Bharati Mukherjee is the doyen of First generation Indian Diasporic writers. She has carved a niche for herself among the Indian Diasporic writers. Her writing has a characteristic peculiarity of simultaneous allegiance to the Western and Indian sensibilities, which acquires its specific uniqueness through her attempt to fuse the elements of home, identity, culture, human relationship, Double Consciousness etc. into a single whole.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *The Tiger's Daughter* trace the theme of Diasporic identity. The aspect of Identity has created an impact from her Diasporic experiences which she encountered during her stay in America. This brings out a clear picture of her unsettled Indian diasporic life and therefore the aspect of diasporic identity left a deep influence on her writing to shape the subjects of unsettlement. In the novel *The Tiger's Daughter*, Bharati Mukherjee's literary creations

respond to the contemporary debate and discourse on identity which is generally seen as a construct of ideology and Consciousness.

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* is an attempt to unfold the complexities of diasporic identities in terms of the variations and the diversities. Tara, the protagonist, grapples with the problem of her diasporic identity on her visit to India. This can be assigned as the outcome of the return diaspora. Tara travels from Bombay to Calcutta, visits her aunt's place, the Catelli-Continental, Mr. Worthington's Council, the Charity Carnival, the Funerary banks, Tollygunge, Darjeeling, Nayapur etc. Tara's Journey to these places makes an impression of meticulous fusion of diasporic identity between Indian and American. Tara's view as an American, observes danger, disorder and confusion in the Indian milieu. On the other hand, the Indians look suspiciously at her marital status and consider it as an "an emancipated gesture" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 86). Diasporic identities may no longer be recognized as static but an ever-changing process of a dynamic self-definition. Therefore, we find in Tara, a changed supercilious attitude towards the home country. The superior diasporic identity formed by Tara while living in America is due to her elite social status. In India, Tara gets utterly disillusioned as her past memories become blurred. Tara as an immigrant is surprised and bewildered to find a different environment in India in an absolute contrast with her imaginative notion abroad. Tara's journey to India may be recognized as a journey from illusion to reality which is evident from the statement by Stanley Stephen in his chapter "Tara: The Uprooted Exile": "Tara's journey in search of identity becomes futile because her search is aimed only at reclaiming her lost collective/community identity as the daughter of Bengal Tiger and the great granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee and not her primary/personal identity" (26).

Much of the investigations affecting the aspect of diasporic identities by the emerging global society suggest that cultural norms that have established barriers between diasporic groups are now being

dissolved, as we become one Internet-driven community with the ability to interact with people from all corners of the earth. Mukherjee's depiction of Indian diasporic identity in Tara is perceived from the third world perspective in the migrant's space (America). Mukherjee's character Tara 'grows' and 'changes' with the change in citizenship. Tara shares the identity crisis as she is seen to be in the process of assimilation, transformation, and adaptability.

Reflection of Diasporic identity in Tara:

In India, Tara's psyche constantly fluctuates between her identity as an Indian and an American. She finds herself in the borderline of these cross-cultural identity problems. As a solution to such an enigmatic situation, she feels like going back to her husband David because, there she feels that she would be more at ease. She is caught in the chasm of two contrasting identities. Tara finds that she has forgotten many of her Hindu rituals of worshipping icons which her mother performs since her childhood:

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 very long time ago, before some invisible spirit or darkness had covered her like skin. (*The Tiger's Daughter* 54)

The above incident throws light on the concept of her jeopardized identity. Tara carries the Indian cultural values with her but she lacks the conviction and faith that can only be engendered through the constant adherence of these values. Back to India, she is an alien who is long divorced from the ethnic practices since her association with "the other culture." The practice of American culture during her stay in America made common Indian rituals alien to her. This concept of cultural identity can be well supported with the statement of Stuart Hall in his most influential paper "Cultural identity and Diaspora":

Cultural identity, in this sense, is a matter of becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, and histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the

names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (225)

In the light of Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identity, it becomes more feasible to understand how Bharati Mukherjee adopts the technique of projecting the trauma of cultural identities as experienced by Tara. Mukherjee, herself, believes that Indian identity is dynamic and multifaceted in nature. An Indian individual usually carries the card or his mosaic identity even in normal course of time. It is this amalgamation of numerous ethnic cultural elements that are put in the making of a holistic Indian self. Diasporic experience helps in realising this multiple shades of Indian identity. This idea corresponds with Carmen Wickramagamage's explanation of the concept of Hindu identity:

Mukherjee's novels gesture to the discovery that identities assumed in the old homeland are provisional, and that a range of disabling or enabling responses to that discovery is made in diaspora...Mukherjee's fictions demonstrate that both responses are enabled not so much by the new homeland of America but by the act of migration which makes possible the recovery of the suppressed heterogeneous models of identity already present in Hindu culture. In other words, it is the experience of migration that provides the context for unleashing the productive potential of Hindu conceptions of identity. (172)

The conflicts between two cultural identities in Tara form the outcome of Indian diasporic experiences. The diasporic identity in Tara perceives to manipulate cultural contradiction which is very aptly correlated with Tara's following incident in India:

When the sandalwood paste had been ground Tara scraped it off the slimy stone 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. (Tiger's Daughter 51)

The 'cracking of axis and center' mentioned in the text is predicted as a symbolic representation of fragmented identity in Tara. This fragmented identity in Tara may be due to dislocation or loss of her cultural heritage. The cultural shock may be asserted due to the amalgam of Indian and American culture or due to the intimacy of American influence on Tara. This American cultural influence tends Tara's view of Bombay's

railway station “more like a hospital” (*The Tiger’s Daughter* 19).

Bhikhu Parekh, a British theorist and academician, deals with the complexities of diasporic identities. He advocates that the development of multicultural society, especially Britain, is an outcome of settlement of a community of citizens as “community of communities”. Such developments may promote the diasporic communities as an organized identity in the midst of the host society.

Conclusion:

Mukherjee’s novel *The Tiger’s Daughter* traces the aspect of identity in the form of cross-culture, dislocation and unending spectacle of duality in the lives of the diasporas who appear to be perennially living in the ‘within but without’ world. Mukherjee’s pugnacity in dealing with Indian Diasporic identity creates a veritable storyboard defining various cultural hazards, displacement, new possibilities, and new ways of thinking and complex experiences faced by the Indian Diasporas. Tara, the model of Indian diaspora, in the foreign land feels nostalgic about her roots and cultural ethos. After bitter experiences on her journey to India, she moves back from her Indian Diasporic journey to America. This incident suggests that diaspora’s identity crisis does not get resolved, neither by our outright abandonment nor by the attempts to subvert either Indian or American cultures. The

only plausible option remains is the twinning of the two identities together and accepting the very best form from both the worlds. Mukherjee delineates an array of victims of diaspora who stand basically detached, yet strongly attached to the nostalgic past. Consequently, they develop a sense of insecurity and as they encounter a counter culture, they attempt to resurrect their nostalgic homes. This is their identity crisis. Basically they are the immigrants on quest for an identity in their new site.

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