

The Splitting of ‘Fringe’ and ‘Center’ in The Dilemma of Immigrant Experience: Bharati Mukherjee’s Discourse on Female Diaspora

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Abstract

Mukherjee’s women do eventually find their distinctive voices after self-actualization, but not before they have undergone slippages and dislocations and struggled with the images of their own selves as representations of ‘otherness’ – exotic yet quiet, competent yet subdued. More often thus, women have grown up in Indian families which in the wake of the British Raj, amalgamated Western ideas with traditional beliefs; this often finds the young women emancipated but confused. Cultural roots retain their hold in insidious ways: though in times of fear and indecision Mukherjee’s Westernized Indian women return to seek comfort of traditional faiths, they increasingly discover it to be cold – and so the quest of a new identity continues. Tara in *The Tiger’s Daughter* has a consciousness of her own identity in the process of the diasporic quest for self. She is wary of her feminine self and is unwavering to assert it in an ambience of disjunction and displacement. Tara grows up in the same environs as the novelist herself. Like her creator, she goes to the US for higher education but fails to adjust with the changed milieu. Her cultural shock in a foreign land is a manifestation of the novelist’s own sense of estrangement and identity crisis.

Key Words: dislocation, split, fringe, location, trauma, mongrelization, estrangement, disjuncture

In Rushdie’s texts, 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-between’s’ 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.ⁱ

It is these mongrel identities and ‘painfully divided selves,’ⁱⁱ 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 *The Tiger’s Daughter*, Tara’s estrangement and the conscious feelings of dislocations are chiefly due to the unfilled space between memories and longing. 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.’ⁱⁱⁱ Her estrangement and isolations escalates when she feels ill at ease while moving away from the ‘brutal atmosphere’ of Howrah Station:

For a moment she thought she was going mad. For she felt that the Bengal Tiger, set apart from the smell and noise of the platform, had in her moved out of the private world of filial affection. He seemed to have become a symbol for the outside world [...] a pillar supporting a balcony that had long outlived its beauty and its functions.^{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.^v

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.'^{vi} 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.^{vii}

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.'^{viii}

The American culture had enveloped Tara like an 'invisible spirit of darkness'^{ix} 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.'^x The 'Occident' had become an inalienable part of her self. 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.’^{xi} 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.’^{xii}

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.’^{xiii} 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.

Such is the intensity and acuteness of her anguish and alienation that sitting in a car, she doubts if ever she would succeed in releasing herself from the monstrous grips of Calcutta. Tara experiences this reality more in the mind than in heart. The novel portrays a darkness that pervades the presence, the

location, and abandoned at the edge she has to imagine and locate another home beyond. In her letter to David she says: ‘It’s hard to explain what’s happening to the city itself. I don’t know where to begin. There’s no plot to talk about [...] nothing really happened.’^{xiv} She is wavering at the edge of historical and cultural re-visioning, in the process of re-location.

Throughout the novel, we find Tara in search of a location ventilating her antithetical and mutually differing emotions which symbolize the fragmentation and exasperation of her self. Seven years ago, ‘the houses on Marine Drive’^{xv} were an object of admiration and beauty to her but now they become detestable, ‘now their shabbiness appalled her.’^{xvi} This change in her outlook is due to her stay at Vassar and her Americanization. To her estranged and rootless self, the splendor and magnificence of the outside world becomes merely ‘alien and hostile.’^{xvii}

Her contradictory feelings find an outlet in her relationship with her aunt. She says to Aunt Jharna, ‘I don’t hate you, I love you [...] love you all.’^{xviii} Similar ambivalent feelings are found in the company of her friends like Pronob and Nilima with whom ‘she had played, done her homework’^{xix} but now after seven years, she feels ‘she feared their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness.’^{xx} Nostalgia or indifference appears to be the only alternative available to Tara’s friend in the city, even Tara begins to feel:

[T]hat the misery of her city was too immense and blurred to be listed and assailed one by one. That it was fatal to fight for justice, that it was better to

remain passive and absorb all shocks as they came.^{xxi}

Tara herself begins to think that despite the few pleasant moments she has had in the city in this trip home 'Calcutta was the deadliest city in the world alarm and impatience were equally useless.'^{xxii} No wonder, then that Tara's husband David Cartwright, reading her reports about the city as well as the New Yorker's Ved Mehta's journals on India, concludes that Calcutta was the collective future in which garbage; disease and stagnation are man's estate.

The actual starting point of the story dates back however, 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 Panchapara. Standing under a wedding canopy on the roof of his 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: 'Because the shadows of suicide or exile, of Bengali soil sectioned and ceded with, of workers rising against their bosses could not have been divined by even a wise man in those days.'^{xxiii}

After the marriage of Hari Lal Banerjee's daughters, life continued to be pleasant and in the village Panchapara many more marriages took place and many deaths too. After two summers Hari Lal Banerjee fell a prey to an 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 Panchapara would grieve for the Banerjee 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.'^{xxiv} This young woman is Tara Banerjee, the great granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee and the daughter of Bengal Tiger, the owner of famous Banerjee and Thomas (Tobacco) Co. Ltd. Tara is packed off by her father at an early age of fifteen for America for higher study. When this young Indian girl 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 granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee, or perhaps, if she had not been trained by the good nuns at St Blaise's to remain composed and lady like in all emergencies, she would have rushed home to India at the end of her first week.^{xxv}

According to Brinda Bose the identities that Mukherjee's women eventually emerge will exemplify the characteristics of a whole new breed in this country, the 'ethnic' who is also an 'American'. The process of finding their identities must be a matter of intense struggle with the self. With tradition, with the wonders and horror of a new culture, with growing aspirations, hopes and desires, where gender, race and the American experience meet in Bharati Mukherjee, the intersection is fraught with the tension of combat.^{xxvi}

In Poughkeepsie she feels homesick. She senses discrimination even as her roommate refuses to share her bottle of 'chutney.' As it is typical of Indians who are proud of their family and genealogy, she defends her family and her country instinctively. 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 cartoon on a side walk while hatted men made impious remarks to her. Headless monsters winked at her from eyes embedded in paddy shoulders. She complained of home sickness in letters to her mother, who promptly prayed to kali to save Tara's conscience, chastity and complexion.^{xxvii}

Tara's husband David Cartwright is wholly Western and she is always anxious and apprehensive of this fact. She cannot communicate to him the finer nuances of her family background and life in Calcutta. Her failure to do so is rooted in their cultural differences. David is hostile to genealogies and often mistakes her love for family for overdependence. He asks naive question about Indian customs and traditions and she feels completely insecure in an alien atmosphere because Madison Square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner.

The new Americanized Tara fails to bring back her old perception and views of India with the keenness of a foreigner and she finds that her entire outlook has changed. Shobha Shinde refers to this expatriate weakness: 'An immigrant away from home

idealized his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it.^{xxviii} And so does Tara in America, but when she comes to comfort the changed and hostile circumstances of her home country, all her romantic dreams and ideals crumble down. She realizes that she has drowned her childhood memories in the crowd of America.

On landing at Bombay airport, she is hailed warmly by her relatives but her response is very cold and unruffled. When her relatives address her as 'Tultul,' a nick name which they always used for her, it sounds weird to her Americanized ears. Seven years ago while on her way to Vassar 'She had admired the house on Marine Drive, had thought them fashionable, but now their shabbiness appalled her.'^{xxix} In the train she happens to share her compartments with a Marwari and a Nepali person. She thinks that both will 'ruin her journey to Calcutta.'^{xxx} The tiny Marwari is very unsightly, and appears impudent while the level nosed Nepali is also equally horrible. Here reaction is voiced in the following extract: 'I have returned to dry holes by the sides of railway tracks, she thought, to brown fields like excavations for thousand homes. I have returned to India.'^{xxxi}

On her coming back to India, American now appears to be a dream land to her. At the station, though surrounded by the army of relatives and by vendors ringing bells, beggars pulling at sleeves, children coughing on tracks, Tara feels herself to be completely alone. Everything seems to be unreal except Bengal Tiger, her father. For a moment she thinks she might go mad. Even her father 'seemed to have become a pillar

supporting a balcony that had long outlived its beauty and its function.’^{xxxii} When she reaches home she gets some peace of mind. Staying in her paternal house she also records her impressions of New York:

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[...] New York, she thought now had been exotic. Not because it had Laundromats and subways. But because there where policemen with dogs prowling 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 or the stiffness of final exams. Because people were agitated over pollution [...] New York was certainly extraordinary, and it had driven her to despair.^{xxxiii}

She recollects how she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make her apartment more Indian on days when she thought she could possibly not survive. In America Tara was always under stress and anxieties and she was always conscious of her foreignness. She felt herself rootless but things do not appear better in India either.

What Tara had not known before coming to Calcutta but must discover it is what is obvious to her friend Reena. As Reena puts it in her Indian-English Idiom, ‘You’ve changed too much, Tara.’^{xxxiv} She begins to let ‘little things [...] upset her’^{xxxv} and comes to realize that ‘of late she had been outraged by Calcutta.’^{xxxvi} Even the language she had used so spontaneously once upon a time now appears strange: ‘she had forgotten so many Indian English words she had once used with her friends.’^{xxxvii} Again and again, she finds herself reacting to an event very differently from them. What surprises or shocks her in Calcutta appears to be quite routine to someone like Reena. Similarly, what she considers sensible and decorous seems silly and outrageous to others. For instance, her suggestion that women participating in a beauty contest should put on swimsuits lead to this rebuke from an Indian physician: ‘I think your years abroad have robbed you of feminine propriety or you are joking with us.’^{xxxviii} 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. She wonders, if it is in the ‘drift inward with the winter chill at Vassar, as she watched the New York snow settle over new architecture, blonde girls [...]’^{xxxix} deep into the glitter and opulence of America.

In this connection Brinda Bose observes that the immigrant women in America suffer from double marginalization, they are the category of borderline community and are forced to negotiate displacements at multiple levels. To quote Bose:

Ethnic Women in America are already twice-marginalized: by virtues of their ethnicity and their gender. The central figures in Mukherjee novels *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, and *Jasmine* Tara, Dimple, Jasmine — fight two simultaneous battles against marginalization during their early expatriate experiences in America 'coming as they are from (an) other world, their very identities are in question in America, calling out for a re-visioning and a re-defining at the start. The moments of change / transformation/ reincarnation are crucial because though the exercise is assertive / powerful / celebratory in its mainstream movement, the echoes at the margins valorize the anxieties of expatriation.^{xi}

Tara feels extremely put down by her inner trauma of such dislocations. She cannot match the past and the present. Her

enthusiasm for the lost home that was much longed for, suffers jolt. 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 these friends, done her home work with Nilima, briefly fancied herself in love with Pronob debated with Reena at the British council. But now she feared their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness.'^{xli} 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 heart, a cracking of axis and centre.'^{xlii} 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 dislocation. She starts questioning the validity of her own identity.

References:

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- ⁱSalman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Vintage, 2010. pp.15-16.
ⁱⁱ*Ibid.*, p.397.
ⁱⁱⁱBharati Mukherjee. *The Tiger's Daughter*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1990.p. 28.
^{iv}*Ibid.* p.29.
^v*Ibid.* p.50.
^{vi}*Ibid.* p.62.
^{vii}*Ibid.* p.51.
^{viii}*Ibid.* p.54.
^{ix}*Ibid.* p.54.
^x*Ibid.* p.106.
^{xi}*Ibid.* p.210.
^{xii}*Ibid.* p.202.
^{xiii}*Ibid.* p.130.
^{xiv}*Ibid.* p.129.

^{xv}*Ibid.* p.18.

^{xvi}*Ibid.* p.18.

^{xvii}*Ibid.* p.25.

^{xviii}*Ibid.* p.38.

^{xix}*Ibid.* p.43.

^{xx}*Ibid.* p.43.

^{xxi}*Ibid.* p.131.

^{xxii}*Ibid.* p.168.

^{xxiii}*Ibid.* p.6.

^{xxiv}*Ibid.* p.9.

^{xxv}*Ibid.* p.10.

^{xxvi} Brinda Bose. "A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race, and America meet in Bharati Mukherjee." *op.cit*, p.47.

^{xxvii} Bharati Mukherjee. *The Tiger's Daughter. op.cit*, p.13.

^{xxviii} Shobha Shinde. "Cross Cultural Crisis in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and the *Tiger's Daughter*." *Commonwealth Writing: A Study in Expatriate Experience*. Ed. R. K. Dhawan and LSR Krishnasastri, New Delhi: Prestige, 1994. p.58.

^{xxix} Bharati Mukherjee. *The Tiger's Daughter. op.cit*, p.18.

^{xxx}*Ibid*, p.20.

^{xxxi}*Ibid*, p.21.

^{xxxii}*Ibid*, p.29.

^{xxxiii}*Ibid*, pp.33-34.

^{xxxiv}*Ibid*, p.105.

^{xxxv}*Ibid*, p.107.

^{xxxvi}*Ibid*, p.107.

^{xxxvii}*Ibid*.p.107.

^{xxxviii}*Ibid*, p.187.

^{xxxix}*Ibid*, p.37.

^{xl} Brinda Bose. "A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race, and America meet in Bharati Mukherjee." *op.cit*. p. 47.

^{xli} Bharati Mukherjee. *The Tiger's Daughter op.cit*, p. 43.

^{xlii}*Ibid*, p.51.