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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title of the Paper</th>
<th>Page No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dr. Bhaskar Roy Barman</td>
<td>Postmodern Sensibility in Midnight’s Children</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Dr. S. Karthikkumar &amp; N. Karthick</td>
<td>Plight of Woman as a Minority in Anita Rau Badami’s Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Talluri Mathew Bhaskar</td>
<td>Chetan Bhagat’s: One Night @ The Call Center: A Critical Study</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ms. Tusharkana Majumdar &amp; Prof. (Dr.) Archana Shukla</td>
<td>Sexting: Innocence or Ignorance</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Prof. (Dr) Mala Tandon</td>
<td>Enhancing Skills For Professional Excellence As Mentor And Role Model</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Vijay D. Songire</td>
<td>Existential Crisis in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye and Alice Walker’s Possessing the Secret of Joy</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dr. Khandekar Surendra Sakharam</td>
<td>The Influence of Sanskrit Poetry on T.S. Eliot’s Critical Theories</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Vinay Kumar Dubey &amp; Dr. B.N. Chaudhary</td>
<td>Alienated Self in Shashi Despande’s ‘That Long Silence’</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dr. Santosh D. Rathod</td>
<td>Investigating Problems in Dattani’s Final Solutions</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Dr. Pooja Singh, Dr. Archana Durgesh &amp; Ms. Neha Sahu</td>
<td>Queen: The Hypocritical Indian Society and Culture</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Nidhi Pareek</td>
<td>Need of Moral Education in Schools</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Dr. Rajib Bhaumik</td>
<td>Bharati Mukherjee’s The Tiger’s Daughter: A Study of the Diasporic Space between Memory and Desire</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bharati Mukherjee’s The Tiger’s Daughter: A Study of the Diasporic Space between Memory and Desire

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Abstract
In Bharati Mukherjee’s narratives, instability of “home” is a diasporic signifier. It cannot be a static point of unproblematic culture and identity one leaves and returns to at ease. Bharati Mukherjee with her Indian heritage and her adoption of new identities as citizen of both Canada and the United States is in an important transit point of gender, race and culture in the post-colonial situation. In the dialectical translation of the cultural splitting and knitting Mukherjee sets out to write a discourse on dislocation through the prism of gender race and culture. With her predilection of conflictual assimilation and fusionism she subordinates the fixed notions of identity and psychic ambivalence. What Mukherjee could realize, as is expressed in the interviews, in her memoir, or as she seems to suggest in her novels, is that America as a nation is culturally constructed by the immigrants since inception and here in-betweenness and hyphenation is less effective as compared to assimilation. Her characters behave erratically in the confusion of hyphenation and assimilation. But Mukherjee seems to gesture at an exclusive fluidity in immigrant’s imagination which should be tilted to embrace fusionism and not mere hybridity, and this process of post-nation formation, dislocations are necessary pre-condition. She is not interested in a new American nationalism, instead creates a new discourse of diasporic condition as a mode of decentering. In The Tiger’s Daughter, Tara’s alienation and the conscious feelings of dislocations are chiefly due to the hollow space between memory and desire. She had remembered Calcutta of the past but now, on her revisit to the metropolis after a seven years’ sojourn in the States, she expects a lot of changes. In other words, She desires to see a new and better Calcutta but shockingly all her anticipation are frustrated when she sees Calcutta in a wretched plight — full of poverty and squalor.

Key Words: desire, identity, gender, race, dislocation, conflictual assimilation, fusionism, inbetweenness, hyphenation, assimilation

Bharati Mukherjee with her Indian heritage and her adoption of new identities as citizen of both Canada and the United States is in an important transit point of gender, race and culture in the post-colonial situation. In the dialectical translation of the cultural splitting and knitting Mukherjee sets out to write a discourse on dislocation through the prism of gender race and culture. With her predilection of conflictual assimilation and fusionism she subordinates the fixed notions of identity and psychic ambivalence.

Bharati Mukherjee has been considered by a few critics like Brewster, earlier mentioned, as an escapist and has been accused of becoming Americanized by the Western
neo-colonial machine. But Mukherjee’s devotion to America is not that of one who has given up an old nation to embrace a new one. For Mukherjee, America is the global mosaic, a transit point of assimilation and re-location of culture and identity. What Mukherjee could realize, as is expressed in the interviews, in her memoir, or as she seems to suggest in her novels, is that America as a nation is culturally constructed by the immigrants since inception and here in-betweenness and hyphenation is less effective as compared to assimilation.

Her characters behave erratically in the confusion of hyphenation and assimilation. But Mukherjee seems to gesture at an exclusive fluidity in immigrant’s imagination which should be tilted to embrace fusionism and not mere hybridity, and this process of post-nation formation, dislocations are necessary pre-condition. She is not interested in a new American nationalism, instead creates a new discourse of diasporic condition as a mode of decentering. In Mukherjee’s narratives, instability of “home” is a diasporic signifier. It cannot be a static point of unproblematic culture and identity one leaves and returns to at ease.

She focuses on the complicated dialectics of dislocation and on the dispersed and dispossessed fate of the cultural, geographic and psychic nomads heading towards productive ambivalence in a contrapuntal negotiation of identity. Said’s comments on such shifting ground of “otherness” is significant. ‘No one today is purely one thing’ he says ‘(l)abels like Indian […] or American are no more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind.’

Transnationalism in Bharati Mukherjee’s fictions depicts an essential relationship that exists between herself as a migrant subject, and the nationality or the location of her native culture and destination countries- first Canada, and finally America. This intersection of culture creates in due course the new location of culture and identity. Problem of identity is due to the forces of globalization which include transnational exodus of the immigrants and exiles. The result is either cultural mosaic or melting pot and in such global village the sense of a homogenous self-contained character is something that is hardly possible. In such postcolonial condition a person on the alien shore is composed of all sorts of conflicting essentials.

However, in Rushdie’s texts, such mongrelization of identity has an explicit historical perspective. It is related to the condition of postcoloniality, a condition where pure space and essential identities have ceased to exist, and where the diasporic subject is inevitably contaminated by diverse cultural practices. For example, the postcolonial ‘immigrant other’ is a potent figure of ‘in-betweenness’ contaminated by history. Likewise the (un)homed ‘immigrant other’ is fragmented by time, which challenges and disturbs the Western Enlightenment’s belief in stable heroic and unified identities approaching relentlessly towards some identifiable Goal. The whole discursive process undergoes distinct phases of contamination and then mongrelization. Comparing the mongrel nature of post-mutation state he notes:
We are Hindus who have crossed the
black water; we are Muslims who eat
pork and as a result […] We are now
partly of the West our identity is at
once plural and partial. Sometimes we
feel we straddle two cultures; at other
times, that we fall between two stools
[…] Having been borne across the
world, we are translated men.\textsuperscript{ii}

It is these mongrel identities and ‘painfully
divided selves,’\textsuperscript{iii} operating within the matrix
of an equally hybridized space and plural
social practices that Mukherjee’s novels
have been set. In her novels Mukherjee
explores the fragmented plural and partial
nature of post colonial identities, the inter-
subjective and inter-cultural experiences,
hybridity and hyphenation. She deals with
the fluid diasporic identities and the
conscious negotiation and contestation
before the cultural translation. Mukherjee
interrogates the myth of fixed and unchanging identities in expatriation and
forced exile and the dilemma in immigrant
experience while negotiating multiple
challenges on one’s identity and dislocation
that one suffers. Tara likewise, unveils many
aspects of the immigrant experience of the
novelist in America. The experience of her
characters in their homeland and abroad
echoes her own concerns, her beliefs and
faith. Simultaneously they also reflect her
growing and transforming identity as an
American.

In \textit{The Tiger’s Daughter}, Tara’s alienation
and the conscious feelings of dislocations
are chiefly due to the hollow space between
memory and desire. She had remembered
Calcutta of the past but now, on her revisit
to the metropolis after a seven years’
sojourn in the States, she expects a lot of
changes. In other words, She desires to see a
new and better Calcutta but shockingly all
her anticipation are frustrated when she sees
Calcutta in a wretched plight — full of
poverty and squalor. She had seen three
children eat rice and yoghurt off the side
walk. The moment Tara arrives at the
railway station, She develops in her a
nauseating feeling of isolation: ‘Surrounded
by this army of relatives who professed to
love her, and by vendors ringing bells,
beggars pulling at sleeves, Children on
tracks, Tara felt completely alone.’\textsuperscript{iv}

Bharati Mukherjee interlinks the events in
the novel like Tara’s visit to a funeral pyre
at the river bank, her meeting a small beggar
girl afflicted with leprosy, the nerve-racking
riots and demonstrations and the worst of all
claustrophobic outrage by the politician
Tuntunwala, to evince the terror and trauma
of Tara’s visit to India.

Thus, what Tara finds in Calcutta is simply
disgusting and repelling. Everything has
undergone a drastic transformation and simultaneously a total descent. Class and caste war has brought the city to the grip of violence and confrontations. Her dreams for a better Calcutta are thus shattered and she becomes estranged from the cold and humiliating milieu. Her alienation is aggravated when her relatives greet her as an Americanized Indian and her husband as an outsider. She has a feeling within her as if she has a horrible existence in Calcutta and that none loves her any more not even her own dear mother:

Perhaps her mother, sitting serenely before God on a 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 this sacred room, dipping like a crow.

In Camac Street, it was ‘hard for Tara to talk about marriage responsibilities’ and ‘her friends were curious only about the adjustments she had made.’ Wavering between two poles of her existence, she had become oblivious of many of the Hindu rites and rituals, especially the practice of idol worship, widely prevalent among orthodox Hindus. She had herself witnessed her mother’s worshipping icons since her childhood. But now she doesn’t remember these rituals. There seems to be partial loss of her religious self, leading to the disintegration and fragmentation of her identity:

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 simple loss, Tara feared this forgetting of prescribed actions; it was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and center.

In not being able to remember the rituals, Tara seems to have been alienated from her own experiences of childhood. This loss of self is not a simple one. It was a splitting of fringe and center. It had pushed her to the periphery of her existence and marginalized her, splintered the axis of herself. Thus Tara has become estranged from her society and the cultural values it carries within. Her estrangement as a result of the loss of her own cultural heritage is revealed in her failure to sing ‘bhajans’ which she sang in her childhood days: ‘As a Child, Tara remembered, she had sung ‘bhajans’ in that house. She had sat on a love seat beside a very holy man with a limp and had sung ‘Raghupati Raghav Rajaram’. But that had been a very long time ago, before some invisible spirit of darkness had covered her like skin.

The American culture had enveloped Tara like an ‘invisible spirit of darkness’ thereby obliterating a part of her Indian self. It is the American culture that had made such common rituals like singing ‘Bhajans’ everyday alien to her. Her friend Reena justly remarked that she (Tara) has ‘become too self centered and European.’

The ‘Occident’ had become an inalienable part of herself. Tara’s hopes for a peaceful and unruffled stay in India are dashed to the ground. A victim of riot-torn Calcutta, everything to her appears frustrating and
horrifying. There is a note of suspense at the end of the novel as to whether Tara survives in the violence or not. Locked in the car she thinks of David, thinks of her own predicament: ‘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 didn’t whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely.’ xii She came to India in quest of peace, but ironically. She had to make peace, with the city, to compromise with its raucous and violent nature, its intolerably menacing reality: ‘She felt she had made her peace with the city, nothing more was demanded. If she were to stay, she thought, there would be other concessions, other deals and compromises, all menacing and unbearably real, waiting to be made.’xiii Tara fails to understand that self is an intangible center and that it is not possible on the part of one to harmonize one’s moorings and one’s roots with an ‘other’. This is an illusion, and hardly could she be at peace with the chaotic milieu, to compromise with the turbulent metropolis and find love and security for her anguished and nostalgic self, she rants disgustingly: ‘It was vague, so pointless, so diffuse, this trip home to India.’xiv Tara stands at the point of disjunction and feels dislocated. She belongs neither to the ‘Occident’ nor to the ‘Orient’. Her roots are scattered and dispersed in both America and India. The Hotel Catelli–Continental serves as the symbol of her ‘pointless’ and ‘rootless’ existence. Existential alienation and self-estrangement dogs her both in America and India. Isolated and denied the right to be mentally free, her existence becomes restricted and circumscribed.

References:


iii Ibid., p.397.

iv Bharati Mukherjee. The Tiger’s Daughter. op.cit., p. 28.

v Ibid., p.29.

vi Ibid., p.50.

vii Ibid., p.62.

viii Ibid., p.51.

ix Ibid., p.54.

x Ibid., p.54.

xi Ibid., p.106.


xiv Ibid., p.130.