

The Exposure of Psychological Isolation and Suppression of Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Novel

Poonam Singh

Research Scholar

Department of English

N.A.S. College, Meerut

Email:

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee was born in India and now she is living in the USA with her husband and two children. So we can easily find the picture of Indian and American society in her works but the real meaning of society is that 'Society is the web of Social relationship'. Every country has its own culture and we can see culture variation in every society. In her novels Mukherjee depicts Indian and American cultures. All the protagonists of Mukherjee's novels live in another land but they come to another lands and accept the culture of the society and adopted country. They fight and survive in their adopted land. Mukherjee herself is an immigrant writer and has an immigrant sensibility. She shows in all her works. They quest for their freedom and real identity in the adopted land and finally they adapt to the new social setup.

Keywords

Social Relationship, Cultures, Disorientation.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Poonam Singh

The Exposure of Psychological Isolation and Suppression of Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Novel

Notions June 2024,

Vol. XV, No. 1,

pp. 17 - 27

Article No. 4

Online available at :

<https://anubooks.com/journal/notions>

Mukherjee's work portrays a wide range of characters and pays more attention to external settings. The women in her novels are too sheltered and ignorant to understand the radical disorientation. She feels she presents the point of view of protagonists, so tightly that we also do not completely grasp of significance of her experiences. It is difficult to say that her novels are stating about marriage, about immigration about gender roles or about self-destruction neurosis. Novels in which women break violently out of rigid patriarchal confine were common features of the decades and Mukherjee's works fit in well with other such novels for westerns even while it appealed to many South Asians.

Mukherjee's protagonists are victims of life which is visionless because it is voiceless. Thus it is clear that Mukherjee's themes focus on the phenomenon of migration, the status of the new immigrants their feeling of alienation as expatriates and the Indian women sojourning abroad and their struggle for identity. her novel deals with the issues emanating from the gap between expatriation and assimilation. After her bitter experience in Canada, her immigration to the States has brought about a radical shift in her attitude.¹

Mukherjee's first novel - 'The Tiger's Daughter' presents the real picture of Calcutta and the trauma of being an American of Indian Origin. The heroine of the novel Tara Banerjee is neither an Indian nor fully American. Mukherjee insists that Tara is not to be confused with herself, but the portrait of Calcutta society in the two books is essentially the same.

Mukherjee's novel presents the difficult phase of life when she was struggling to determine her own identity and Indian heritage. This novel is a very fine manifestation of cultural conflict. This is an interesting story of an upper-class Bengali Brahmin girl who goes to America for higher studies. Tara Banerjee the protagonist of the novel is the granddaughter of Harilal Benerjee and daughter of Bengal Tiger, the owner of famous Benerjee and Thomas Tabacco Co. Ltd.

She was living and married in America at the age of fifteen. Though afraid of the unknown ways of America in the beginning she tries to adjust herself to it by entering into wedlock with an American. After seven years of her marriage, she came back to India and experienced alienation in her motherland. She realizes that she is now neither Indian nor truly American. She had certainly transformed. Tara for she had come to realize the gulf between the two cultures. In a moment all her romantic dreams and ideals crumbled down. She could not help but murmur to herself, "I have returned to dry holes by the sides of Railway tracts. She thought of brownfields like excavations for a thousand homes. I have returned to India."²

Tara finds herself being suffocated between the two cultures. She finds it difficult to relate herself to her family, and city culture in general since her marriage to an American. Her Western education is enough sign to brand her as an alienated Westernized woman. In India, a marriage is not simply a union of two individuals, it is a coming together of two families as well. But in Western societies like America, a marriage is simply a contract between two individuals and Tara's husband David Cartwright is wholly Western and she is always apprehensive of this fact. She could not communicate with him the inner nuances of her family background and end of life in Calcutta. She leads a life of quality and conflict seeking a stability through a marriage that locks confidence a mutual understanding and puts her in an acute traumatic dilemma.

Bharati Mukherjee's female protagonists are immigrants and suffer cultural shock but they are anxious to establish their identity by undertaking their heroic journey that is why Bharati Mukherjee received considerable critical attention from all quarters of the globe in a relatively short period of just twenty-five years. Even though she has been acknowledge as a voice of expatriate, immigrants, sensibility and a close observation of her novels reveals that she has written all the novels with predominantly feminist views. Mukherjee's depiction of women and their different relationships portrays the dominance of practical practices in traditional society as well as the forms of liberation and empowerment that are available to women in their Diasporic situation.³

Jasmine

Bharati Mukherjee wrote a unique novel - Jasmine and also the name of the narrator. This novel portrays a young Indian girl in a rural village in Hasanpur Punjab India. She tells her story through a flashback, while she is pregnant and a widow in Iowa with her lover, Bud Ripple Meyer she also expresses all the struggles she went through murders, rape, suicide and all the affairs she had. The universal themes that Mukherjee showed were rebirth and love. In this novel Mukherjee aims to attempt the traumatic experiences and cultural perplexity of the first and second generation immigrant and which explores the depth of women's consciousness of self-discovery and their immigrant experiences among the male-dominated society in Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine (1989) which set in the present about a young Indian woman Jasmine in the United States who trying to adapt to the American way of life in order to be able to survive changes identities several times. The state of exile a sense of lose the pain of separation and disorientation makes Jasmine as immigrant personality in a quest for identity in an alien land Jasmine, the protagonist of this novel undergoes several transformation during her journey of life America from Jyoti to Jasmine to

Jane and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement resulting in a fluid state of identity. This novel finds out the research hypothesis, how the protagonist Jasmine try to assimilate herself into foreign culture where she gains new independent individual identity.

Jasmine is one of the best novels of Bharati Mukherjee through which the author explicitly pictures. Jasmine as an Indian woman who celebrates her new nationality. Unlike Dimple, the protagonist Jyoti who later become Jasmine is praised for her successful quality in American society narrating the story in Jyoti's first person point of view Mukherjee makes her speak in more personal and revealing voice. Starting her life of journey in Trinidad as Jyoti Vidh she has adopted many names at various stage such as Jasmine, Jase, Jane to attain her identity at the time of mobility. Born in a small village she gets married to Prakash, a modern Indian man who tries to make her a modern woman. She is name as Jasmine and asked to call him by his name. But soon Prakash demise gives her frustration.⁴

Bharti Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) is a very fine manifestation of cultural conflict. This is an interesting study of an upper class Bengali Brahmin girl who goes to America for higher studies. Though afraid of the unknown world of America in the beginning, she tries to adjust herself to it by entering into the wedlock with an American. She returns to India after seven years, only to find herself as a total stranger to the inherited milieu. She realizes that she is now neither Indian nor truly American. She is totally confused and lost.

The actual starting point of the story dates back to a rainy night in the year 1879. It was the day of the grand wedding ceremony of the daughters of Hari Lal Banerjee, the 'Zamindar' of village Pachapara. Standing under a wedding ceremony of the roof of his house, Hari Lal Banerjee could have hardly imagined what future holds in store for house, Hari Lal Banerjee could have hardly imagined what future holds in store for his coming generations. He "did not hear the straining and imprisoned ghost of change". As she experienced that

the shadows of suicide on exile, of Bengali soil sectioned and ceded, of workers rising against their bosses could not have been divined by even a wise man in those days. (*The Tiger's Daughter*, p.6)

After the marriage of Hari Lal Banerjee's daughters, life continued to be plessent in the village Pachapara and many more marriages took place and many deaths toe. After two summers, Hari Lal Banerjee fell a prey to an unseen assassin while mediating a feud. All the reputation and influence of Banerjee family died with him. Nobody knew at that time that years later a young woman who had never

been to Pachapara would grieve for the Banerjee's family and try to analyse the reasons for its change. She would sit by a window in America to dream of Hari Lal, her great-grandfather, and she would wonder at the gulf that separated him from herself. (p.9)

This young woman is nobody else but Tara Banerjee, the great-grand ghter of Hari Lal Banerjee and the daughter of Bengal Tiger, the owner of Bus Banerjee & Thomas (Tobacco) Co. Ltd. Tara is sent by her father at an early age of fifteen to America for higher study. When this young Indian gi comes to terms with the American life, her reactions are one of fear and anger:

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

In Ploughkeepsie she feels homesick. She senses discrimination even if her roommate refuses to share her bottle of mango chutney. As it is typical of Indians who are proud of their family and genealogy, she defends her family and her country instinctively. At such moments when she thinks like breaking, she ever prays to goddess Kali for strength. When at the end of May, that first year abroad, girls around her prepare to go home, she is seized by a vision of terror: She saw herself sleeping in a large carton on a sidewalk while hatted men made impious remark 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 letters to her mother, who promptly prayed to Kali to save Tara's conscience, chastity, and complexion.⁵

Circumstances so contrive incidentally that she falls in love with an American. Mukherjee's description of Tara's chance meeting with David betrays her faith.

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.

Staying in her parental house, she records her impression of New York: New York, she thought now, had been exotic. Not because it had laundromates and subways. But because there were policemen with dogs prowling in the underground

tunnels. 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 on the stiffness of final exams. Because people were agitated over pollutionNew York was certainly extraordinary, and it had driven her to despair...

She recalls how she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and bang them to make her apartment more Indian on days when she thought she could possibly not survive.⁶

While in America, Tara was always under stress, she was always conscious of her foreignness. She felt herself rootless but things do not appear better in India also. Her mother compels her to accompany her to Aunt Jharna's place to visit her siling child infected by polio. Tara tries to sympathise with Aunt Jharna but is gravely mistaken as Aunt Jharna insults her. Tara's reaction to this is one of mutually contradictory emotions. While on the one hand, she cannot sympathise with the aunt's religious attempts to heal her child, on the other, she thinks: "I don't hate you. I love you, and the miserable child, the crooked feet, the smoking incense holder, I love you all". Tara herself wonders at the foreignness of her spirit which does not permit her to establish an emotional kinship with her old relatives and friends:

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?"⁷

Or did it drift inward with the winter chill at Vassar, as she watched the New York snow settle over new architecture, blonde girls...? She meets her friends but even in their company antithetical feelings beset her, "Seven years ago she had played with these friends, done her home work with Nilima, briefly fancied herself in love with Pronob, debated with Reena at the British Council." (p.43) But now "she feared their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness" (p.43). Tara forgets the next step of the rituals while Preparing for worship with her mother and at once realizes.

While in America, Tara was always under stress, she was always conscious of her foreignness. She felt herself rootless but things do not appear better in India also. Her mother compels her to accompany her to Aunt Jharna's place to visit her siling child infected by polio. Tara tries to sympathise with Aunt Jharna but is gravely mistaken as Aunt Jharna insults her. Tara's reaction to this is one of mutually

contradictory emotions. While on the one hand, she cannot sympathise with the aunt's religious attempts to heal her child, on the other, she thinks: "I don't hate you. I love you, and the miserable child, the crooked feet, the smoking incense holder, I love you all".

Tara herself wonders at the foreignness of her spirit which does not permit her to establish an emotional kinship with her old relatives and friends:

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?"⁸

Or did it drift inward with the winter chill at Vassar, as she watched the New York snow settle over new architecture, blonde girls...?(p.37)

She meets her friends but even in their company antithetical feelings beset her, "Seven years ago she had played with these friends, done her home work with Nilima, briefly fancied herself in love with Pronob, debated with Reena at the British Council." (p.43) But now "she feared their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness" (p.43). Tara forgets the next step of the rituals while Preparing for worship with her mother and at once realizes: "It was not a simple loss....This forgetting of prescribed actions, it was a little death, a hardening of the hearts a cracking of axis and center" (p.51). Religion plays a central role in any culture. When she forgets the rituals it upsets her because at once she realizes what America has done to her. Now she has become 'foreign' to her native values also and it fills her with a sense of rootlessness. She starts questioning the validity of her own identity.⁹

The Catelli- Continental Hotel on Chowringhee Avenue, 'the navel of the universe' becomes her favorite place and she spends much of her time in that hotel along with her friends. There were many parties in honour of Tara's return, many teas, many dinners hosted by friends. At first Tara looks forward to these parties. She hastens to Pronob's or Reena's so that she can dole out remembrance with people who easily get her attitudes and mistakes. "Her friends had seemed to her a peaceful island in the midst of Calcutta's commotion. She had leaned heavily on their self-confidence" (p.55). But gradually the beliefs and the omissions of her friends begin to unsettle her. "Her friends let slip their disapproval of her, they suggested her marriage had been imprudent, that the seven years abroad had eroded all that was fine and sensitive in her Bengali nature"(p.55). Tara feels agitated at the lack of seriousness in the group of her friends. They want to listen to stories about America about television and automobiles, frozen foods and record player but when she mentions ghettos or student demonstrations they protest, Tara notices a lot of change

in her friends during these seven years. She cannot think of Ponob being a big industrialist. How can she tolerate his fatness and his ill-tempered nature whom she had seen as a sensitive and poetic young man. Now and ten her friends and relatives make her feel guilty for marrying an American. "In India she felt she was not married to a person but foreigner, and his foreignness was a burden" (p.62). Though she writes to David regularly, she fails to communicate her feelings for him because:¹⁰

It was hard to tell a foreigner that she loved him very much when she was surrounded by the Bengal Tiger's chairs, tables, flowers, and portraits. (p.63)

How can she "describe in an aerogramme the endless conversations at the Catelli-Continental, or the strange old man (Joyonto Roy Choudhury) in a blazer who tried to catch her eye in the café, or the hatred of Aunt Jharna or the bitterness of slogans scrawled on walls of stores and hotels?" (p.63) Tara is totally confused. She cannot share her feelings with her friends and relatives and she fails to share her feelings even to her foreign husband. For David, she is a foreigner and for her Indian friends and relatives, she is a sinner who has polluted herself by marrying a 'mleccha' (outcaste). M. Srivaramkrishna blames her American husband and western education for her feelings of rootlessness and lack of identity:¹¹

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 and identity with India, the voice does not carry conviction for it is at variance with the usual stance-of difference and arrogance-one generally associates with the 'westernized' (exiled) Indian.

Tara realizes that America has transformed her completely. "Tara's westernization has opened her eyes to the gulf between two worlds that still make is the despair of those who govern it." In India, she sees disease, despair, riot, poverty, the children eating yoghurt off the sidewalk. Now she has started looking the ugly aspects of India. Always in her mind there is an on-going conflict between her old sense of perception and outlook on Calcutta and her changed mullock. Jasbir Jain, thus, comments:¹²

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.

Tara visits a funeral pyre at the river bank with Joyonto Roy Chowdhury, the watt of tea estates in Assam and runs at the sight of the 'tantric' who stretches his hands for her palms. She fails to read his intentions and thinks that the man needs 'bakshees'. Is it a simple misunderstanding of tantric's intentions or Tara's inherent fear and uncertainty of her life. It seems she does not want to show her prime to the tantric because she is conscious of her sin of marrying an American without matching her horoscopes. Again her visit with Joyonto Roy Chowdhury to the Tollygunge Compound turns out to be painful. When Joyonto Roy proposes to show her the place and says that it is a 'bustee',¹³

Is it a 'bustee'? asked Tara. She recalled a frustrating moment at Vassar, when idealistic dormitory neighbours had asked her to describe the slums of India. The circuitous and uneven road to Tollygunge troubles her a lot. She cannot bear the dust and foul smell of squalor:

Had Tara visualized at the start of the journey this exposure to ugliness and danger, to viruses that stalked the street, to dogs and cows scrapping in garbage dumps, she would have refused Joyonto's invitation.¹⁴

Joyonto shows her his vast compound which is now occupied by refugees and quite sentimentally tells her how he proposed his garden etc. But Tara is hardly interested in these details:

Tara was bewildered by her first view of the large and dusty compound. She thought if she had been David she would have taken out notebook and pen and entered important little observations. All she saw was the obvious. Goats and cows grazing in the dust, dogs chasing the friskier children, men sleeping on string beds under a banyan tree. Children playing with mud beside a cracked tubewell. Rows of hovels and huts.¹⁵

Tara loses her balance of mind when she sees a little girl suffering from leprosy. She screams and becomes almost hysteric:

Don't touch me, don't touch me! Actually Tara has never been a part of the crowd. She has always been sheltered, as child, young adult, and woman. Each excursion traumatizes her by bringing her closer to the touch of the masses.

In fact, disease, suffering and poverty are part of existence and a common Indian ignores it or rather accepts it as an integral part of life. Tara herself once ignored all these things but her stay in States has opened her eyes to the gulf between the lives of the poor and those of the rich in her own country. Like the people of the West, now she has started looking at India as a land of poor people living in hostile, unhygienic conditions and suffering from starvation, decay and disease. Reena's

mother entrusts her with the duty of mediating between them and the Irish-American Washington McDowell but her failure in understanding McDowell testifies to the fact that she has not been able to gratify the complications of American culture. America is a land of diverse cultures and people from all parts of the world have settled there. Though Tara marries an American she remains unexposed to the other culture within America. McDowell, being a black, belongs to the class of 'have-nots' in America, so it is quite natural for him to join hands with the agitating crowd of labourers of Calcutta.¹⁶

During the summer Darjeeling is the favourite holidaying place for the upper class families of Bengal. Along with the families of her friends, Tara's family also rove to Darjeeling for a holiday trip. Darjeeling is as beautiful as ever. Tara tries to enjoy the beauties of blue mountains and natural surroundings. But her trip is arded by ugly and violent incidents. One afternoon she accompanies Pronob and a American lady Antonia on horseback around the Observatory Hill but, on the way, she is stopped and teased by some young hooligans. This incident leaves Tara trabled and ill-humoured. Not only this but she is also insulted by one of the members while she suggests something about the beauty contest organized by the bevel manager. The heart specialist who is one of the judges sarcastically remarks, "I think your years abroad have robbed you of feminine propriety" (p.187). But it besn't mean that in Darjeeling everything happens negative. Once at the special Request of her religious mother, she visits Mata Mananbala Devi. She forgets all the malice and hatred for the time being and feels her soul uplifted by the 'darshan' of Mata. It is a typical Indian experience to undergo a sort of trance in a temple:

Tara found herself shouting "Ma, Ma, Mata" with the rest. She found it easy suddenly to love everyone, even Antonia Whitehead, who was the only person standing in the entire room. It was not Kananbala Mata who moved her so much as the worshippers themselves. (p.173)

What India needed...was less religious excitement control devices. She hates confusion of issues, she said. Indians should be more discerning. They should demand economic reforms and social upheavals and throw out the Chief 'Chela' as pledge of future success.¹⁷

References

1. Mukherjee, Bharati. (1973). *The Tiger's Daughter*, Boston; Houghton Mifflin 1972. pt. Chatto and Windus: London. Pg. 5. All citations followed refer to this edition.
2. Shinde, Shobha. (1994). *Cross-Cultural Crisis in Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine and The Tiger's Daughter* in R.K. Dhawan and L.S.R.

- Krishnasastry, (ed.) *Commonwealth Writing: A Study in Expatriate Experience*. New Delhi Prestige. Pg. **50**.
3. Shivaramkrishna, K. (1982). Bharati Mukherjee in M.S. Prasad, (ed.) *Indian English Novelists*. Sterling: New Delhi. Pg. **74**.
 4. (1973). 'Oh Calcutta', *Times Literary Supplement*. 29 June. Pg. **736**.
 5. Jain, Jasbir. (1985). Foreignness of Spirit: The World of Bharati Mukherjee's Novels. *Journal of Indian Writing in English*. 13,2. Pg. **13**.
 6. Sharma, Maya Manju. The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant. in Nelson, Emmanuel S., (ed.) *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. Pg. **12**.
 7. Bose, Brinda. A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race and America Meet in Bharati Mukherjee. in Emmanuel S. Nelson, (ed.) *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. op.cit.. Pg. **50**.
 8. Kerns, Roshni Rustomji. (1988-89). Expatriates, Immigrants and Literature: Three South Asian Women Writers. *Massachusetts Review*. Winter. Pg. **657**.
 9. Crane, Ralph J. (1991). 'Mukherjee, Bharati' in Lesley Henderson, (ed.) *Contemporary Novelists*. St. James Press: Chicago and London. Pg. **670**.
 10. Sharma, Maya Manju. op.cit. Pg. **13**.
 11. Quoted in Ann Mandel. (1986). 'Bharati Mukherjee' in W.H. New, (ed.) *DLB: Canadian Writers Since 1960*. Vol. 60 Detroit: Gale Research Company. Pg. **267**.
 12. Klass, Rosanne. (1975). *Indian Wife Lives Soap-Opera Life*. MS, October Pg. **88**.
 13. Sharma, Maya Manju. op.cit. Pg. **15**.
 14. Choudhury, Enakshi. (1995). Images of Woman in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels. in I.S. Anand, (ed.) *Literary Voice*. Oct. Pg. **84**.
 15. Kakutani, Michiko. (1989). Third- World Refugees Rootless in the U.S. *The New York Times*. 19 September. Retrieved 21 August. 2023.
 16. Enjeti, Anjali. (2018). *The Book I Kept for the Cover*. *The Paris Review*. 13 April. Retrieved 19 August.
 17. Gorra, Michael. (1989). *Call It Exile, Call It Immigration*. *The New York Times*. 10 September. Retrieved 21 August.