

Quest for Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Ficiton with reference to *The Tiger's Daughter*: A Brief Analysis

Dr. Prabha P. Paul* & Dr. Aishwarya Vidhya**

*Asst. Professor, Dept of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai-21.

**Lecturer in English, Ethiraj College, Chennai.

Received Sept 11, 2017

Accepted Oct. 12, 2017

Indian English writing cherished in the hands of women writers after a lot of efforts owing to prejudice that they wrote what they experienced. They basically dealt with female subjectivity, domestic space and personal sufferings. These women writers made fruitful attempts in experimenting with various genres in the recent times making them stand tall and unique. Their writings covered various subject matters under the sun giving the readers a sense of variety and individuality. Several distinguished personalities made efforts for years to bring literature to the present status. Today women's writing is considered as a dominant and influential medium of modernism. The phenomenal achievement of carving the niche for themselves by these writers has brought a change in the way women's literature is looked at today. These writers deal with the most burning issues, sensitive aspects of life, like search for identity and feminine sensibility, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity etc.

The present day women writers have out and out realized the need to come to terms with the need of an hour by making successful attempts in the directions of conquering the masses through their writings. No longer confined to four walls, modern woman have become to part of the social, political, economic and academic scenario. Many have written on the male-dominated societies, the sufferings and trauma faced by women, exploitation, complexities of men-woman relationship, social and personal dilemmas and other such related issues. No doubt, Indian English writing did tremendously flourish in the hands of many women writers like Laxmi Debi, Attia Hossain, Santha Rama Rau, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Arundhati Roy, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Nair, Kiran Desai, Shashi Deshpandai, Manju Kapur of whom Bharati Mukherjee is considered as one of the outstanding novelists holding a significance place in modern Indian fiction.

Born in Calcutta in West Bengal on 27th July 1940, she finished her graduation from the University of Calcutta in 1958 and post-graduation from the University of Baroda and then moved to the University of Iowa in the United States of America in 1961 in order to do MFA and Ph. Degrees and lived there in the American contingent for more than three decades. Despite her stay there for long, the familial ties did richly bind her to the country of her birth and made her remain at pains to emphasize the fact that she is an American writer. Being greatly attached to Calcutta where she was born and brought up, she said, "the city will remain a habit with me, but as a writer, I have developed entirely in the United States".

Mukherjee's writing career began in 1971. She has to her credit publication of six books of fiction: 1) **The Tiger's Daughter** 2) **Wife**, 3) **Darkness** 4) **The Middleman and other stories** 5) **Jasmine** and 6) **The Holder of the world**, out of which **The Middlemen and Other stories** won her the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1980. No doubt his work like **Tiger's Daughter**, **Wife**, **Darkness** deal with sensibility of immigration in America. His works also reflect the gentle collision between two worlds (East and West) struggling to understand each other through this writer's works. **The Tiger's Daughter** is about Tara, a Brahmin girl educated at Vassar (U.S.A) and married to an American; but she returns to Calcutta and rediscovers the culture of her people. **Wife** is a tale about Dimple and her husband, Amit Basu who moved to New York to live in an appropriate ethnic ghetto. In her latest novel **Jasmine**, the novelist is not confined to India or U.S.A. but she makes an extravagant sweep. Ayesha Kegal writes:

"India-meets low meets – Vietnam, as Jyoti turned- Jasmine – turned Jane Ripplemeyer, moves from a "mud-hut" in a Punjab village, via "Queens" to 300-acre low farm; from being widowed by a terrorist bomb she becomes the pregnant wife of an American banker" (p.298)

The measured pace of **Tiger's Daughter** picked up "momentum in her second novel **Wife** and **Darkness**, is a collect of short stories reaching electrifying speed in **Middleman**... she is a writer consummate skill and the 'urgency' and 'energy' she speaks, is visible in her recent work" (p.298). Her earlier novels **The Tiger's Daughter** and **Wife** deal with the conditions of being an Indian expatriate and an America immigrant,

through the character of Tara in **The Tiger's Daughter**, she has travelled for from being an expatriate and by the portrayal of Dimple in **Wife**, she becomes an American immigrant. In **Darkness**, she is completely an immigrant.

Bharati Mukherjee is primarily on Indian women who explores through her fiction the meaning of life in a way the Indian women writer continues to do in English or in her mother tongue. An important concern of post-colonial literature of related to place and displacement. The concern with identifying a relationship between self and place lead to crisis of identity. Ethnic women in America are clearly twice-marginalized, by virtue of their ethnicity and their gender. The central figures in Mukherjee's novels **The Tiger's Daughter**, **Wife** and **Jasmine** – Tara, Dimple, Jasmine – fight two simultaneous battle's against marginalization during their early expatriate experiences in America; coming as they are from (an) other world, their very identities are in question in America, calling out for revisioning and a re-defining at the start. The moments of change / transformation / reincarnation are crucial because through the exercise is assertive, powerful in its mainstream movement the echoes at the margins valorize the anxieties of expatriation. The identifies that Mukherjee's women eventually emerge with exemplify the characteristics of a whole new breed in this country, the "ethnic" who is also "American". The process of finding their identities must be a matter of intense struggle: with the self, with tradition, with the wonders and horrors of a new culture, with growing aspirations, hopes and desires.

Bharati Mukherjee's women do eventually find their distinctive voices but not before they have battled violently with the images of their own selves as representations of "otherness" – exotic yet silent, capable yet suppressed. More often, these women have grown up in Indian families whose cultural roots retain their hold in insidious ways; though in times of fear and indecision, Mukherjee's westernized Indian women return to seek the comfort of traditional faiths, they increasingly discover it to be cold and so the quest for a new identity continues. Apparent, Mukherjee's growing concern is that these new born identifies should not suffer from the terror of marginalization, concern that is probably legitimate to immigrants everywhere tracing a development through Mukherjee's work from early novel **The Tiger's Daughter** to **Jasmine**. One finds that this community is, ever increasingly a celebration of what the author obviously considers the spirit of America, a spirit that defines homesickness and nostalgia in order that one may favour the "exuberance of immigration". (p.18) Certainly, more and more is left out as Mukherjee's women evolve from the homesick Tara who returns home to find herself peculiarly alienated, through Dimple whose confusion turns violent, to the liberated Jyoti – Jasmine – Jase – Jane who makes a lifetime – for – everyone look like a possibility for any exuberant immigrant.

Mukherjee's first novel **The Tiger's Daughter** pictures the cultural conflict of the East and the West. The novel has a heroine of Indian origin, who suffers a cultural shock by giving to the United States of America. Basically the novel is an imaginative rendering of Bharati Mukherjee's personal experience in going west and the after affects of the culture shock felt by her personally. The protagonist named Tara Banarjee Cartwright is an autobiographical presentation of the author herself who is a married to an American. Though Mukherjee herself described as an American author, the after may feel more than Indian pulse throbbing in her after reading the novel **The Tiger's Daughter**. It appears that Indianness is always her rather deep rooted to the core. There are numerous scenes in the novel where we find the typical spirit of Bengali which is found in her use of the typical Indian terms. The protagonist's habit of retaining her maiden surname after marriage symbolically reflects her subconscious mind which is still deeply rooted in her native land and has not been able to forget it in spite of the changed identity of a European adopted by her. There is a storage fusion of the Americanness and Indianness in the psyche of Tara. The Tiger's Daughter is Tara, schooled at Poughkeepsie, New York. Being homesick in Poghkeepie, Tara sensed discrimination if her roommate did not share her mango chutney. She defended her family and her country vehemently. She prayed to Kali for strength, so that she would not break down, before the American's New York was extraordinary and drove her to despair:

"on days when she had thought she could not possibly survive, she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make the apartment more Indian" (p.34)

Tara fell in love and got married to an American named David Chatwright. Tara's husband David was painfully western and she could not communicate the finer nuances of her family background and life in Calcutta. Her husband asked naive questions about Indian customs and traditions. She felt completely insecure in an alien atmosphere. "Madison square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner" (p.38). Tara makes a trip home to India after being there for seven years. When the twenty-two-years old Tara visits India, the alien western culture which has almost become a second self to her is

constantly in clash with the culture of her native soil. The clash is deeply felt in the psyche of Tara who finds it difficult to adjust with her friends and relatives in India; and sometimes with the traditions of her own family. The greatest irony of her return is that she feels loneliness in her own native land. Her new self is, no doubt, responsible for this disruption of her pleasure, but the deteriorating social changes and her new perspective towards the poverty and dirtiness in India aggravate her discomfort, frustration and disgust. Tara expected that her return to India would remove her displeasure of staying abroad. Her first stepping on the land of India at Bombay filled her with disappointment. Bombay is the same but her outlook has changed. To her, Bombay railway station “was more like a hospital, there were so many sick and deformed men sitting listlessly on bundles and turnks” (p.14) Her sickness at the present situation makes her think about her husband, David. The thought of her husband symbolically suggests the second self developed in her. It seems that the alien land has become more of a home to her.

Tara's journey from Bombay to Calcutta brings on equally disgusting experience to her. In Calcutta too, she finds everything changed and deteriorated. The Calcutta she finds now is under the grip of violence due to riots, caused by the confrontation between different classes of society. This shatters her dream of Calcutta, and makes her react in a negative manner. Slowly her changed personality makes her a misfit in the company of her friends and relatives and makes her unable to participate in the ritual functions of home. Tara is shown as being an Indian-American, for now she looks at India with the eyes of an American she finds herself marginalized on the psychological level. The most important cause aggravating her discomfort is her marriage which hangs on her heart as a burden:

“In India, she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner, and this foreigner was a burden. It was hard for her to talk about marriage responsibilities in Camac Street; her friends were curious only about the adjustment she has made” (p.62)

Tara's mind is constantly at conflict with the two personalities one of an Indian and the other of an American. She also finds herself a misfit everywhere she goes. With her dangling personality, she tries to look Indian and adjust with her friends but there is an invisible gap between them and she feels the breakdown. She is forced to look at her inner world consisting of two cultures and the two different ideologies which are the two worlds wide apart. Realizing that the reconciliation is impossible, Tara longs to go back to David. Her father Begal Tiger in order to entertain her sends her to picnic or makes her to go Darjeeling to spend her summer but Tara gets consolation and peace nowhere. Thus, Tara's journey to India her own native soil ironically proves frustrating, slowly leading to her illusion, alienation, depression and finally her tragic end. Her desire to find a place for love and security which she missed in New York, ends in ironical frustration. In her own way, Tara is a representative figure, not just of the Indian expatriate, but of the crisis of modernity also:

“If modernity represents the end of older process of filiation rooted in culture and biology, the challenge for her is to find some form of affiliation and so to form relationship which of not as enduring and sustaining, will allow more freedom and flexibility” (Said, 61)

As the story ends, she remains true to her feelings for David, to the commitment she has made to live as she does, between worlds: “The paradox remains but tears no one apart” (Clark, 235) The usual thematic core of expatriate writing, the conflict between the native and the alien, “self” and “the other” seems to have acquired a new richness and complexity in the novelistic vision of Bharati Mukherjee owing to her singular dovetailing of the narrative line with diverse perspectives – Indian, feminine and immigrant. Her adroit grafting of their valence on to an existentialistic frame work underscores the universal implications of alienation, the impetus behind in our modern absurd world, “a geometry that mirrors a universe that is rough not rounded, scabrous not smooth” a geometry “of the pitted pocked and broken up the twisted, tangled and intertwined” (Padma, 1)

WORKS CITED

1. Dhawan, R.K. ed. “Introduction” *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee*. **Indian Women Novelists**, set –I, Vol.I, New Delhi, Prestige Books, 1991.
2. Clark, Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee, **Days and Nights in Calcutta**, New Delhi, Penguin, 1986.
3. Said, Edward, **The Text, the World, the Critic**, New York, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.
4. Spivak, ed. **Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives**, New Delhi: Garland Publishing, 1993.
5. Padma, T., “Diaspora, Multiple identities and Metam psychosis: A Critique on Bharati Mukherjee's novels”, **Indian Scholar**, Vol-15, No.2, July 1993.