

Dialectics of Woman's Self and Personality in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger Daughter*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is a post-colonial writer who tries to shed off the shackles of colonialism so as to confront the strange and unknown force of new culture translated in terms of the central protagonist of her novels, who with the best of her capability take her life to its logical end. There is a post-colonial approach to many of her thematic concerns where Mukherjee portrays her protagonist grappling with unknown circumstances either to assert her Indianness or to get rid of her past to become a part of the new culture. In her novels dialectic vision is necessitated by the life and career of her protagonists. There is every possible attempt on the part of the novelist to present and portray the dislocation and exile of the protagonist in all its visible and invisible reality.

Keywords

Dialectics, displacement, Bharati Mukherjee, The Tiger's Daughter, Immigration, Exile, Cultural Conflict, Identity Crisis.

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Bharati Mukherjee's novels by and large exhibit the experiences of a woman who single-handedly struggles to sustain her identity or recreate it while fighting every kind of odd and obstructive situations. Besides the construction of a female identity there is a focus on the methodology and even narratology to capture the essence of these experiences and struggles. Bharati Mukherjee is a post-colonial writer who tries to shed off the shackles of colonialism so as to confront the strange and unknown force of new culture translated in terms of the central protagonist of her novels who with the best of her capability take her life to its logical end. There is a strong sense of historicisation in some of the novels of Bharati Mukherjee where the main theme is explored and expressed by placing the career and life of the female protagonist in a historical context of the Indian society.

Similarly, there is a post-colonial approach to many of her thematic concerns where Mukherjee portrays her protagonist grappling with unknown circumstances either to assert her Indianness or to get rid of her past to become a part of the new culture. In the same way, the diasporic experiences of Bharati Mukherjee after migrating to the West is translated as one of the central threads of her vision as expressed in her various novels. But these thematic concerns are deftly handled and skilfully portrayed in terms of the narration, cinematography, a large variety of images and symbols, parallels and contrast between the two cultures along with the double vision that carry the central stream of the main vision of her books.

Dialectics of vision, in fact, refers to two way perception of one image. It is like perceiving human life as an integral part of the processes of nature. In other words, it is a comprehensive view of the reality in its intrinsic and extrinsic aspects or we can say that dialectic vision looks into the physical aspect of reality as well as its essential dimensions from within. Sometimes a writer employs this dialectic vision as part of aesthetic strategy to explore and express the total contents accessible to human eye and mind. Although, Bharati Mukherjee makes an extensive use of the omniscient author technique to capture the best and worst moments in the life of her characters but it is through dialectics of vision that we get a comparative and contrastive dimensions of the reality of the characters, situations and events so as to arrive at a sufficiently fair assessment of the main concerns in the novel. In Bharati Mukherjee's novels dialectic vision is necessitated by the life and career of her protagonists. Mukherjee has to deal with different cultures, different social realities and different situations. There is every possible attempt on the part of the novelist to present and portray the dislocation and exile of the protagonist in all its visible and invisible reality.

So, from a psychological point of view Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* is a powerful exploration and expression of the dialectic vision in terms of the cultural conflict between the East and the West. The novel traces the career and migration of a woman from East to the West due to which the expatriate sensibility suffers a lot in terms of multiple dislocation and broken identity. As there is migration and resultant expatriate feeling, the woman protagonist Tara Banerjee, in order to search for her identity through relationships with in her family and her culture, gradually gets separated from her native, culture and bonds. But immediately after migration she is unable to acquire inclusion in the new society with the result that she gets trapped between two cultures and suffers to maintain a balance between her dialectic vision and dual affiliation. So, it is because of her rigorous search for identity that she tries to reconcile this dual affiliation by identifying herself with the new community after her suffering displacement.

In her first novel, Bharati Mukherjee implies that the protagonist has returned to India as a recovery of her roots so as to unite this dialectic vision into one insight. Tara Banerjee Cartwright goes to America where she marries to David Cartwright, but after this marriage she finds herself trapped and released at the same time because of the dialectic vision. So, in order to recover her confused sense of belongingness she returns to India after seven years. But to her utter dismay to Camac Street which she longed for and the independent room at Vassar with which she associates her childhood memories, all have turned into a confusing sink of politics, privileges, hierarchies of power and class in India.

Tara is nostalgically as well as anxiously gravitated towards India and particularly Calcutta of her idyllic childhood, due to which she plans a trip to India. But as soon as she arrives in Bombay she realises her mistake because the building on the side of Marine Drive had become shabby and outdated. Even Bombay railway station gave the look of a hospital and during her journey to Calcutta she found herself huddled with a Marwari and a repulsive Nepali; so, she decides to complete her journey silently and without much interaction with her co-passengers. But her arrival at Calcutta disillusioned her more because as portrayed by Satyajit Ray, Calcutta of aristocrats, music and Calcutta of green open spaces has turned into a city of buses, trains and rallies. So, it is for the first time that she realises how her American life has transformed her to the extent that Calcutta appears to be a city of shattered dreams, as Tara reflects:

... right in the centre of Calcutta, with forty ruddy Belgian women, fat foreheads swelling under starched with headdresses, long black habits intensifying the hostility of the Indian sun? The nuns had taught her to inject the right degree of venom into the words like “common” and “vulgar”. They had taught her *The Pirates of Penzance* in singing class... (Mukherjee 45)

Tara also realises that over a period of time it is very difficult to keep the culture separate, that is why, there is a frequent intermingling, criss-cross and a contamination through constant interaction and education. But at the same time two cultures alienate each other due to which there is stagnation and sink. This is how Tara is completely disenchanted and confused with the socio-cultural reality of today’s Calcutta. This double perspective put forth by the novelist is beautifully captured and explained by Brinda Bose when she writes:

Mukherjee’s women are brought up in a culture that presents such ambiguities from childhood. The breaking of identities and the discarding of languages actually being early, their lives being shaped by the confluence of the rich cultural and religious traditions on the one hand, and the ‘new learning’ imposed by British colonialism in India on the other. These different influences involve them in tortured process of self-recognition and self-assimilation right from the start; the confusion is doubled upon coming to America. (Bose 50)

So, the dialectic vision in *The Tiger’s Daughter* is the extension of Tara’s soul and psyche who finds herself trapped between two cultural environments, between nostalgia and rootlessness. But the tragedy of Tara lies in her ability to choose one of the two and discard the other one. In other words, she cannot enclose herself either in her Indian self or her new found American self, with the result that she becomes

a split personality which is beautifully explained by Parekh and Garg:
For women currently struggling to transcend the inevitable structure of their life space and create a new space for themselves, this role model of traditional Indian woman evokes admiration and awe, but it does not mobilise them to

act for themselves because it also evokes pathos and a sense of inadequacy. The entire dialogue centres around the question, if not this then what? (Parekh. et.al. 111)

Since Tara's personality and nature has been shaped by her mother with the values of traditional Indian culture comprising religion, myth and rituals, due to which she finds it extremely difficult to immediately shed off this socio-cultural garb of values. The double-mindedness gets precipitated in her attitude with respect to religion also. While Tara complained in New York that she could not pray, she clung to Kali for protection. The same Tara who feels infidel at her ancestral house is able to share devotion with her mother at Darjeeling among the crowd of vulgar worshippers and finds it easy to love anyone. In the religious procession of Kananbala Mata the atmosphere removes all her instinctive suspicions, fears of misunderstanding and persistent tears rose in Tara's heart.

The greatest irony of her return is that she feels loneliness in her native land. Tara's mother Arati is a saintly woman and she spends a great deal of her time sitting in her prayer room. At home, Tara is compelled to lead a pious life. Her mother urges her to sit and listen to Sanskrit slogans, but she tries to tolerate prayers and Saraswati Pooja. For Tara, who could sing 'Raghupati raghava raja ram', it becomes non-natural for her to sing it after her return from America. Tara's mind is constantly at conflict with the two personalities – one of an Indian and the other of an American.

Tara is caught in the gulf between these two contrasting worlds and feels that she has forgotten many of the Hindu rituals of worshipping, which she has inherited from her culture. It is the American culture that has covered Tara like an invisible spirit or darkness. In the deepest core of her heart, Tara has an intense desire to behave like an ordinary Indian but her re-rooted self in America made such common rituals alien to her. She realises that she has become rootless now. She is convinced of her "... little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and centre" (Mukherjee 54)

On the other hand after being migrated to America, Tara is exposed to a cosmopolitan culture of freedom and liberation which she finds is in direct conflict with her traditional self. This dual self generates two different perspectives and attitudes which in the common linguistic idiom is called double vision. Now Tara must suppress one to address the other, which she is unable to do because of centuries old grip of traditional Indian values, which why, she is confronted with a dilemma and also suffers on that account. So, her decision to revisit India after seven years is a

cultural pull but the intermittent intervention of the American education and socio-cultural influence makes her both a re-creator and victim of her sufferings. Her surrender to Tuntunwala is a part of that pull and counter pulls which she wanted to resist but psychologically willing to submit.

This is what Parikh and Garg have to say about the cultural internalization of Tara as a woman who despite her best efforts, fails to absorb either the American culture or the Indian culture and rather becomes both a carrier and victim of the dialectic vision:

Perhaps the role models of the cultural lore are internalised as deeply as the universe of identities is interjected. The three significant and persistent models running through mythology and history are the virtuous women who suffers, the virtuous and assertive woman who fights, and the one who escapes into religion. (Parikh. et. al. 153-4)

That is why, Tara is trapped in a cultural vacuum admiring the life of her mother, who lived through a very fragile cultural existence and on the other side Tara's exposure to the Western world makes her confused and she is completely nonplussed in her attempt to mix and amalgamate both the cultures. The early experiences of Tara in America are discriminatory because her roommate dislikes her mango chutney and Tara's aggression in hanging around her clothes in the apartment, her daily prayers to Goddess Kali for strength all show the cultural strength of India that wards off the innocent immigrant from being destroyed by the alien culture. In other words this strength of the Indian culture does not allow Tara to submit or get sucked into the American socio-cultural matrix and hence she decides to revitalise her strength by returning to India after seven years. This is proved by the fact that even after her marriage she decides to retain her surname Tara Banerjee Cartwright which is reflective of her being rooted in her native culture but gradually after her marriage with David she undergoes acculturation which punctures her dream when she is forced back to confront the harsh Indian reality on her return. In other words, this marginal culturalisation is responsible for making her unfit to adjust anywhere. At the same time, this split vision is also an evidence of her husband's failure to understand either her Indian culture or her Indian personality. As a result, she finds that even her mother's attitude towards her has undergone a change:

Perhaps her mother sitting serenely before God on a tiny

rug, no longer loved her either. After all Tara had wilfully 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 this sacred room, dipping like a crow. (Mukherjee 63)

For Tara, this factual reality of the American society is marked by violence and ghetto life, which is further accentuated by her marriage with a foreigner. Tara expected her friends to be positive in their assessment of her marriage as a way to emancipation but the conservative attitude of all friends made her sad. This leads her to a miserable conclusion that these friends in America are fond of food and love all things foreign except the foreign partner, due to which Tara calls them the racial conservatives and cultural purists. Her family and friends consider this marriage a bondage, as David does not appreciate her habit of cleaning bathroom. It is because Tara could not share her cultural upbringing and life in Calcutta and she finds David completely indifferent to Indian values. That is why as per the Hindu vision of dignity, which is based on the balancing of the opposites, the approach to the Identity of an individual is the result of a balanced contradiction that gives rise to the dialectic vision. That is why Tara is incapable of understanding her affection and love for David till the seduction scene when she vehemently cries that she desperately loves David.

Towards the end of the novel, Tara is trapped in a violent demonstration which she so strongly dislikes. Not only this, even Joyonto Roy Chowdhury in his attempt to guard Tara is attacked by the demonstrators and got killed and in the process injured Pronob. Though, Tara seems to have reconciled with the city but she gets her dialectic vision converging on a single vision that makes her re-examine both the cultures with a clear sense of understanding. In other words Tara realises that in spite of many similarities between these two cultures there is a visible separation in both which cannot be reconciled. The last scene of the novel depicting the social turmoil and cultural discontent outside is but an external manifestation of the inner deep recesses of Tara's heart, mind and soul, and her having been trapped in this conflict from within and without Tara finds that such conflicts cannot be resolved. As the novelist beautifully described this nervousness of Tara:

And 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 248)

Maya Manju Sharma has aptly described this naturalisation and denaturalisation of the culture represented through the life and career of Tara Banerjee Cartwright that she misunderstands insight for vision, and hence her quest for self terminates into depression and a tragedy. The central irony of Tara's life has been that in spite of her strength to resist the racial discrimination and social violence in an alien land, Tara becomes a victim of her own native culture she used to long for. So, Maya Manju Sharma writes:

Like Henry James heroine, Isabel Archer, who goes to Europe/Britain, the source of her tradition, for vision in knowledge, so Tara/Bharati must come to the source- the omphalos of all vision- the Catelli Continental. Thanks to Joyonto Roy Chowdhury, and her years away, Tara begins to exchange vision for insight. At the end of the novel, as she sits shivering in the Fiat, surrounding by a mob, wondering whether she will ever see her husband again, she sees the vision twinkling...(Sharma 13)

This is what we find stated in *The Tiger's Daughter* where Tara comes back to Calcutta after seven years of stay in America in order to revive and revise her cultural values and social make-up. However, the values of the western society have substantially transformed her into an individual who is unhinged and unhappy with the social reality and culture of India. There is a direct aesthetic confrontation of the two points of view – one has imbibed from the West, about the West and second Tara's original use of India along with her revised vision of Indian reality in the light of the Western experience. This is a part of her vision that Tara feels uncomfortable both in America and in India, because she fails to transform herself either as a pure American or as an original Indian. That is why, her friends and people in her circle make fun of her new found identity and as a result she feels slighted for not being appreciated or acknowledged as a foreigner in the complete sense of herself.

There is a constant endeavour on the part of scholars and critics to analyse the vision of Bharati Mukherjee. She has been as welcoming of the idea of the American 'melting pot' as she has been critical of the Canadian cultural mosaic.

Having lived with Blaise in Canada for 14 years, Mukherjee has described her relocation to the US as having provided an immediate sense of relief. In her essay 'An Invisible Woman' Canada, particularly Toronto is depicted as a place of deeply ingrained racism, where her self-perception as a 'middle class professional' was constantly at odds with the way she was treated – her individuality reduced to her immigrant experience. This dialectic vision was what especially unnerved Mukherjee, making it impossible for her to continue living in Canada. From her perspective, the US was utterly different in its attitude toward immigration. There she was simply "an immigrant, living in a continent of immigrants" (Alam 9). Mukherjee's photograph taken for an interview emphasizing her commitment to the American nation and awareness of cultural roots, the photo depicts Mukherjee wrapped in an American flag, fashioned in the style of a sari. Mukherjee has self-confessed her position as an Asian American one.

I maintained that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I am ashamed of my past... but because my whole adult life has been lived here, and I write about the people who are immigrants going through the process of making a home here... I write in the tradition of immigrants experience rather than nostalgia and expatriation. (Coward 71-2)

The vision 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. Despite western education, upper-class living and a western husband, Tara fails to assimilate to the exposed culture because her sheltered background failed to equip her to confront the causalities. She remains rootless both at home and abroad, suspended between Cartwright and Banerjee as Tara Cartwright Banerjee, a nowhere woman. Hence she remains a hyphenated identity, an Indian – American "suspended between two worlds and rooted in neither (Padma 86). As a result Tara is torn between the lure of new American spirit and the outdated Indian self that makes her a split personality nurturing a dialectic vision which makes her an eternal outsider. Despite her sincere efforts the protagonist suffers from the feelings of alienation, racial apartheid, social discrimination followed by a sense of rootlessness.

So, we can say that there is a dialectic sense of loss reflected in the writings of the diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee: one is their severed bond with the

motherland and the other is the invariable ongoing struggle in their attempt to belong to the alien country and the society.

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