

VICTIMS OF CULTURE SHOCK IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOVELS *THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER AND WIFE*

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Abstract:

Exile, expatriation, search for identity, aloofness, alienation and immigration are the characteristic situations of diaspora. The reason for this exile and immigration may vary from political or religious persecution to economic problems. Women are the victims of this migration. The psyche of women remains complex because of this migration. Indian English fiction has witnessed a remarkable change in the perspective of immigrant women. The pathetic condition of women results from her multiple dislocations and the culture shock they receive while entering a new culture. The immigrant writers try to focus how the immigrant women transform from the stereotypical woman to an aggressive or independent person. They try to come out of the culture shock through the within family or society. The protagonists in both novels reveal the very real aspects of collisions between cultures at different times and practical and psychological problems of womanhood in a male centered social set up across the world and how they become victims of culture shock.

Keywords: *Immigrant women, alienation, migration, culture shock, condition of women.*

Exile, expatriation, search for identity, aloofness, alienation and immigration are the characteristic situations of diaspora. The reason for this exile and immigration may vary from political or religious persecution to economic problems. Women are the victims of this migration. The psyche of women remains complex because of this migration. Indian English fiction has witnessed a remarkable change in the perspective of immigrant women. The pathetic condition of women results from her multiple dislocations and the culture shock they receive while entering a new culture. The immigrant writers try to focus how the immigrant women transform from the stereotypical woman to an aggressive or independent person. They try to come out of the culture shock through the various relationships within family or society. As Aparajitha says, she gets involved in an act of sustained self-removal of her native culture, balanced by a conscious resistance to total inclusion in the new host society (83). She carries her own culture and values to the new country, thus making it more difficult and problematic for her to adjust. Her affiliation to both cultures makes her psyche more problematic to find a balance. This paper focuses on how immigrant women become victims of culture shock and how far they lose their self in due course.

In Bharati Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter*, The protagonist Tara Banerjee Cartwright making a trip home to India after seven years to soothe her memories of a Brahmin lifestyle is taken by her westernization. Tara discovers that the return to her longed-for Camac Street, where she had grown up, will fail to engender the sense of familiarity and belonging which equates with "home". The memories about India in her childhood days have vanished and the Indian homeland has turned malevolent enough to desecrate her nostalgia. She identifies, she is more an outsider than a native. All the negative sides of the post-colonial Calcutta have become prominent in her eyes, like the misconduct of a brutal man, open dustbins and many other things. Finding no solution to these problems of declining Calcutta, Tara thinks, "That it is fatal to fight for justice; that it was better to remain passive and absorb all shocks as they come" (131). Even though she wants to be calm, she is totally upset and cannot respond to these changes. All these

years she has longed for the Bengal of Satyajit Ray where children run through cool green spaces. Her shattered dream of Calcutta makes her unconsciously perceive how life in America has changed her. Her seven year study at Vassar changed her outlook on life, though America did not fascinate her:

New York, she thought now, had been exotic. Not because there were policemen with dogs prowling the underground tunnels... The only pollution, she had been warned against in Calcutta had been caste pollution. New York was certainly extraordinary and it had driven her to despair. (34)

When she returns to Calcutta after her stay in the West, we find her greatly changed. Bombay's railway station appears more like a hospital. She has turned supercilious. When a Marwari family and others enter her compartment she ironically and contemptuously remarks. The Marwari was indeed very ugly and tiny insolent. To her the native place appears merely alien and hostile. The friends she have played with, now turns into hostile. She finds that she is admired neither by her family nor by her friends. For Tara, it is violence and ghettos in American life that matter, but her friends do not accept the facts about American life. They want to be told about their fantasies of that life. Out of this predicament, her communication becomes devoid of significance. Helplessly she tells Sanjay:

How much easier she thought it was to live in Calcutta. How much simpler to trust the city's police inspector and play tennis with him on Saturdays. How humane to accompany a friendly editor to watch the riots in town. 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 streets into giants fangs crouching. (69)

Tara's psyche is always extremely distressing because of the tension created in the mind between the two socio-cultural environments. Neither can she adopt in her old Indian self nor in her newly discovered American self. It would be easy for Tara if her choosing lies in her refusal to totally condemn any one world. But she does not. She does not fit in any longer. The shock she received from the both cultures leads her to split personality. This brings us to the discussion by Indira J. Parikh and Putin K. Garg about the Particular dilemma that modern women face when confronted with the lifestyles of their traditional counterparts:

For women currently struggling to transcend the inevitable structures of their life space and create a new space for themselves, this role model of traditional Indian Women evokes admiration and awe, but it does not mobilize 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? (Parikh and Garg 111)

Tara's experiences had rendered her unable to merely sacrifice and suffer. She is unable to become assertive as she is confused about her status and identity. She couldn't escape into religion whose superciliousness does not attract her anymore. Therefore Tara finds it hard to create her path of life from nothing. Her Western exposure does not unravel any definitive answers, leaving her no choice but to merge both the ways as best as she can and making her realize the pathos and the shock that lurks under such amalgamation.

Tara's early experiences in America, her sense of discrimination if her roommate did not share mango chutney, taking out all her silk scarves and hanging them around to give the apartment a more Indian look, her attempt to stick to Indian ways by praying to kali for strength so that she would not break down before the Americans; all portray the cultural resistance put forward by an innocent immigrant who refused to be completely sucked into the alien land. She persists on the belief that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time spent abroad would be erased if she could just return home. Retaining her maiden surname after her marriage symbolically reflects her subconscious need to be rooted in her native land. But the return to India jolted her back to reality and her wounded dreams made her react in negative

manner. Her changed personality made her a misfit everywhere. She has raised doubt about her husband not understanding her country through her. She is very much convinced of her alienation when she forgets the next step of the ritual after the sandalwood paste has been grounded. It was not 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' (51). Tara feels like a stranger in the midst of home, feels alone in the company of friends, and feels unloved in the presence of family. In her second novel 'Wife' Mukherjee portrays the problem of acculturation of a typical Indian girl married to an American in a foreign soil. The central character of the novel 'Wife' is Dimple who is forced to expose to new social settings and the brutality of male domination by her husband himself. Dimple has been projected as a typical Bengali girl born and brought up in a conducive social and cultural environment in the first part of the novel. But ever since she happens to marry a foreigner out of the compulsion of her parents, her fundamental beliefs are little bit shaken. However, she, like every wife who simply follows her husband, runs behind her newly married foreign husband with lot of hopes and aspirations.

In the US, Dimple is left alone with Amit. Back home she had held him in high esteem. The commendable comments and remarks of her friends and mother had drawn her attention to her husband's virtues and qualities but in the US odds are against him. Lack of a job makes him less self-assured and more self-centred. His own problems partly turn him apathetic towards Dimple's piling mental and emotional turmoil. The gap between the romantic fanciful Dimple and the matter of fact, down-to-earth realist Amit widens day by day in the US. On the contrary, everything turns upside down. Unable to tolerate the tortures of her husband, at one point in a fit of anger she murders her husband. All her dreams and aspirations of new married life and new environment become futile. To everybody's surprise, her life itself comes to and at last.

Dimple has to cope with her traumatic mental condition all alone. "She had expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place." (109). She turns toward Ina, Leni and ultimately Milt Glasser in her moments of crises. Ina and Leni fail her as friends. Milt proves to be a temporary transgression. The rebel in her is devising new means and ways to commit suicide. "I'm terrible in crises" (204). she had told Meena and she is true to her words in the moments of her crisis. Her extra-marital abandon gives rise to a growing feeling of guilt. Given the right opportunity she might have confided in Amit but Amit's inattentiveness blocks the outlay. Torn by her psychic and emotional tensions, she takes the drastic step of murdering her husband thinking that she cannot bear this sort of life forever: "but he never thought of such things, never thought how hard it was for her to keep quiet and smile though she was falling apart like a very old toy that had been played with, sometimes quite roughly by children who claimed to love her." (212).

In a stunningly calm and cool manner, she takes out the knife from the kitchen drawer and dives it down on a spot near his hairline repeatedly hitting at the same place seven times. Thus, she punishes her inattentive husband for his lapses and unceremoniously ends up her disharmonious marital life. Kumar points out, "Her splintered-self finds solution to her problems only in murdering her husband. Thus, it is America which intensifies her confusion and turns the violence inside out and she ends up as a murderess" (59).

Becoming victims of culture shock and search for identity is the basic theme of both novels. In the case of Tara, in *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara finds identity neither in her native land nor in her immigrant land. The writer points out that, the native nation as the place of ultimate refuge and gratification, the destination of a narrative tour, is a myth to which the immigrant can never return. Once culture or tradition is denaturalized it loses its meaning, and naturalness is impossible to recover. Tara survives in the racial hardships in a foreign country but becomes a victim in her native soil. In the case of *Wife*, Dimple's helpless husband, her psychosis, psychotic disorder, effects of alienation and the culture shock make her feel like

American by murdering her husband. Her psychotic disorder might have propelled her to think of murdering her husband but the culture shock she received made her do the same in fit of anger to come out of culture shock.

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