



Transculturalism in the Diasporic Writings of Bharati Mukherjee: A Note on *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*

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Abstract--This paper is an attempt to analyse the transcultural elements in the novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* written by Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian diasporic writer. Mukherjee's writings reflect her own life as an immigrant, as she writes about the pain of adjusting to a completely alien land with its own culture and beliefs. Through her stories, the readers are able to catch a glimpse of the immigrant life, and their conflict between location and culture. An attempt is made to explore the concept of transculturalism in her novels by tracing the respective journeys of the protagonists, Tara and Dimple, with the help of Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, third space and hybridity.



Keywords— diaspora, alienation, transculturalism, third space, mimicry, hybridity.

India was a colonised country for many decades, and was witness to a lot of forced and voluntary migration of its people even after independence. A large scale of displacement or dispersal took place where people scattered over various parts of the world. When these people relocated themselves in a new realm, they were bound to feel vulnerable due to linguistic and cultural differences with their hosts in the new lands. They felt torn between two lands which challenged their identity and led to severe nostalgia, sense of loss, homelessness, and physical as well as psychological alienation. As a result, immigrants and diasporic writers go through a sense of double consciousness, that is, two cultures, two world views, two languages and two different kinds of experience thus making them 'hybrid' individuals. Diasporic writers share much in common making an effort to soak them in the ambience of their new culture, while feeling an overwhelming sense of nostalgia for their land of origin. As reflected in their works, the cultural traits they acquire from their native place form a backdrop to their writing while they simultaneously try to cater to the new cultural space of their host land.

In this era, where political borders and cultural boundaries are blurring and a sense of interconnectedness

is increasing, people are constantly migrating to different places for various reasons. Consequently, they experience the effects of dislocation and cross-cultural transculturation. The term transculturalism was coined in 1940 by a Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in his essay *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* while studying the cultural phenomena in Cuba. It was a modified version of the term 'acculturation' introduced in the 1920's by Bronislaw J. Malinowski, a Polish ethnographer, and later used by an American anthropologist J.W. Powell for analysing the assimilation of immigrant populations in the U.S.A.

Acculturation and transculturation are very closely connected to one another, the basis of both theories being migration and assimilation of immigrant cultures in foreign lands. If the two terms are to be differentiated from each other then, it can be said that acculturation focuses more on the one-way process of assimilation, where the transition of one culture into another occurs resulting in a sense of loss for the immigrant as it involves the less impactful culture assimilating to the culture with more power. On the other hand, transculturation is a more complex two-way process, leading to the creation of a new layered culture, by going through many processes of

linguistic, cultural and racial exchange. It is an important aspect in diasporic literature, which we will try to understand through concepts of Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, third space and hybridity. These concepts go beyond the paradigm of the coloniser/colonised, to a more complex dimension known as the liminal space where multiple cultures interweave with one another depicting a sense of ambivalence. He believes that culture does not exist in isolation, rather it interacts in a hybrid space which he calls the 'third space'.

According to William Safran, the term 'diaspora' can be applied to the minority group of immigrants, whose members share their memory, vision and myth about their native homeland. At present, it means going away from a native place as well as acquainting oneself in the host society (Safran 84). Every diasporic movement holds a historical significance, as it carries within itself the seed of a nation's history. Such a kind of movement implies change involving the cultural and psychological risk of losing one's identity. Preservation of identity in the host society is perhaps the most critical factor in the concept of diasporic productions. Therefore, diasporic literature is a journey towards realisation, recognition and expression of the self and explores the themes of homelessness, nostalgia, alienation, identity crisis and multiculturalism.

Indian writers have contributed extensively to the realm of Diasporic literature. Among these writers may be mentioned of Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Meena Alexander, Manjula Padmanabhan and Bapsi Sidhwa, who themselves had to bear the consequences of migration which reflects in their works to a large degree. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most renowned Indian writers to have contributed to the realm of diasporic literature. Born and brought up in India, she spent most of her adult life in the USA and Canada to fulfill her literary ambitions. Her writings reflect her own life as an immigrant, as she writes about the pain of adjusting to a completely alien land with its own culture and beliefs. Readers laud her for the realistic descriptions and vivid imagery, as she tries to paint a picture of the life of the immigrants who feel disconnected from their homeland as they try to assimilate in the completely new environment.

Mukherjee writes about their sense of longing and nostalgia for their roots, and the quest for identity as they feel torn between two completely different cultures. She sheds light on the melting pot concept in her works, which basically implies that various immigrant groups while adapting to their new home, will tend to melt together abandoning their individual cultures and becoming fully assimilated into the new milieu. She also makes sure of laying particular emphasis on the changes that are taking

place among the South Asian women in a new world. Her works have been categorised into three phases; in the first phase, she herself was trying to find her roots in her own Indian heritage on her return from Canada which largely reflects in her earlier works like *The Tiger's Daughter*. In the second phase, like in her novel *Wife*, Mukherjee explores the more complex dimensions of the immigrant experience where one feels torn between two lands and eventually becomes "the other" in both. The third phase saw Mukherjee adopting a more positivistic approach to the immigrant experience in her writing, which can be seen in her novel *Jasmine*. The present work is an attempt to explore the transcultural dimension of her novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*.

The Tiger's Daughter by Bharati Mukherjee can almost be labelled as an autobiographical representation of Mukherjee's own life, when she returned to India after several years only to be disappointed by the extreme poverty and exploitation of women in the name of culture and religion. In the novel, the protagonist, Tara Banerjee returns to Calcutta, India on the pretext of connecting with her past, but is very disturbed by the social and political turmoil in the country. She always feels a sense of alienation in America and struggles to find her true identity, which leads her to return to her birthplace in the hope that she will connect to her roots again. But when she returns to India, she feels lost again, and a sense of disconnection and rootlessness overwhelms her causing an identity crisis where her sense of self was split between two different cultures. To the Americans, she is always the outsider, and unfortunately, to her native people, she becomes the outsider all over again. Her own family addresses her as "Americawali" and her husband as "meleccha", which meant an outcast (*The Tiger's Daughter* 33). The events that unfold in Calcutta intensify her feeling of alienation and agonise her.

On her return, Tara is quick to notice the decay that dominates her surroundings as she takes the two day train journey from Bombay to Calcutta, escaping her overexcited "Bombay relatives" who addresses her by the nickname "Tultul" – a name long forgotten- and showered her with sweets and endearments. The journey was also a sense of realisation for Tara, who started understanding that may be the India which she was yearning for in her days abroad was not really the same. The Marine drive that she once so admired in Bombay seemed an array of shabby houses. She was disheartened at the sight of the handicapped beggars at the station, at her homeland reeking of poverty and decay.

Reaching Calcutta further intensified her feeling of disdain, at the noise, the hustling relatives and nothing seemed familiar to her. She felt alone in the crowd,

overcome with shock and sudden inexplicable fear. From that point onwards it was a slippery slope, and the situation only seemed to worsen. Tara feels a sense of despair when she is unable to carry out the religious rituals like she remembers doing as easily as a child. It was like a blow to her head, for in America she often spoke about these rituals and how she missed performing them with her mother. She feels that her own mother is not ready to accept her new identity, mainly as she has married a foreigner outside their caste. Her kind sincere suggestion regarding her relative Jharna's daughter is met with a nasty retort, who asks Tara if she feels she is too educated for them.

Tara feels like the odd one out even with her friends, who belong to rich Bengali families and the same caste as herself, but still she is unable to share her true feelings about Calcutta with them. Her visit to her school St. Blaise also proves to be unfruitful as the nuns who she once so admired now seems completely different and distant, like a people in an old photograph, yellow and faded (*The Tiger's Daughter* 201). When Joyonto offers to show her the "baste", she agrees and is even ecstatic at first, as her dormitory fellows at Vassar college often asks her about the slums of India. Her excitement dies a slow death as the reality of the slums hits her as she takes the irregular road to the place amidst filth and gross odour. The poverty and decay that she witnesses are too much for her, and she becomes hysteric when she sees a little girl suffering from leprosy. Tara wonders whether it is the actual India or not—thus making her heart heavy with the burden of the hostility surrounding her.

Her holiday visit to Darjeeling with her family and friends fails to soothe her emotional wounds, and certain unpleasant incidents trouble her deeply, like the hooligans misbehaving with her as she accompanied her friends Pronob and Antonia on horseback around the Observatory Hill. The only saving grace was her visit to Ma Kananbala Devi, where for a fleeting second she feels her soul uplifted and a tremendous peace in her heart, the passionate worshippers moving her more deeply than Devi Ma herself does.

Tara's visit to Nayapur along with her friends proves to be the final nail in her coffin. She meets Tuntunwala, the same Marwari fellow with whom she shares her train compartment while travelling from Bombay to Calcutta. Tuntunwala, who is visiting Nayapur to strategise for the upcoming election, offers to show Tara around, and Tara agrees to his offer is probably the least wise decision of her entire life. Tuntunwala rapes her, and she fails to stop him. Tara does not inform any of her friends about this wretched politician, as she feels that it will lead to her own disgrace. In a place where a smile or the mere brushing of

fingers lead to the gossip mills churning, this piece of knowledge would definitely shoot in all directions. Mukherjee ends the novel on an appalling note, amidst violence and turmoil.

There is a political background to the novel when West Bengal was witnessing the naxalite movement. The newspapers of Calcutta were filled with horrifying incidents of murder, violence, epidemic and starvation. Tara longs for the Bengal of her grandfather's time, where children ran through cool green grasses and melancholic aristocrats filled the music rooms of desolate palaces. She decides to return to her husband David and calls her friends at Catelli Continental to inform them of her decision. In a sudden turn of events, Tara's car is surrounded by a mob, and we last see her wondering if she would ever be able to leave Calcutta and if her husband would ever know how intensely she loved him. The open ended nature of the novel's climax leaves the readers perplexed and wondering whether Tara returns to her husband or becomes a victim to the riots.

Before shedding light on the transcultural aspects of the novel, it is important to discuss Tara's stay in America—the land of dreams. When the fifteen years old Tara moved to the US for her studies, she had a hard time getting accustomed to her new environment and faces racial discrimination and severe nostalgia. Mukherjee has explained Tara's experience in vivid details, perhaps depicting her own life incidents through the protagonist's story. Tara missed home so much, that in a bout of desperation she ironed and hung her silk scarves all around her apartment to give it a more Indian touch. Another touching scenario shows Tara praying to the goddess Kali to impart some strength to her and save her from a mental breakdown before the foreign people.

It is ironic that a few years later, we see the same Tara struggling to remember the next ritual after the sandalwood paste had been grounded. Tara finds New York an extraordinary place to be, but she is also aware that girls like her are stabbed in their own homes. The native country is idealised by immigrants who are away from it and only have memories to cherish and feel nostalgic about, just like Tara in the United States (Kumar 31). Tara marries a young American man, David Cartwright, which in itself is an act of defiance against her Indian customs. She likes the fact that David has a complete western approach to life, which reflects a hint of desperation to fit into the American culture and getting rid of the "outsider" image. To say that their marriage is a cakewalk would be a lie, as gradually Tara realises that her husband does not really understand her family background or life at Calcutta, asking really naïve questions about her

Indian culture. Thus, Tara feels insecure, as she feels that she is not understood by her own husband who mistakes her value for family as being excessively dependent on it.

Tara's lame attempts to stay connected to her roots are reflected in her actions, like when she refused to change her maiden name after marriage, or making curried hamburgers until her husband's stomach gave in. Tara feels culturally alienated, her husband's inability to understand her and the problem of adjusting in a foreign land, both factors have a significant role to play in her life. Tara's comparison of the nuns at her school with an old yellow photograph is in some way similar to Salman Rushdie reminiscing of his home by looking at an old photograph in his famous work "Imaginary Homelands." He writes, "It's my present that is foreign, and that the past is now, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (Rushdie 9). However in Tara's scenario, it is the opposite feeling where she feels that her present in her homeland is foreign, and wonders, "How does the foreignness of spirit begin" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 20)?

Mukherjee's second novel, *Wife*, is about a young ambitious Bengali girl whose sole purpose in life is to get married to a rich neurosurgeon as seen in all the romantic novels and magazines she regularly consumed. Dimple is like Alice in Wonderland, living far away from the ugly truths of life floating in a bubble. She belongs to a simple middle-class family in which her father is already looking for eligible bachelors (mainly engineers) in matrimonial ads. Mukherjee has shed light on the patriarchy of Indian cultures where the father decides upon the groom for his daughter, irrespective of the girl's wishes. Dimple feels that marriage would be the perfect solution to her problems and that she would finally attain the freedom and bliss her heart so desired. She imagines marriage to be a fairy tale where she would host lavish parties on carpeted lawns, and dinners to raise funds for noble causes. She wishes for herself all those fancy things that rich wives boast of, "an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris" (*Wife* 3).

Finally, her father's search bore fruit and a consultant engineer, Amit Kumar Basu, was the chosen one for marriage. Despite the fact that he is an engineer and Dimple wishes for a neurosurgeon, she is elated at the aspect of moving abroad as Amit has applied for immigration in Canada. But post marriage, things do not match up to Dimple's imagination. To begin with, her mother-in-law does not like her name and insists on changing it to Nandini. This ancient and orthodox Hindu tradition enrages Dimple who wonders if her identity will also alter after the name change. As she takes on her duties of the household, her notion of a perfect marriage

gradually shatters into tiny fragments. She dislikes her new name, her new home, the apartment is small and she is not even allowed to put up curtains of her choice. The freedom that she has dreamt of before getting married is just a far-fetched dream and nothing else. But finally Amit's immigration application gets through and Dimple finally sees a flicker of hope in their pungent lives. Her desperation of leaving her home and its traditions is so high that she does not want any obstacle in her path, resulting in her brutally self-aborting her baby by skipping rope. Instead of feeling remorse, she feels relieved that she will finally be able to start anew in her land of dreams without any kind of link tying her to her native land.

However, much as Dimple is overjoyed at the prospect of moving abroad, the American lifestyle does not really meet her expectations. Coming to a completely new environment she feels overwhelmed with all the hardships she faces as an immigrant. At first, Amit is jobless and they face financial crisis, and then when he finally gets a job, he is unable to spend quality time with his wife. This causes a dent in their marital relationship, the main cause being a large communication gap between them. Married life abroad does not offer Dimple all the sparkle that she hopes for and she starts resenting her own husband. Even though their financial situation improves considerably and they move to a new furnished flat adorned with modern gadgets, it does not improve their marital bond.

Dimple's husband is wrong in thinking that a lavish lifestyle would make his wife happy and satisfied. Instead, they are like the opposite ends of a pole and Dimple feels lonely and gradually slips into depression. She turns to the media, particularly the television, to feel a little better, but slowly becomes obsessed with it. In a desperate attempt to become a part of the American culture, Dimple seduces her American friend Milt and hides it from her husband. Gradually, she becomes neurotic and so psychologically damaged that she tries hurting Amit with a knife when he is hugging her. However, she becomes remorseful and blames her madness on the pressure of assimilating to the alien culture.

Amit mistakes her actions to be stemming from a deep culture shock and fails to identify them as a psychological disorder. He promises to take her to India but nothing seems to work on Dimple's deteriorating state of mind. Her obsession with Television becomes so ugly that she starts contemplating her husband's murder: "She would kill Amit and hide his body in the freezer. The extravagance of the scheme delighted her, made her feel very American somehow, almost like a character in T.V series" (*Wife* 195). Dimple starts displaying signs of schizophrenia, struggling to differentiate between reel and

real life. Perhaps it is the guilt of cheating on her husband that weighs her down and fills her with contempt for her own self. The story takes a shocking turn when in a dreamlike state, Dimple kills her husband. Maybe if she has stayed in India things would not have turned so horrible, making a simple Bengali girl a disillusioned murderess. The pressure of conforming to the new culture and belief system is so high that it completely destroys a family.

Dimple's conflict with transculturalism is depicted vividly in this novel, as she constantly tries to assimilate to the new culture and surroundings. In Mukherjee's novels, the female characters go through various processes of assimilation and adaptation to come to terms with their new identity. There is a sense of double consciousness that Dimple feels of double cultures, double languages and double mindsets. While trying to navigate her way through this chaos, she struggles to find her own identity. One can say that Dimple strives to become a transcultural individual, a link between two cultures, but is weighed down by intense psychological turmoil, as is the case with many immigrants who ultimately lose the battle. As a critic states, "Dimple is entrapped in a dilemma of tension between American culture and society and the traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife, between feminist desire to be assertive and indecent and the Indian need to be submissive and self-effacing" (Asnani 42). Even as she struggles in India post marriage, it is nothing compared to the isolation she faces in America. She feels a deep cultural shock, when she is treated like an outcast while doing simple things like buying cheesecake from a sweet shop.

Dimple finds it hard to cultivate her own niche in the alien society. She feels like an outsider even among her Indian acquaintances who have overcome the cultural divide and found their own identity living as transcultural Americanised Indians. It is important to mention the cross-cultural elements in this novel that Mukherjee has shed light on occasionally. There are Indian Americans and then there are American Indians, the difference is depicted through the Sens and Mullicks in the story. The Sens and Mehras still cling onto their Indian roots; the framed picture of King Ram and his court hanging in the Sens' apartment spoke volumes about their loyalty to their Indian culture. On the other hand, there are the Mullicks, who behave more American than the Americans themselves. The Sens warn Amit against the influence of Ina Mullick who in her "pants and mascara" may mislead Dimple and causes trouble (Nithiya 191). Dimple feels as if she belongs to none of these categories which further leads to disillusionment and identity crisis.

Bharati Mukherjee has explored the notion of the immigrant's homecoming to her native land while hoping to reconnect with her roots and reassures herself of her true identity. Her novels showcase the way how identities are formed and evolve constantly, thus, challenging the notion of fixity and taking on a fluid nature leading to new patterns of culture. This process leads to the formation of a transcultural identity in the "in-between space" (to use Bhabha's term), an interlude between two cultures creating a feeling of un-homeliness, which does not translate to being homeless, rather it is a state where the individual is unable to feel at home even while being at home. Simply put, it is a state of psychological unrest, arising due to the inability to conform to a particular identity.

Tara and Dimple are unable to shake the feeling of being the "other" in India as well as in America, and unable to feel a sense of belongingness to any place. They subconsciously aspire for a third space, their new hyphenated identity while trying to assimilate in a new environment. Bhabha says that this in-between space lay ground for adding onto the existing strategies of selfhood, which initiate new signs of identity (*The Location of Culture* 2). These two characters of Mukherjee's texts are cultural hybrids, a delusive image of being in two or more places at the same time which in reality, is an impossible feat for the devalued person (*The Location of Culture* 117). In order to explain this "third space" more efficiently, Bhabha used the concept of a stairwell. As Bhabha writes, "The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (*The Location of Culture* 5).

Tara's life is like existing on this stairwell, she identifies as neither American nor Indian while being torn between two nations. Dimple too faces difficulty as not only does she find it hard to identify as an American, but she also finds it hard to find her place among her Indian friends living in America. Bhabha also built onto Frantz Fanon's concept of mimicry and asserted that mimicry is an "effect of hybridity", a process in which the colonised tries to imitate the ways of the coloniser in an attempt to attain the power associated with the coloniser, and sometimes in an attempt to unsettle the power dynamics between the two by claiming their hybrid identity in the

interlude known as the third space (*The Location of Culture* 162).

Tara tries her best to Americanise her way of living, even marrying an American man perhaps to fit more into the society. However, she realises that she will always be considered as an outcast in their circle no matter how much she tries. The occident gradually becomes a part of her, but not so much that she feels at home. Rather it causes an emotional turmoil in Tara's head and she ends up feeling utterly confused regarding her identity. Tara exists in an ambivalent space, nor fully assimilating to the American way of life-- as depicted by her desperate efforts to remain in touch with her Indian roots through silk scarves and curried hamburgers- and neither being able to relate to her Indian traditional ways, as we see her struggling on her return to India.

Dimple's obsession with the American culture proves to have atrocious consequences as she murders her own husband in a dreamlike state and feels as if she is living in an American TV series. Another instant of her desperation to Americanise herself is when she seduces Milt which is against her Indian values. An important aspect of a transcultural identity is ambivalence, which is the result of the in-between space becoming the provision for expressing cultural difference (Bhabha 22). Thus, a transcultural identity does not involve a mere mix up between two cultures, rather a new culture is formed within the ambivalence of the third space, which is that liminality between the two cultures where a cultural hybrid is created as a result of mimicry and hybridity. Like many other transcultural immigrants, both the characters must make peace with existing in the grey area, and make it their new home.

The India that Tara has dreamt of returning to since so many years seems unfamiliar, and this has shaken her completely. She realises that she is an outsider in her own land, just as she is in America. The poverty, political tension and class struggle of India shatter her precious image of her homeland and she feels a strange sense of loss. The point where she fails to perform the religious rituals in her house is a powerful narration by Mukherjee, is like the last straw, where the traumatised Tara realises that she is not the same person anymore and may be the last seven years had Americanised her: "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" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 51). Her friend Reena retorted that Tara was too European and selfish now to be able to accept the traditional Indian life. She was a new person now-- a part of two cultures yet fully belonging to none. Dimple is a wanderer who is unable to find solace in America or her birth place leading

to a psychological dilemma. Maybe, the question is not where one is from, rather where one is between (Clifford 109).

Dimple is different from Tara in the sense that she is unhappy in India as well and resents the traditional family that she is married into where she is forced to change her name as well. She yearns to leave this out-dated culture behind and get settled in America where she would lead a luxurious life free from all cultural restrictions. In order to get rid of all her Indianness and move to the land of her dreams and to free from all chains that tie her to her native land, she even goes to the extent of self-aborting her unborn child. But on reaching America, she realises the reality of actually living in an alien country and this shocks her completely. It leads to irreparable damage to her psyche and she fails to find her way in the utter chaos surrounding her. Both Tara and Dimple have a split personality, seeking answers but in the absence of any choice, they are impelled to merge and try to attain the best of both worlds. They must learn to exist in a third space, navigating their way through the chaos and find their own identities.

Reflective of her own life, Mukherjee creates a complex world and vividly describes the disturbance and changes that occur as a result of the interweaving of cultures, depicted by the characters in her novels in the most heart touching way. Through her stories, the readers are able to catch a glimpse of the immigrant life, their conflict between location and culture. In her novels, Mukherjee has tried to represent the plight of an individual who returns to her native land after a period of voluntary exile. Unfortunately, home to this person will never be the same again, and life in the alien land, as sad it may seem, will be more desirable than the home where she was born and raised.

At the end, we see Tara stuck amidst the riots wondering if she would be able to escape or if her husband would ever know how much she loves him. It is obvious to the readers that if Tara did manage to save herself from the political outburst, she would hop onto the first flight to America. The writer has used Tara's marriage skillfully to shed light on the intricacies of a cross-cultural relationship. On the other hand, there is a tragic end to Dimple's story as she becomes schizophrenic and kills her husband in a subconscious state. The pressure of adapting to her new surroundings takes a heavy toll on her mental health which comes crashing down by the end. Thus, we have already been made aware that Tara and Dimple both feel a communication gap with their husbands for their own personal reasons. Perhaps for survival, every transcultural individual must come to a compromise entailing living somewhere between two cultures, navigating through that

grey area, trying to find their true identity. Thus, the writer's attempt at exploring the transcultural identities of the two female protagonists in the respective novels has added a significant dimension to the study of Indian diasporic literature.

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