

A Reading of the Immigrant Psyche of the Protagonist/Writer in “The Tiger’s Daughter”.

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Abstract

One of the key features of twentieth century is the large-scale migration across the globe. Two world wars, emergence of decolonized countries, and the dominance of information technology have redefined concepts such as identity, belonging and home. These historical and social events have made the immigrant the protagonist of the twentieth century. This study examines how these socio-political experiences are translated into the context of American identity. In order to do so, it must interrogate the critical fields that are most interested in issues of national and cultural identities, migration, and the appropriation of women by both Western and postcolonial projects. Analysis is also undertaken about the manner in which the protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee’s “The Tiger’s Daughter” navigate between the various and often contradictory demands placed on her by her homeland culture and her position as an immigrant in the United States. This novel is a probe on the one hand to the innate complexities and inconsistencies of a conservative traditional background, and on the other hand, a sarcasm on a deformed and prejudiced social set up. Mukherjee enjoys a special place in the category of immigrant writers because she is both an immigrant writer as well as a feminist writer.

Key Words: Alienation, Dilemma, Dislocation, Immigrant Writing, Isolation

Introduction

“I once thought to write a history of immigrants to America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history.” declared Oscar Handlin (1951, p.3). This holds true even sixty two years after this proclamation, as the theme of immigration, and the alienation and isolation resulting from this, continues to be the major concern of many a writer. This group of writers who portrays the joys, agonies, wish fulfillment and the disenchantment of the immigrants, can be clustered together and termed as ‘immigrant writers’.

Bharati Mukherjee is an immigrant by choice. She has a special place in this category of writers because she is both an immigrant writer as well as a feminist writer. Mukherjee in “The Tiger’s Daughter” (1971) delineates with issues regarding the return to homeland and the particular problems associated with a highly mobile class of women immigrants whose lives move back and forth as they travel to old and new homes. Though four decades have passed after its first publication, the popularity of this work seems rooted in the near universal appeal of this theme. Her novel focuses on the vaguely autobiographical journey back to India of a Bengali-born Indian girl educated and married in America to an American.

Literature Review

Mukherjee’s works focus on the “phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates” (Alam, 1996, p.7) as well as on Indian women and their struggle. Her own struggle with identity, first as an exile from India, then an Indian expatriate in Canada and finally as a immigrant in the United States has led to her current state of being an immigrant in a country of immigrants (Alam, 1990, p.10). To understand the works of Bharati Mukherjee one has to acquaint oneself with the term immigrant and what it means to be an immigrant.

“To migrate”, Salman Rushdie (2010, p.210) writes in *Imaginary Homelands*, is “to lose language and home, to be defined by others, to become invisible, or, even worse, a target; it is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul.” He adds, however, that “the migrant is not simply transformed by [this] act; he [or she] transforms his new world” (Rushdie, 2010, p.210). It is said that a person who adopts a country is simultaneously adopted by it. There is an anonymity and distinctiveness in the term immigrant. Harold H. Itwaru says that it entails “paradoxical forms of identification which paint faceless faces and paint also the facedness of the interaction between the state and the people so named” (1990, p.12). The immigrant suffers from disorientation. He is torn between hopes and fears and also between yesterday and tomorrow.

The immigrant who lands at his dream country expects this dream land to fulfill his desires, hopes and wishes. In the first flush of elation and excitement, the immigrant contributes his maximum energy – both physical and intellectual – to this land, which he hopes to make his own. But the country which is often soulless assumes the role of a manipulator and sucks the life out of the immigrant. He feels betrayed and the dream of fulfillment changes to the reality of exploitation.

Exactly after a decade of her attending the Writer’s Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1961, Mukherjee ventured out to create a novel of her own. Like the author, the protagonist Tara also returns to her native land after an encounter with Western value systems. The foreign returned Tara is forced to re-adjust her values and even re-define her identity.

For an immigrant, the need to understand what he or she has left behind and what is experienced in the new land is crucial to survival. Tara is forced to learn this lesson for surviving in the alien land. The immigrants often come from a land of rich culture and heritage. One wonders why then, these people discard their mother country and immigrate to an alien land. The reasons for the emigration vary. These may be due to advance oneself in the field of education, modern science and technology or monetary improvement or for reason known to them alone. These immigrants are uprooted from an indigenous culture and transplantation causes the immigrant's life to,

“occur amidst many shifting images of the self, between a yesterday always alive within, but situated now in another country and culture to which the term ‘host society’ is usually applied” (Itwaru, 1990, p.13).

The memory of her parents, friends and the Camac Street society becomes dear to Tara within the closed confines of the dormitories of Vassar. It is this memory of love and kindness that solaces and gives comfort to her. Bailey correctly observes that “the phenomenon of immigration so profoundly affected these individuals that they spend the rest of their lives adjusting to this uprooting” (1975, p.3). The setting of “The Tiger’s Daughter” is the upper class urban elite of Bengal, a milieu with which Bharati Mukherjee is familiar and is an integral part of her upbringing. This novel is a probe on the one hand to the innate complexities and inconsistencies of a conservative traditional background, and on the other hand, sarcasm on a deformed and prejudiced social set up. In the words of Mukherjee (1992):

It is the autobiography of a class rather than an individual. I was writing about the passing away of a way of life that I and many young Bengali women growing up in the Calcutta of the 50s experienced. Many of the characters are meant to operate both believably and symbolically. There is the nouveau riche class coming in and that is personified by one principal character. There are those who have been prepared by their westernized education for a gracious Calcutta that is on the eve of disappearing and there is a new people with a great deal of political vitality with reformist ideas. It’s a nostalgia for a Calcutta that has already collapsed (p.7).

Given this background, Mukherjee could not but be passionately involved with the changing scenario in Calcutta. Materialism and political corruption had eroded the majesty of a gracious Calcutta. Mukherjee as an outsider looks at this individualistic society that has emerged with detachment. Tara has been molded by a Western society whose norms are based on the self rather than the collective self. Tara is not at home with her roots nor can she fit into the society of her acquired living. Tara is stirred passively by the impulse to rebel, but does not show any power for decision in the course of the novel.

As an immigrant writer, Mukherjee’s concern in this novel is with the ethos of an Indian woman who has been subjected to the extreme liberalism of the West. Her identity entrenched in the Indian culture encounters a dilemma in this polarity of ethics. What surfaces ultimately is Mukherjee’s conviction that societies make and remake gender roles for women. Tara’s parents are proud of their only daughter. They do not constitute in themselves, the traditional patriarchal society. It is they who make it possible for Tara to break away from the gender role which the society expected of her. Tara is sent to the States at the tender age of fifteen. It should be noted

here that Arati (Tara's mother) proudly proclaims that her only daughter is more than enough to make up for many valiant sons. Though she did not mean it, the Indian mother's longing to have a son is inherent in this statement. And by equating her daughter with sons, Arati unconsciously substitutes her daughter for sons. Arati confines herself to her role as a wife and mother. Society and the gender role constructed by the society, makes Arati unconsciously believe that her life would be fulfilled only if she gave birth to a son. Arati is not to be held guilty for making the innocuous statement.

Tara arrives in India after seven years of living abroad, a period of hibernation of value system. She is outraged by the squalor and confusion of Indian life. She is irritated when the attendant sneezes on her raincoat and offers to wipe out the mess with his dusting rag. Amidst this confusion, she suddenly finds solace in meeting her parents. This episode gives a general impression that, however westernized she is, Tara is very much attuned to the class she belongs to, and to the roots that she hails from. Here the interesting aspect is that Tara's roots, especially since she has been away for seven years, is with a class in Calcutta which is tied to its dogmas and does not open up to changing trends. It is this upper middle class perspective, that gives Tara an awe about Calcutta. The disdain and disgust she has about what is going on in Calcutta, is all because of her class consciousness on the one hand, and on the other hand, because of her acquired awareness from the west.

Tara's renewed encounter with her homeland is far more insightful than it had been when the land was accepted uncritically. She observes:

It is the same Calcutta that she left but the awareness of Calcutta which she knew before leaving was only partial. For her the Catelli Continental Hotel on Chowringhee Avenue is the navel of the universe. The group outside her Fortified home in Calcutta often sat on the roof of the Catelli Continental, imagining in public to flout conventions, imploring Tara not to smile at strange old men in blazers and sun hats (The Tiger's Daughter, p.31).

But Tara was fond of Calcutta not because of the superior status she enjoyed, but because of other reasons. Her mother Arati was a saintly woman. She was not holy enough to turn her hair white overnight, but was adequately religious. Her religiosity did not proceed to the extreme of fanaticism. Though Arati occasionally goes to shrines and visits religious people she is not narrow minded. She wants her daughter to study and widen her horizons. She does not believe that the be all and end all of a girl's life is a suitable marriage. Tara on the other hand always kept her mother's holiness as a resort at times of distress and she used to long for the security of the prayer room.

At Vassar, it is this symbol of calmness and serenity at the other end of the world that is her solace. Here, as Itwaru says, "the present consciousness with its attendant ambiguities, anxieties and disorientations, invents meaning in the need to reduce confusion" (1990, p.13). We are dealing with the transposition of social, racial, cultural and religious memory. That memory will be consciously as well as unconsciously central in the interpretation of perceived realities. Itwaru further adds that the stranger in the case, here Tara, is categorized in the name and label 'immigrant'. This immigrant status is distinctive and at the same time also anonymous. This person is no longer only the bearer of another history (Tara considers herself more Indian than she was at home, while her friends at Vassar ask her about India and the population explosion and other things), but has now become a particular 'other'. The person has become the

immigrant-- this term of depersonalization which will brand her or him for the rest of their lives in the country of their adoption. Tara's personality is thus confined to a kind of dependency, not only on parents, but also to her religion and culture.

Tara undertakes the lone journey back to India which aggravates her feeling of rootlessness. She realizes how different she has grown, how incompatible life is in her native land. Tara's nostalgia and idealization for India were the spontaneous responses inherent in every immigrant removed from his country by time and space. The second position, much more complicated and complicating, gives the novel its ironic sharpness and urgency. Since Tara's image of India is now an image which makes her a kind of accomplice of custom, it also enables her to define herself against it, because she is no longer a part of it. The institution, rituals and language by which she once lived now appear to her alien, even absurd. In the midst of a serious argument with her friend Reena, for example, she is suddenly overwhelmed by feelings of strangeness: "It was the word "fusspot" that calmed Tara. What a curious tie language was: She had forgotten so many Indian – English words she had used with her friends. It would have been treacherous to quarrel with Reena after that" (The Tiger's Daughter, p.107). It is at this point that Tara realizes that she no longer shares their language and thus no longer belongs.

Conclusion

However ambiguous it seems to be, the conclusion represents the novel's achievement, which is personal as well as aesthetic. In her own way, Tara is a representative figure, not just of the Indian immigrant, but of the crisis of modernity also. Mukherjee's craftsmanship is evident in the division of the novel into four parts. The novel begins with Tara's arrival and ends with her proposed return to the U.S. By going back, unable to grasp its meaning, Tara is rejecting her homeland and her Indianness. The first part is brief and deals with her responses to India; the second part takes us back to her feudal, ancestral past. Tara and her father have tried to reject this past – a past which is overwhelmed and pushed aside by Westernization; the third section of the novel is concerned with Tara's early experiences in America – her loneliness, her attempt to stick to Indian way and the gradual acculturation leading to her marriage to David Cartwright; the fourth brings us back to India.

By centering the novel on a 'daughter', Mukherjee tries to explore the question of womanhood in India. Cultural bondage together with familial ties create the concept of a woman. She is cast into stereotype gender roles. Tara is both a daughter and a wife. As a daughter, she has been given much independence, but her upbringing and subconscious notions of the concept of womanhood are a bondage from which she cannot escape. She remains the tiger's daughter and not a tigress. It is this tension that Mukherjee has poignantly portrayed in her first novel, "The Tiger's Daughter". In reading this novel, we tend to agree with Chinua Achebe (1973) who says that a Third World Writer is a teacher. "He has as much a role to play in depicting his society as the native historian in studying indigenous history" (p.185). This is true of Bharati Mukherjee who has said that in writing "The Tiger's Daughter", she was writing "the autobiography of a class rather than an individual...about the passing away of a life that I and many young Bengali women growing up in the Calcutta of the 50s experienced"(p.7). "The Tiger's Daughter" can be considered as Mukherjee's attempts to find her identity in her Indian heritage. We can see reflections of the author in Tara, the protagonist who returns to India after many years of being away only to return to poverty and turmoil. This story parallels Mukherjee's own return to India with her husband Clark Blaise, in 1973 and the way in which

she was deeply affected by the chaos and poverty of India and mistreatment of women in the name of tradition (Alam, 1996).

The `exile` in Bharati Mukherjee turns her alienation into an opportunity not merely for a critical perspective on her world, but also to enforce complex integrations through struggles that take her beyond the narcissistic insecurities of identity search. She defines herself as an American writer of Bengali-Indian origin. In an interview with Chen and Goudie (1997), Mukherjee confesses:

The writer/political activist in me is more obsessed with addressing the issues of minority discourse in the U.S. and Canada, the two countries I have lived and worked in over the last thirty odd years. The national mythology that my imagination is driven to create, through fiction, is that of the post-Vietnam United States. I experience, simultaneously, the pioneer's capacity to be shocked and surprised by the new culture, and the immigrant's willingness to de-form and re-form that culture. At this moment, my Calcutta childhood and adolescence offer me intriguing, incompletely-comprehended revelations about my hometown, my family, my place in that community: the kind of revelations that fuel the desire to write an autobiography rather than to mythologize an Indian national identity.

As is evident from the above lines, what Mukherjee is interested in as a novelist is an issue that baffles not only third world writers, but literary artists of today everywhere: how to express a sense of displacement, while only through a sense of place and its corresponding ethics can a novel as a primarily linguistic artifact achieve an authentic voice? As Mukherjee proclaims in her first novel, "changes in the anatomies of nations are easy to perceive. But changes brought by gods or titans are too subtle for measurement" (*The Tiger's Daughter*, p.8). This perception of anatomies of nation does not unmake one's belonging, however adamant one's transformation is from one culture to the other. Bharati Mukherjee is definitely an expatriate writer and has not grown out of this stature.

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