

The Tiger's Daughter: A Study in Cultural Conflict

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Expatriation is the modern complex phenomenon of the present century when people not only from India but also from other parts of world have migrated from the colonial country to the free country like U.S.A., U.K., Canada and other European countries. The West as the non-orient had always been a source of attraction for the orient. Expatriation involves a wistful longing for the past especially the ancestral home, the pains of displacement and exile, unfriendly surroundings and the imposed identity of the adopted land on the expatriates which brings the conflict of cultures. We can witness the on-going quest from 'expatriation' to 'immigration' in Bharati Mukherjee's writings. Her major concern is the life of South-Asian expatriates/immigrants in USA and Canada which encounters the problems of 'acculturation' and 'assimilation'. George Steiner calls them as 'the contemporary everyman' and Uma Parameswaran considers it as the phase of 'expatriate sensibility'. The present chapter deals with such theme of expatriation which leads from 'the autobiographical concern' to 'multiculturalism/diversity' which is a body of Bharati Mukherjee's diasporic experience.

Bharati Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is a very fine manifestation of cultural conflict. This is an interesting study of an upper class Bengali Brahmin girl who goes to America for higher studies. Though afraid of the unknown world of America in the beginning, she tries to adjust herself to it by entering into the wedlock with an American. She returns to India after seven years, only to find herself as a total stranger to the inherited milieu. She realizes that she is now neither Indian nor truly American. She is totally confused and lost.

The actual starting point of the story dates back to a rainy night in the year 1879. It was the day of the grand wedding ceremony of the daughters of Hari Lal Banerjee, the 'Zamindar' of village Pachapara. Standing under a wedding canopy on the roof of his house, Hari Lal Banerjee could have hardly imagined what future holds in store for his coming generations. He "did not hear the straining and imprisoned ghost of change." (Mukherjee, p.5) As she experienced that

... the shadows of suicide on exile, of Bengali soil sectioned and ceded, of workers rising against their bosses could not have been divined by even a wise man in those days.(Mukherjee 6)

After the marriage of Hari Lal Banerjee's daughters, life continued to be pleasant in the village Pachapara and many more marriages took place and many deaths too. After two summers Hari Lal Banerjee fell a prey to an unseen assassin while mediating a feud. All the reputation and influence of Banerjee family died with him. Nobody knew at that time that

years later a young woman who had never been to Pachapara would grieve for the Banerjee's family and try to analyse the reasons for its change. She would sit by a window in America to dream of Hari Lal, her great-grandfather, and she would wonder at the gulf that separated him from herself.(Mukherjee 9)

This young woman is nobody else but Tara Banerjee, the great-grand daughter of Hari Lal Banerjee and the daughter of Bengal Tiger, the owner of famous Banerjee & Thomas (Tobacco) Co. Ltd. Tara is sent by her father at an early age of fifteen for America for higher study. When this young Indian girl comes to terms with the American life, her reactions are one of fear and anger:

For Tara, Vassar had been an almost unsalvageable mistake. If she had not been a Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin, the great-grand daughter of Hari Lal Banerjee, or perhaps if she had not been trained by the good nuns at 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.(Mukherjee 10)

In Ploughkeepsie she feels homesick. She senses discrimination even if her roommate refuses to share her bottle of mango chutney. As it is typical of Indians who are proud of their family and genealogy, she defends her family and her country instinctively. At such moments when she thinks like breaking she ever prays to goddess Kali for strength. When at the end of May, that first year abroad, girls around her prepare to go home she is seized by a vision of terror:

She saw herself sleeping in a large carton on a sidewalk while hatted men made impious remark to her. Headless monsters winked at her from eyes embedded in pudgy shoulders.... She suffered fainting spells, headaches and nightmares She complained of homesickness in letters to her mother, who promptly prayed to Kali to save Tara's conscience, chastity, and complexion. (Mukherjee 13)

Circumstances so contrive incidentally that she falls in love with an American. Mukherjee's description of Tara's chance meeting with David betrays her faith:

Within fifteen minutes of her arrival at the Greyhound bus station there (at Madison), in her anxiety to find a cab, she almost knocked down a young man. She did not know then that she eventually would marry that young man.(Mukherjee 14)

Tara's husband David Cartwright is wholly Western and she is always apprehensive of this fact. She cannot communicate with him the finer nuances of her family background and of life in Calcutta. Her failure to do so is rooted in their cultural differences. In India, a marriage is not simply a union of two individuals; it is a coming together of two families as well. But in Western countries like America, a marriage is simply a contract between two individuals. David is hostile to genealogies and often mistakes her love for family for over-dependence. He asks native questions about Indian customs and traditions and she feels completely insecure in an alien atmosphere because "Madison Square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner."

After a gap of seven years, Tara plans a trip to India. For years she has dreamed of this return and thinks 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 perception and views India with the keenness of a foreigner. Her entire outlook has changed. Shobha Shinde refers to this expatriate weakness, "An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it," (Shinde,p.58) and so does Tara in America but when she comes to confront the changed and hostile circumstances of her home country, all her romantic dreams and ideals crumble down. She realizes that she has drowned her childhood memories in the crowd of America.

On landing at Bombay airport, she is greeted warmly by her relatives but her response is very cold and dispassionate. When

her relatives address her as 'Tultul', a nick name which they always used for her, it sounds strange to her Americanized ears. Seven years ago, while on her way to Vassar "she had admired the house on Marine Drive, had thought them fashionable, but now their shabbiness appalled her" (Mukherjee, p.18). Her reaction towards the railway station is also one of despire. She "thought the station was more like a hospital; there were so many sick and deformed men sitting listlessly on bundles and trunks" (Mukherjee, p.19). In the train, she happens to share her compartment with a Marwari and a Nepali. She thinks that both will "ruin her journey to Calcutta" (Mukherjee, p.20). The Tiny Marwari is very ugly, and appears insolent while the flat-nosed Nepali is also equally disgusting. Her reaction is voiced in the following extract:

I have returned to dry holes by the sides of railway tracts, she thought, to brown fields like excavations for a thousand homes. I have returned to India. (Mukherjee 21)

With coming back to India, America looks like a dream land to her. Just a few days have passed since she left America but it seems to her that she had never been out of 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" (Mukherjee, p.25). To her, her husband David "seemed far less real than the flat-faced Nepali with extra-sensory perception. She watched David's healthy face "disappear into the fleshy folds of the Nepali's neck and the spider's body" (Mukherjee, p.26). As soon as she reaches Howrah station, she is outraged by "the squalor and confusion of Howrah station" (Mukherjee, p.27).

While in America, Tara was always under stress, she was always conscious of her foreignness. She felt herself rootless but things do not appear better in India also. Her mother compels her to accompany her to Aunt Jharna's place to visit her ailing child infected by polio. Tara tries to sympathise with Aunt Jharna but is gravely mistaken as Aunt Jharna insults her. Tara's reaction to this is one of mutually contradictory emotions. While on the one hand, she cannot sympathise with the aunt's religious attempts to heal her child, on the other, she thinks:

I don't hate you. I love you, and the miserable child, the crooked feet, the smoking incense holder, I love you all" (Mukherjee 38).

Tara herself wonders at the foreignness of her spirit which does not permit her to establish an emotional kinship with her old

relatives and friends:

How does the foreignness of spirit begin? Does it begin, right in the centre of Calcutta, with forty ruddy Belgian women, fat foreheads swelling under starched white head-dresses, long black habits intensifying the hostility of the Indian Sun?"(Mukherjee 37)

Or did it

drift inward with the winter chill at Vassar, as she watched the New York snow settle over new architecture, blonde girls...?(Mukherjee 37)

She meets her friends but even in their company antithetical feelings beset her, "Seven years ago she had played with these friends, done her home work with Nilima, briefly fancied herself in love with Pronob, debated with Reena at the British Council."(Mukherjee 43) But now "she feared their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness"(Mukherjee 43). Tara forgets the next step of the rituals while preparing for worship with her mother and at once realizes:

"It was not a simple lossThis forgetting of prescribed actions; it was a little death, a hardening of the hearts a cracking of axis and center"(Mukherjee 51).

Religion plays a central role in any culture. When she forgets the rituals it upsets her because at once she 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. She starts questioning the validity of her own identity. M. Srivaramkrishna blames her American husband and western education for her feelings of rootlessness and lack of identity:

Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* finds it difficult to relate herself to her family, city culture in general since her marriage to an American, her western education are enough signs to brand her as an 'alienated' westernized woman. The implicit logic is that since she is exposed to the west and has absorbed its values she must be necessarily alienated. Therefore, even when she tries to 'voice' her continuing attachment for and identity with India, the voice does not carry conviction for it is at variance with the usual stance of difference and arrogance-one generally associates with the 'westernized' (exiled) Indian.(Shivaramkrishna 74)

Tara realizes that America has transformed her completely. "Tara's westernization has opened her eyes to the gulf between two worlds that still make India the despair of those who govern it." (TLS, p.736) In India, she sees disease, despair, riot, poverty, the children eating yoghurt off the sidewalk. Now she has started looking at the ugly aspects of India. Always in her mind there is an on-going conflict between her old sense of perception and outlook on Calcutta and her changed outlook. Jasbir Jain thus comments:

Tara's consciousness of the present is rooted in her life in the States and when she looks at India anew it is not through her childhood associations or her past memories but through the eyes of her foreign husband David. Her reactions are those of a tourist, of a foreigner. (Jain 13)

Once in an interview Bharati Mukherjee said about her first novel:

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. (Steinberg, Pp.46-47)

Mukherjee's statement has a force of conviction behind it in that she has also married an American, and is thus amply qualified to articulate identical responses authentically. However, her claim that she did not feel any conflict appears far-fetched. Tara Banerjee, who is identified with a majority of critics, as the writer finds herself sandwiched between two cultures.

Works Cited

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impact of tiger parenting and to unpack the complexity of Asian-heritage parenting and its relation to child and adolescent well-being. Collectively, the articles in the special issue offer a more nuanced and accurate perspective on Asian-heritage parenting by taking readers beyond the myth of the tiger mother and dispelling some of the stereotypical, monolithic notions of parenting within Asian-heritage families. Six Empirical Studies in This Special Issue. In the first article, drawing on both parent and adolescent report data, Kim, Wang, Orozco-Lapray, Shen, and Murtuza (this issue) implicated culture-based conflicts, shaming or disapproval, and parental monitoring as aspects of tiger parenting. Collectively *The Tiger's Daughter* is a novel by an expatriate female novelist. The novel has different layers. But the main layer it includes is the journey of a female from India to America and again its repetition. At the age of 14, she flies USA for abroad study most due to her family reputation and less by her own capacity. Her father is known as the Bengal Tiger and the novel gets its topic from the same title. Although the protagonist tries to free herself from the chain of her family she fails. The cultural conflict invites this situation. She is the character who has already left her culture and failed to adopt a new culture. She is displaced, dislocated, and floated. It is impossible for her to adjust herself to one of any of the culture. Avoid cultural conflict by avoiding stereotypes when negotiating across cultures. What would you do in this cross-cultural conflict negotiation example? Before partaking in any negotiation, you should take the time to study the context and the person on the other side of the bargaining table, including the various cultures to which he belongs—whether the culture of France, the culture of engineering, or his particular company's corporate culture. The more you know about the client, the better off you will do in any negotiation. In this cross-cultural conflict negotiation example, we see that the negotiator has learned after the fact that her Indian counterpart would have appreciated a slower pace with more opportunities for relationship building.