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A Study on the Novel 'The Tiger's Daughter'- Mukherjee

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Abstract – Mukherjee is also a writer of non-fiction, which includes scholarly articles, essays and sociopolitical commentaries. Indeed it is impossible to read Mukherjee's fiction without recognizing that it engages with and extends many of the central questions raised by her other prose works. Accumulatively, her writings attest to her ideological envisioning of herself as a pioneer of new territories, experiences and literatures.

It can perhaps be said that like the migrant themes she explores in her writing, Mukherjee's biography itself, in terms of her multiple movements across national boundaries, testifies to what Timothy Brennan, referring to the new literary aesthetic created by the forces of migration and movement, calls 'a kind of perennial immigration'. Indeed, Mukherjee's life, like her writings, can be read as a text that exemplifies a state of perpetual journeying from a fixed and bounded narrative of home and belonging.

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A STUDY ON THE NOVEL 'THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER'- MUKHERJEE

In her first novel, The Tiger's Daughter (1971), Mukherjee uses the return to India of her nostalgic and 'homesick' Bengali Brahmin heroine as the context for undermining national myths of origins and foundations. In other words, the migrant's return 'to recover her roots' and the stability of her cultural identity as an Indian is not equated uncritically with an unexamined sense of what being 'Indian' means.

Instead, Mukherjee uses the migrant's moment of return to elaborate a much more complex and mediated understanding of national and cultural identity.

Twenty-two-year-old Tara Banerjee Cartwright, an observant, vulnerable and 'sensitive person, sensitive especially to places' returns to India for a much-anticipated reunion with her family 'after seven years abroad ... that had swept her from Calcutta to Poughkeepsie, and Madison, and finally to ...Columbia'. If to ward off the 'despair' and 'homesickness' of her expatriation in America, she had eaten 'curried hamburger', 'burned incense sent from home' and hung colorful silk scarves 'to make [her] apartment more "Indian.. , Tara discovers that the return to her 'longed-for Camac Street, where she had grown up' fails to engender the envisioned sense of familiarity and belonging. No sooner has she returned to what used to be her habitus than she is struck by its strangeness and her feeling of estrangement from it. In fact, as the narrative unfolds, home as the destination of a narrative retour not only fails to correspond with the idyllic memory of childhood and adolescent wholeness that had sustained her in her 'lonely room at Vassar'; home has turned menacing enough to 'desecrate her shrine of nostalgia'. Indeed, Tara discovers that she is no more 'at home' in the home of her birth than she was in a malevolent and racist New York, where 'girls like her ... we're being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings'.

In keeping with the text's intention to destabilize Tara's nostalgia which is built around an image of India which preserves an unaltered existence, images of dereliction, change and decay dominate the landscape of The Tiger's Daughter.

The use of these images to narrativize home as the place of return and refuge takes the form of Tara's response to India from the very outset of her arrival. Greeted by her 'Bombay relatives', who have come to meet her with 'garlands and sweetmeats to put her at ease', Tara is assailed instead by a feeling of unease. As her relatives fuss over her in Bengali and call her by her childhood nickname, Tara's feeling of disquiet intensifies: 'She had not remembered the Bombay relatives' nickname for her. No one had called her Tultul in years.... It was difficult to listen to these strangers'. Anxious to spend as little time with them as possible, she insists on taking the train alone to Calcutta, disrupting earlier plans. Left with no choice

but to give in to her stubborn demand, the relatives 'attributed Tara's improprieties to her seven years in America'.

While being driven through the streets of Bombay, Tara observes the near decrepit surroundings, the 'run-down and crowded' apartment blocks that she passes by. Yet, seven years earlier, she had 'admired the houses on Marine Drive, had thought them fashionable ... now their shabbiness appalled her'. Everywhere, the inventory of decay bears witness, the text suggests, to the flux and change taking place in the heart of a country in which Tara had expected to find life at its most constant, as the stable embodiment of her identity.

The two-day train journey across the subcontinent, from Bombay to Calcutta, provides another occasion for Tara to assess, with steadily increasing horror, both the corrosive squalor and decay of her home country, and her own failed expectations of this return home to suture over the gaps and dislocations of her American experience:

For years she had dreamed of this return to India. She had believed that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could just return home to Calcutta. But so far the return had brought only wounds. First the corrosive hours on Marine Drive, then the deformed beggars in the railway station, and now the inexorable train ride steadily undid what strength she had held in reserve.

The two male passengers with whom she shares her compartment -- the Marwari and the Nepali -- further set the stage for undermining Tara's confidence in her identity. For now though, Tara regards them in a way that underscores her own assurance about the solidity and strength of her Indian identity on account of her Bengali origins: 'Her Bombay aunt would have said all Marwaris are ugly, frugal and vulgar and all Nepalis are lecherous. Tara hoped she had a greater sense of justice toward non-Bengalis. But the gentlemen in the compartment simply did not interest her.

Both men, Tara decided, could effortlessly ruin her journey to Calcutta'. The undercurrent of hostility between the two men as they vie for the attentions of their 'foreign-returned' travelling companion foreshadows the competing claims that will be made later on in the narrative on Tara's confidence in the unassailability of Calcutta as a place in which she can locate and secure her identity as an 'Indian', more specifically as 'a Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin, the great- granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee'.

Arriving in Calcutta, Tara is shocked by her failure to recognize the birth city she had imagined she knew so well. If Bombay station had looked 'more like a hospital ...with its so many sick and deformed men sitting listlessly on bundles and trunks' ,the 'squalor' of Calcutta's Howrah Station, dense with the noise and presence of coolies and vendors and beggars, first takes Tara by surprise', then fills her with 'outrage' and 'confusion'. Surrounded by the crowds and her throng of relatives, 'who had come to the railway station in two small delivery trucks' , Tara is overcome by fear and a sense of feeling 'completely alone'.

Nothing seems familiar to her: 'For a moment she thought she was going mad .... Calcutta had already begun to exert its darkness over her, she thought'. The only person who seems 'real' to her is her father, the 'Bengal Tiger', and even then the text's ironic undercurrent calls attention to the illusionary nature of Tara's quest to seek order in the face of change and confusion: 'In its ceaseless effort to escape the present, Tara's familiar part of Calcutta had created of the Bengal Tiger its key to a more peaceful world' .

In Calcutta, Tara finds that the image of the city she had preserved in her memory no longer corresponds to the city she now experiences. This disjuncture takes on literal significance, for instance, when Tara is taken to tea at Kapoor's Restaurant, only to find out that this 'symbol of modem India' had replaced the tea-shops she used to frequent before, 'tea shops like Arioli's and Chandler's where straw-hatted European ladies discussed the natives and the beastly weather over tea and cakes'.

In the presence of family and friends, Tara finds herself 'quite cut off, unable to connect with those around her. Although she had often reminisced in America about performing prayers with her mother, she finds, back home, that she cannot remember the next step of the ritual in the prayers she performs: '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'.

Furthermore, what she considers sensible, seems silly, or foreign, to others. It is this 'foreignness', of which Tara is made acutely conscious, that makes a wreckage of local customs and offends local sensibilities. Her well-intentioned attempts to offer advice are met with a violent rebuke from her aunt Jhama, who interprets Tara's suggestion that her handicapped daughter try special shoes as being both supercilious of Indian ways. Stunned by the hostile responses to her overtures, Tara tries to make sense of her predicament by seeing herself as the cultural other through the perspective of her American husband, David Cartwright, who was, after all, 'a foreigner'. She constantly assesses her own reactions to situations by using David as the 'foreign' yardstick. In the American visitor Antonia Whitehead, who elicits similar responses from the local community, Tara recognizes a sense of her own foreignness, 'a faint rubbing of herself as she had been her first weeks in Calcutta, when her responses too had been impatient, menacing and equally innocent'.

She senses her alienation even in the company of her close circle of 'Camac Street friends', the Westernized and liberal elite of Calcutta with whom she shares her

caste and class affiliations. Like Tara's husband David, they appear to Tara to possess the assurance of people who live in a 'world that was more stable, more predictable than hers. Untroubled by the sort of contradictions and pluralities that plague her, they are, Tara realises, not the people she can confide in or communicate with about her feelings of being 'outraged by Calcutta. In fact, it is in their company, in her increasing awareness of 'their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness" that Tara's alienation is intensified. It is they who make it clear that Tara's being away in America had indeed 'eroded all that was fine and sensitive in her Bengali nature' ; her friend Reena tells Tara that she has 'changed too much' that she had 'forgotten so many Indian-English words she had once used with her friends. In fact, Tara's sense of being 'an alien and outcaste' among family and friends assumes monstrous' proportions when her friends accuse her of abandoning her Brahmin caste by marrying an American, a mleccha or outcaste. Also, it must be pointed out in this context that Tara's friends automatically perceive an American to be a white American. This stereotypical response is evidenced when the American student, Washington McDowell, visits Calcutta on an exchange programme. The excitement of Reena's family turns to shock when they find out that they will be hosting a black student. In fact, Reena's mother gets hysterical at the thought that her daughter might be having an affair with an 'African'.

Suffering under the burden of this estrangement from the city of her birth, Tara, compelled to introspection, discovers that her seven years abroad are not the sole source of her alienation. In fact, she traces her alienation not to America, 'as she watched the New York snow settle over new architecture, blonde girls, Protestant matrons, and Johnny Mathis' but here, in the heartland of her 'native' home:

How does the foreignness of the spirit begin? Tara wondered. Does it begin right in the centre of Calcutta, with forty ruddy Belgian women, fat foreheads swelling under starched white headdresses, long black habits intensifying the hostility of the Indian sun? The nuns had taught her to inject the right degree of venom into words like 'common' and 'vulgar'.

They had taught her The Pirates of Penzance in singing class, and 'If I should die, think only this of me'.

Thus, Tara's rejection by her native land, which itself, as the passage above makes clear, has been underwritten by the history and culture of colonialism, and her own sense of 'the foreignness of the spirit' in both New York and Calcutta, powerfully underscores for her the 'gap between the desire for a home and the reality of homelessness. Crucially, Mukherjee also sets her narrative at a particularly significant and ideologically-charged moment in Indian history -- Calcutta in the early 1970s. The Naxalite movement which rocked the eastern and south eastern sections of India entered its most intense phase between 1967 and 1972. The movement takes its name after the Naxalbari region in Northern West Bengal, which is where it originated. The Naxalites were the militant dissidents from the Marxist Community Party of India whose ideological beliefs centered around the need for armed revolution in order to resist the neocolonial exploitation of the state. Their main grievance was the unequal distribution of state resources, which continued through the food shortage of the mid 1960s and the prohibitive increase in prices. A spontaneous peasant uprising in Naxalbari sparked off a number of peasant struggles all over West Bengal and other states, including Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. In Calcutta, the movement took the form of a largely youth and student uprising, which challenged all institutional forms of power. The Naxalite uprising marked an important crossroad in the history of West Bengal and was viewed as a major threat to the national government.

The significance of the Naxalite movement in the history of political struggles in India is that it marks a highly unstable nodal point in the history of the Indian nation. Listening to radio announcements about the bomb blasts rocking the city, Tara can feel herself 'in the presence of history. This is a significant detail in the text for if the text has thus far gestured to the idea that the construction of national identity can no longer be structured by the myth of return to origins, its next step is to stage the migrant's return at a particularly vexed moment in Indian history. The returning migrant Tara, for instance, as we have seen, is riddled by the contradictions and pluralities that arise from the histories that migrancy seeks to leave behind. As Rushdie formulates it, the migrant, by going away from home, 'has floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time'. However, the migrant's choice to stage his or her agency by claiming an affiliation above and beyond the national does not alter the agency or the constitutive force of the nation. Thus, Tara returns only to confront the nation at the moment when, as Homi Bhabha has described it, 'history is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of "composing" its powerful image'. Keeping in mind Bhabha's point in this essay about the ambivalence of the nation as a cultural and historical formation and more significantly, that the nation is constructed by the performance of its narration, what we discern in Mukherjee's text is precisely the mechanism through which to eschew the teleology of 'origin' and 'totality' in order to represent the nation as a temporal process, in the very act of composing itself.

Mukherjee's novel further captures the chief resonances of Bhabha's argument by staging the migrant's return at a particularly visible intersection of history. The anarchy and chaos unleashed by the

Naxalite rebellion disrupts the nation's temporal and cultural coherence by bringing to the fore the differences between ruler and ruled, minorities and majorities, empowered and disempowered, past and present.

More specifically, Mukherjee deploys the minority discourse that this movement represents to contest the appeal to 'origins' that authorize and legitimize dominant identities by claiming authenticity and unity. In this case, the hegemonic upper-class, Bengali Brahmin identity that Tara upholds is challenged by the diverse discourses and different kinds of address and knowledges that the Naxalite uprising uncovers within the nation space In relation to this, it must be emphasized that it is through the ambivalent spaces of Calcutta city that the narrative of the nation is rewritten. Thus, Tara is confronted by a multiplicity of Calcutta that confound any notion of the existence of a single or unchanging India. These multiple narratives of Calcutta are criss-crossed by various temporal and spatial narratives on the basis of the ethnic, religious, caste and class differences in the city. Indeed, it is a Calcutta 'too immense and blurred to be listed and assailed one by one.

First, there is the Calcutta of the once plush and fashionable but now decaying Catelli-Continental Hotel, a disturbing obsolescence of British culture which towers over the stench and decay of busy Chowringhee Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare. Once the 'navel of the universe', when Calcutta was the imperial city of British India and also its centre of commerce and political power, the Catelli is now a symbol of Calcutta's decline; its 'entrance is small, almost shabby', its 'walls and woodwork are patterned with mold and rust', the 'sidewalks along the hotel front are painted with obscenities and political slogans'. On them 'a colony of beggars' jostle for space with 'shrivelled women' and vendors selling their wares. Frequented in the past by people in positions of power and influence who would come together and talk, it is now the haunt of the Calcutta elite, people without passion and conviction, who come to take 'their daily ritual of express or tea while flicking through old issues of The New Yorker. Then, there is the capitalist Calcutta of moral bankruptcy evoked by Tara's coterie of upper-caste, upper class Bengali friends -- Sanjay, Pronob, Reena and Nilima -- which disdains the vulgarity and insurgence of the working class while lamenting the loss of an earlier Calcutta, 'one they longed to return to, more stable, less bitter'. Juxtaposed with this is the revolutionary Calcutta of class equality espoused by the Marxist vision of the Naxalite movement. And there is also the 'Third World' Calcutta of economic underdevelopment, poverty, disease and overpopulation that is the target of the American visitor Antonia Whitehead's zealous prescriptions of 'democratization' and socio-economic reform. There is also the agricultural and feudal Calcutta symbolised by Pachapara, the old Bengal of order and stability represented by Tara's great-grandfather, the zamindar Hari Lal Banerjee. And then there is the graceful and stately Calcutta, representative of the high culture associated with the Bengal renaissance past, which is now both mourned and kept alive by the elegiac poetry and nostalgia of Joyonto Roy Chowdhury, a once wealthy tea-magnate whose failing fortunes is another metaphor for Calcutta's own crumbling social order.

Through him, Tara is exposed to another, tubercular, Calcutta symbolised by the bustees of Tollygunge with their squatters, beggars, lepers and 'open dustbins, warm and dark where car casses were sometimes discarded. There is also the Calcutta of industry and progress symbolised by the new township of Nayapur which is associated with the rising prominence of a new class of Marwari businessmen represented by Tuntunwalla, who have accumulated their riches in contrast to the old wealth of the Bengali Zamindars and businessmen like Tara's father, the 'Bengal Tiger'.

CONCLUSION

This thesis makes a close study of the text of seven novels of Bharati Mukherjee , with a view to describe their theme in the wider sense of diasporic consciousness which binds together the various complexities of the postcolonial theory. The dimensions of novelistic complexities as subject of critical attention are now far extended beyond simple thematic study of diaspora, exile, isolation and alienation, to encompass all the meanings and features such as margin, construction of homeland, hyphenated identity, displacement and assimilation, 'unhousement' and 'rehousement', and above all the complexity of a point of view of a woman diasporic South Asian writer in North America.

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