Abstract

This paper delineates cultural dilemma in *The Tiger’s Daughter*, the first novel of Bharati Mukherjee published in 1972. It portrays Tara, the protagonist who goes to America for higher education and marries with an American to overcome the fear of being ignored in a foreign country. After seven years she decides to come back to India but finds herself a stranger in her native place. Her entire outlook has changed. When she was in America, she idealizes her home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it but when she has come to India, she starts hating the hostile circumstances and dirty surroundings here. During her stay in America, she was not happy and was always conscious about the rootlessness. But now in India also, she does not feel better. She finds herself alienated and faces identity crisis. She suffers with a constant dilemma at psychological level and has a clash between two cultural traits—American and Indian.

Keywords: culture, conflict, rootlessness, split-self, expatriation
Cultural Dilemma in Bharati Mukherjee’s
The Tiger’s Daughter

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Bharati Mukherjee is one of the major novelists of Indian Diaspora. Her intellectual quest covers a period of about thirty years in which her five novels and two story collections, besides other non-fictional writings appeared. Her creative characters come from every walk of life and belong to diverse ethnicities and cultural preferences and various religious faiths. She explores the complexities of her choicest theme of expatriate experience. Her first novel The Tiger’s Daughter was written in 1972 when she was staying in Canada. This work delineates cultural conflict and portrays an upper caste Bengali Brahmin girl, Tara who goes to America for higher education. To overcome the fear of being ignored in a foreign country, she marries with an American. After seven years she comes back to India but finds herself a stranger in her native place.

The novel starts with the grand wedding ceremony of the daughters of Hari Lal Banerjee, the ‘Zamindar’ of village Pachapara. Two years later Hari Lal Banerjee fell a prey to an unseen assassin while he was mediating a dispute. With his death all the reputation of the Banerjee Zamindar family died. The great granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee and the daughter of Bengal Tigers, the owner of famous Banerjee & Thomas Co. Ltd. is nobody else but Tara Banerjee, the protagonist of The Tiger’s Daughter. Her father sends her America at an early age of fifteen for higher study. She feels anger and is afraid of American way of living.

For Tara, Vassar had been an almost unsalvageable mistake. If she had not been a Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin, the great granddaughter 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 the end of her first week. (Mukherjee 10)

In America she feels homesickness and faces discrimination for being an Indian. She always defends her culture and her country instinctively. When at the end of the academic session every student around her prepares to go home, she is afraid of even going back home.

She saw herself sleeping in carton on a sidewalk while hated men made impious remarks 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 letter to her mother who promptly prayed to Kali to save Tara’s conscience, chastity and complexion. (Mukherjee 13)

During her studies she falls in love with an American boy named David. At the Greyhound bus stop, she by chance meets him, “Within fifteen minutes of her arrival at Greyhound bus station there (at Madison), in her anxiety to find cab, she almost
knocked down a young man. She did not know then that she eventually would marry that young man.” (Mukherjee 14)

She gets married with David Cartwright who is wholly western and does not know anything about Indian culture. Tara never communicated her family background and Calcutta life with him. In India a marriage is the bond of two families, cultures and two individuals but in America their marriage is union of two persons only and not of two families. It is simply a contract between two persons. David is opposed to parentage and does not like to expand his family tree. Whenever Tara shows care for his family, he mistakes her love for over dependence. She feels completely insecure with him as he often asks foolish questions about Indian customs and culture.

Tara plans to return to India after seven years. She thinks on reaching her native place all her fears and worries would be disappeared. But it is not so as the new Tara who is America returned, fails to perceive India as a native but views India with the avidity of a foreigner. Her entire outlook has changed. When she was in America, she idealizes her home country, India and cherishes nostalgic memories of it but when she has come to India, she starts hating the hostile circumstances and dirty surroundings here. All the dreams and ideals fall apart.

When she returns to India and is welcomed by her relatives and friends on Bombay Airport she did not feel happy on hearing her nickname ‘Tultul’. She becomes upset as it feels strange to her. She finds it very childish thing. While on her way to Calcutta, she strikes with disgust on seeing shabbiness. She “thought the station was more like a hospital; there were so many sick and deformed men sitting listlessly on bundles and trunks.” (Mukherjee 19)

In the train Tara happens to share her compartment with a Marwari and a Nepali. She thinks that both of them will spoil her journey to Calcutta. The tiny Marwari is very ugly and seems impudent while the flat nosed Nepali is equally wicked. Her reaction is voiced in the following line: “I have returned to dry holes by the sides of railway tracks, she thought, to brown fields like excavations for a thousand homes. I have returned to India.” (Mukherjee 21)

As she reaches to Howrah station, she is appalled by “squalor and confusion of Howrah station.” (Mukherjee 27) Although she is surrounded by the crowd of relatives, vendors and beggars, she feels herself completely alone. Her father has come to receive her who “seemed to have become a symbol for the outside world. He had become a pillar supporting a balcony that had long outlived its beauty and its function.” (Mukherjee 29) On reaching home she feels peace of mind and is thankful to be again at her own home:

After seven years abroad, after extraordinary turns of destiny that had swept her from Calcutta to Poughkeepsie, and Madison, and finally to a two-room apartment within walking distance of Columbia, strange turns that had taught her to worry over a dissertation on Katherine Mansfield, the plight of women and racial minorities, Tara was grateful to call this (her father’s) restful house home. (Mukherjee 33)
Coming back to Vassar, America looks like a dreamland to Tara. She recalls the days when she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make her room look more Indian. She assumes New York an extraordinary and exotic place. New York, she thought now, had been exotic. Not because it had Laundromats and subways. But because there were policemen with dogs prowling the underground tunnel. Because girls like her, at least almost like her, were being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings. Because students were rioting about campus recruiters and far-away wars rather than the price of rice or the stiffness of final exams. Because people were agitated over pollution… New York was certainly extraordinary, and it had driven her to despair… (Mukherjee 34)

During her stay in America, she was not happy and was always conscious about the rootlessness. But now in India also, she does not feel better. With her relatives she is unable to establish relations as good as she was having before shifting to America. Now she does not become happy on meeting her old friends. She herself wonders at her foreignness.

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? 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)

Tara realizes what she has lost in America when she forgets one of the certain rituals on doing worship with her mother. "It was not a simple loss… this forgetting of prescribed actions; it was little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and centre." (Mukherjee 51) Now she has become a foreigner to the rituals, customs and natives values. She feels the rootlessness and loss of identity and realizes that it is the great loss which America has done to her.

Tara was literally, neither here nor there. She was a misfit with her Calcutta milieu and she was always under stress in America– trying to be correct, trying not to be a gauche immigrant, trying to be American. Tara is intelligent, highly educated and capable of self-analysis. She is conscious of her instability, insecurity and unhappiness. (Chowdhury 95)

Her friends throw many parties in honour of Tara’s return in The Catelli-Continental Hotel on Chowringhee Avenue. She thinks that her friends would understand her attitude and circumstances. “Her friends had seemed to her a peaceful island in the midst of Calcutta’s commotion. She had leaned heavily on their self-confidence.” (Mukherjee 55) But gradually she realizes that she is wrong in her expectations to her friends. “Her friends let slip their disapproval of her. They suggested her marriage had been impudent that the seven years abroad had eroded all that was fine and sensitive in her Bengali nature” (Mukherjee 55). Her friends were more interested to listen stories about America than Tara’s plight. She notices a drastic change in her friends as they often make her realize the mistake she made in marrying an American. “In India she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner, and this foreignness was a burden.” (Mukherjee 62) She is very confused as she cannot share the feelings of her
relatives and friends with her husband. For her relatives and friends, she has polluted the society as well as herself by marrying a foreigner. According to M. Sivaramkrishna, 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 an identity with India, the voice does not carry conviction for it is at variance with the usual stance – of indifference and arrogance – one generally associates with the ‘westernized’ (exiled) Indian. (74)

She realizes that she has completely changed. Now she does not feel the same happiness as she used to do earlier. Tara’s westernization has opened her eyes to the gulf between two worlds that still makes India the despair of those who govern it. She looks all the ugly aspects of India. For her, it is full of disease, despair, riots, poverty and filth. All the time she remains confused about the past perception for India and newly changed perception. Now she has become a foreigner, an American, that’s why her perception has changed.

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)

She has started viewing India with the eyes of a foreigner as a land of poor people living in unhygienic conditions and suffering from starvation. On her way to Observatory Hill in Darjeeling, she is stopped and teased by some rowdy boys. This incident makes her upset. She meets the politician Tuntunwala, the same ugly Marwari fellow with whom she had shared her train compartment while coming to Calcutta. He proposes her to show a new township, Nayapur and unfortunately she accepts his proposal. This meeting ends with her seduction by this cruel politician. She does not tell about her rape to anyone for fear of disgrace.

She could not share her knowledge of Tuntunwala with any of her friends. In a land where a friendly smile, an accidental brush of fingers, can ignite rumours – even lawsuits – how is one to speak of Mr. Tuntunwala’s violence? (Mukherjee 199)

Tara Banerjee has not fully adapted to American culture, but alienated to the values and customs of India. She shows omissions and oppositions in her native practices that give an abundant environment for the reader to ruminate her cultural plight.

Tara’s psyche is always tragic as a result of the tension created in the mind between the two socio-cultural environments, between the feeling of rootlessness and nostalgia. She feels both cornered and neglected at the same time. Neither can she take refuge in her old Indian self nor in her newly discovered American self. This difficulty of choosing lies in her refusal to totally condemn any one world. It might have been easier for Tara to leave her past untouched if she could find her old home unworthy, but she does
not. She does not fit in any longer. The outcome of this encounter is her split personality. (Mehra 239)

In the concluding part of the novel, the entire city is burning with violent demonstrations. Tara plans to go back to her husband David and invites her friends at Catelli Continental to announce her decision. But unfortunately she is surrounded by rioting mob. “Tara, still locked in a car across the street from the Catelli Continental, wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she did not, whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely”. (Mukherjee 210)

There is no clear-cut or obvious conclusion in this novel as it creates a situation of illusion. The novel poses so many questions for the readers. Does Tara succeed in going back to her husband David and start living her married life happily keeping all her nostalgia aside or she falls a victim to the rioting mob? She finds herself alienated and faces identity crisis. She suffers with a constant dilemma at psychological level and has a clash between two cultural traits—American and Indian. She wants to behave like an ordinary Indian but her American-self-made ordinary practices strange to her. She realizes her rootlessness and gets confused over it.

Works Cited


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