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## THE PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *The Tiger's Daughter*



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**Keywords:**immigrants, expatriates, identity, heritage, isolation, culture, homesick, nostalgic, antithetical tension, Indianness, confrontation, disappointment, realization and reconciliation

Bharati Mukherjee's works mainly focus on the issues of Indian women and their struggle in migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feelings of expatriates. She herself was in exile from India, expatriate in Canada and an immigrant in the United States. Mukherjee's own struggle with identity works as motivating force behind her attempts to find identity for her protagonists. Her works are her attempts to find her identity in her Indian heritage. About her aim of writing, in an interview, Mukherjee says:

*"...when we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society... I attempt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country."* (Sunday Review page 1)

She is at her best to draw on her experiences of the India and Canada while writing with insight about the New World in America to which she now belongs. She describes her American experience as one of 'fusion' and immigration as 'two-way process' in which Americans and immigrants are growing by the interchange and experience. Her recent books prove that she is an original writer in American immigrant/multicultural literature.

Mukherjee's early novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is published in the early 1970s. The novel is about the isolation of Indian expatriate. A reading of *Days and Nights in Calcutta* reveals that there is a strong autobiographical element in *The Tiger's Daughter*. On another level, *The Tiger's Daughter* is an interesting response to E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Tara Banerjee, an autobiographical representation of authoress herself, like the Bharati Mukherjee of *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, is an outsider in India because of her decision to leave the subcontinent, to live in North America, and to marry an American, mleccha (outcaste) husband. She represents the image of women who try to assimilate the alien culture and to accept the changed identity, over throwing their own Indian culture. Her spirit is different with which she overthrows Indian culture and

adjusts with the American one. She feels tension between the two socio-cultural environments, between the feeling of rootlessness and nostalgia as an outsider in a no-man's land where she is struggling for survival. There she carves her own new territory and develops a new personality with emotional ties with both homeland and adapted land. This new self makes her forget her native culture and the return to India results in feeling it as an alien country as she has lost her native taste and touch. In fact, her new self is responsible for the disruption of her pleasure, but along with it the deteriorating social change and her new perspective towards Indian poverty and dirtiness culminate in her discomfort, frustration and disgust.

The theme of expatriation and isolation which is handled with such assurance in *The Tiger's Daughter* is again treated in her further novels. *The Tiger's Daughter* is a fictionalized story drawing from Mukherjee's own first years of marriage and her return home for a visit to a world unlike the one that lives in her memory. The protagonist, Tara Banerjee, returns to India after marrying an American and faces a different India than the one she remembers leaving. This first novel addresses Mukherjee's personal difficulties of being caught between two worlds, homes and cultures and is an examination of who she is and where she belongs. Each offers a different India through their separate journals, and ultimately, the two tell the tale of a relationship that faces the daily difficulties of cultural barriers that have been drawn and separate pasts that linger.

The novel is divided into four parts to present the dangling personality of Tara. The first part deals with the family background and the past of Tara and interferences of native soil of Calcutta in the process of her settlement in New York. The second part deals with Tara's visit to India, her journey from Bombay to Calcutta and her reactions to India. The third one narrates Tara's life at Calcutta with her Catelli-Continental friends. The last part deals with Tara's visit to Darjeeling, her boredom and alienation at coming back to Calcutta and her victimization in a mob and her tragic end which remains mysterious.

Twenty-two-year-old Tara Banerjee is a daughter of an industrialist known as Bengal Tiger who sends her to

America at early age of fifteen because he was afraid of situations at his mother land. Tara felt homesick in the school at Poughkeepsie, New York. She sensed discrimination when her roommate shared not her mango chutney. Even in discussions she defended her family and country very strongly. She always prayed Goddesses for power that she should not break down in front of the Americans. Whenever she felt despair and nostalgic, she used to create an India around herself. Once she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make the apartment more Indian. It was only fate that she fell in love with David, an American, painfully Western man. Like true Indian wife she was very dutiful, but devious in her marriage, she always failed to communicate the finer nuances of her family background and life in Calcutta at her husband's naïve questions about Indian customs and traditions. Due to her split personality she doubts understanding of her country through her by her husband. Her Indianness is found in her use of typical Bengali terms and her habit of retaining her maiden surname after marriage. Her husband was after all a foreigner and she was feeling completely insecure in an alien country. Her doubts and conflicts are resolved by the strength, determination and quite dignity of her parents. Tara's perspectives about India were refreshed and cleared by Antonia Whitehead's decision to make India a home as she believed that India needs help. She thought that all her hesitations, fears at abroad will be magically erased if she visits her home at Calcutta and comes to India.

In India, through a series of adventures and misadventures she reaches to a final self-realization and reconciliation. Depressed and disgusted with deteriorating situation of India finally she determines to leave for USA to her husband. Actually, the fusion of Americanness and Indianness in Tara's personality results in inability to take refuge either in her old Indian self or in newly discovered American self. She comes with changed outlook to India and her very first landing at Bombay fills her with disappointment. Once admirer of Marine Drive, Tara now feels it as shabby:

*"Tara, lagging behind with several nephews, thought the station was more like a hospital; there were so many sick and deformed men sitting listlessly on bundles and trunks."*(TTD-19)

Because of her supercilious attitude in air-conditioned compartments in America she ironically observes the Marwari as a circus animal and the Nepali as a fidgety older man with hair, both ruining her journey. At this situation she missed her husband David. This missing is symbolizing the demand of her American self, which leads her to repentance on her tour to India. She frets about David and thinks:

*"Perhaps I was stupid to come without him, .....even with him rewriting his novel during vacation. Perhaps I was impulsive, confusing my fear of New York with homesickness. Or perhaps I was going mad."* (TTD- 21)

After losing the roots in India Tara finds India merely alien

and hostile.

She finds the Calcutta of which she was homesick has gone through many changes. She was expecting happy Bengal of her childhood where children are running through cool green spaces and aristocrats despairing in music rooms of empty palaces; but she was confronted to Calcutta forcing weak men to fanatical defiance or dishonesty.

*"But so far the return had brought only wounds. First the corrosive hours on Marine Drive, then the deformed beggar in the railway station, and now the inexorable train ride steadily undid what strength she had held in reserve. She was an embittered woman, she now thought, old and cynical at twenty-two and quick to take offence."* (TTD-25)

The news papers at Calcutta were full of epidemics, collusions, fatal quarrels and starvation- the vision of modern India. A funeral pyre at the river bank, a small beggar girl afflicted with leprosy, beggar children eating off the street, superficiality in the life of her friends, the riots and her claustrophobic rape by the politician, her Darjeeling visit marred by ugly and violent events; all bring out the trauma of her visit to India. She comes across a kind of bewilderment on her visit to India.

On her return, Tara sees India through the eyes of a Western imagination rather than through her own childhood eyes. Tara's efforts to adapt to American society are measured by her rejection and revulsion of Indian modes of life. Her sense of alienation in Calcutta is symbolized by her regular visits to the Catelli-Continental Hotel, from where she views the turmoil of Calcutta, from the safe heights of a tourist, cut off from the *real* India which seethes below her. The Calcutta she finds now is totally changed under the grip of violence between different classes of society. Such picture of Calcutta shatters her dreams and turns her negative. Unlike Maya of Anita Desai and Kim of Rudyard Kipling; Tara finds nothing of her liking in India, instead she finds emotion of escape in Catelli-Continental Hotel. Tara's improprieties are related by the relatives to her American attitude to life because of her seven years stay in America and she is found as 'stubborn'.

Torn between two contrary emotions, even though Tara declares her love for, she cannot sympathize with her Aunt Jharna's religious attempts to heal her child. Tara is no longer able to feel a part of her family, who belong to an old Bengal which is now lost to her, nor is she able to feel at ease with her old friends who, like her family, belong to a Calcutta which is rapidly fading, and who, in their different ways are as isolated as Tara from the beast beneath them. She is caught in an antithetical tension because at one hand her family and friends consider her marriage as an emancipated gesture and on the other her husband gives her no credits for cleaning bathrooms. After returning from America the antithetical feelings beset her among friends; she feels afraid of their tone, their omissions and their superior oneness, the same friends with whom seven years ago she had played, done homework, loved and dated. Today her friend Reena comments:



*"How is it you have changed too much, Tara? I mean this is no moral judgment or anything, but you have become too self-centred and European." (TTD-105)*

Her friends expect her to tell about their fantasies of American life, but Tara knows the facts of violence and ghettos in the American life and could not escape from them. Actually, she felt that she was a woman only to clean bathrooms at home in America. Among her friends she was a foreign-return; a woman enriched with many romantic experiences at America. But the reality is stated in the lines below:

*"Each aerogramme caused her momentary panic, a sense of trust betrayed, of mistakes never admitted, Tara thought. In India she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner, and this foreignness was a burden. It was hard for her to talk about marriage responsibilities in Camac Street; her friends were curious only about the adjustments she had made." (TTD-62)*

Her friends approved her foreign manners, foreign etiquette and foreign fashion; but as conservative racial purists they are, they would never approve her foreign marriage.

"They liked foreigners in movie magazines- Nat Wood and Bob Wagner in faded Photoplays. They loved Englishmen like Worthington at the British Council. But they did not approve of foreign marriage partners. So much for the glamour of her own marriage, she had expected admiration from these friends, she had wanted them to consider her marriage an emancipated gesture. But emancipation was suspicious- it presupposed bondage." (TTD-86)

Tara narrates about her strange experience in America to Sanjay:

*New York, she confided was a gruesome nightmare. It wasn't mugging she feared so much as rude little invasions. The thought of stranger....looking into her pocket book, laughing at the notes she had made to herself transforming shoddy innocuous side into giants fangs crouching." (TTD-69)*

Thus, her communication becomes devoid of significance. Tara's every attempt to adjust with her friends fails and she strongly feels the breakdown and invisible gap between them. While avoiding the temptation of glorifying the native country and belittle and degrade the adopted one, Mukherjee has presented the problems of a displaced person in the adopted as well as at the native country.

Tara feels that her mother's attitude towards her has been changed as she is not happy with her daughter's marriage. It becomes clear through the following lines:

*"Perhaps her mother, sitting serenely before God on a tiny rug, no longer loved her either. After all Tara had willfully abandoned her caste by marrying a foreigner. Perhaps her mother was offended that she, no longer a real Brahmin, was constantly in and out of sacred room, dipping like a crow. She thought her mother had every right to wary of aliens and outcastes." (TTD-50)*

Caught between two contrasting worlds, Tara has forgotten many of the Hindu rituals at worships. In fact she was always standing beside her mother at performing Pujas since her childhood, but today she has forgotten the steps of the rituals during the prayers. The incident at Shivpuja alerts her about the loss of religion and own cultural heritage:

*"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 centre. But her mother came quickly with the relief of words." (TTD-51)*

Today she is unable to sing the bhajan which she used to sing in her childhood very fluently. The American culture works as an 'invisible spirit or darkness' which kills her simple desire to behave like an ordinary Indian.

The Tiger's Daughter represents the confrontation between the illusion and reality. Tara had leaved India in search of her dreams and again nostalgically comes to India in search of her Indian dreams. But for times she is confused with purpose of her trip to India. She is unable to express her state of mind and feelings.

*"It was not a topping or sliding of identities that Tara wanted to suggest to David, but an alarming new feeling that she was an apprentice to some great thing or power. If she was pressed to tell more precisely the nature of that power, she would have to remain silent. It was so vague, so pointless, so diffuse, this trip home to India". (TTD-130)*

After reading the letters from her husband David at late night she feels the real consolation that Calcutta has provided her, which cannot be understood by her husband.

*"She thought about Calcutta. Not of the poor sleeping on main streets, dying on obscure thoroughfares. But of the consolation Calcutta offers. Life can be very pleasant here, Tara thought." (TTD-132)*

Her inner self consisting two different cultures; two different ideologies makes any reconciliation impossible.

Even her father's attempt to entertain her by a picnic to Darjeeling fails to provide her peace. When she realizes that India no longer yields her recognition, she decides to return to New York and books Air India flight ticket for herself. This was the escape she had planned, but destiny could not allow her to escape. Before she takes off for

*The Predicament Of Women In Bharati Mukherjee's The Tiger's Daughter*

America, she becomes a victim of violence. The violence started as the marchers proceed towards the Catelli-Continental hotel. At the end of the novel Joyob Roy Chawdhury, a symbol of the old world order is brutally beaten to death. As if, it is suggestive of killing the past to provide space for new to take birth and grow. During the process of such cultural transactions and replacements the relations are damaged, which is symbolically suggested as Pronob also gets injured while trying to save Tara. Tara's end is mysterious, but it is suggested that she does not survive in the violence. This is suggesting that a person can escape from the roots either through death or by keeping on hanging forever. This is how Tara's end suggests:

*“And Tara, still locked in a car across the street from Catelli-Continental, wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she doesn't, whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely.”(TTD-210)*

In this way Tara's search for her dreams turns out ironically frustrating and results in her disillusionment, alienation, depression, and her tragic end. It is ironic that she survived in the racial discrimination and hardship in the foreign country like America, but becomes a victim of violence and tragic death in her native country India. Homesick at New York she comes to India seeking peace and finds her final peace in death. When death is approaching she is thinking about her American husband. This symbolically presents that she finds greater love and security with a foreigner, instead of finding it in the arms of her father and mother.

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- (Note- Short form used TTD for '*The Tiger's Daughter*')

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