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THE IMAGE OF INDIA IN THE NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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Abstract:

In order to understand Bharati Mukherjee's fiction and explore the image of India as reflected in her work, it is essential for us to study the biographical details of her life as they have a great bearing on her vision of life and her native country. She was born on 27th July, 1940 in a high caste Hindu Brahmin family of Calcutta, India. She grew up in an extended family of 40 members, including uncles, aunts, and cousins in the middle class area Rash Behari Avenue of Calcutta. Her father, Sudhir Lal Mukherjee, was a well-known chemist and researcher of repute who had studied in Germany and England. Her mother, Beena Mukherjee was a homemaker. Bharati and her two sisters got encouragement to get postgraduate degrees. Sudhir Mukherjee's ancestral home was in Faridpur and his wife's native was in Dhaka, the two districts of Bengal. But at the time of the Partition of India in 1947, these two districts of Bengal became part of East Pakistan which later became independent as Bangladesh in 1971. It was due to the Partition their families had to leave their native districts and move to Calcutta.

While exploring the image of India in Bharati Mukherjee's novel it becomes clear that she has used Indian history in the form of some anecdotes in her novels and stories. She has fictionalized Indian history and it is very important in the context of the post-colonization and globalization. However, we find that she does not have adequate knowledge of proper historical and political events that shaped the Indian history. Therefore, her view of India is totally unconvincing and extremely superficial. Moreover, as she represents the elite society of the metropolitan society of Calcutta, her fictionalization of Indian history also reflects her inability to understand context of social, historical and historical events. She seems to be unaware of the complex postcolonial and neocolonial forces that were at work.

She has not taken the cognizance of the subaltern classes of Calcutta. Mukherjee and her class enjoy the privileged position in the city but the people below her class are treated as the 'Other'. She has a casual attitude towards the Naxalites and their struggle. So the image of India reflected in her novel is hardly authentic.

KEY WORDS:

Novels, historical, social, postcolonial, neocolonial.

INTRODUCTION

In the novel Tara the protagonist and her friends consider the Naxalites as silly or immature people. Even the political riots form the background of the narrative structure but they are also treated in a prejudiced manner. Mukherjee shows little sympathy or concern for the cause or ideology of the Naxalite activists. The disintegrating effects of this movement are reflected in Mukherjee's tendency of 'othering' the subalterns. Tara's attitude of difference and indifference towards the Afro-American visiting student

Macdowell from California reveals Mukherjee's indifference to the 'others' in Calcutta of the 1960s and 1970s. It seems that both Mukherjee and her fictional heroine Tara are the victims of solipsistic considerations and the bourgeois individualism.

In *The Tiger's Daughter* Mukherjee creates a background of some important historical and political events such as the India's support to the East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh, the exodus of refugees, migration of the Hindu Bengalis from the East Pakistan, or Bangladesh, the communist uprising and the Naxalbari movement against the landlordism of Bengal and the established elite classes etc. All these events are presented and critiqued during the protagonist Tara's first vacation in Calcutta after her seven-year stay in the U.S. Her stay in Calcutta and the contemporary political events are mixed together in the narrative structure of the novel. This fusion of the contemporary historical events and their fictionalization offer an insight into the political intention of the novelist. Mukherjee writes about death and destruction but she ignores the political context of the Naxalite Movement and the Communist uprising in Bengal. She shows indifference to the revolutionary ideas behind those significant historical events of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. The protagonist of *The Tiger's Daughter* Tara belongs to the privileged bourgeois class. Like Mukherjee, her protagonist Tara also looks at the prevalent social and political situation from her narrow middle class perspective. She and her heroine Tara show utter lack of interest in the Utopian political movements such as Naxalbari who were striving for equitable distribution of the surplus of land for the landless tenants and poor peasants. In the Naxalbari district of Bengal the poor peasants from the rural areas were mobilized by a Krishak Samiti (Peasants' Organization) of the Communist Party (Marxist) under the leadership of a middle class radical leader named Kanu Sanyal. They demanded work in the villages. Since late March 1967, the Krishak Samiti organized demonstrations against landlords for evicting tenants or for hoarding food grains. During the period of that UF-LF government there were around 1200 gheraos. The stoppage of works created feelings of fear, terror and uncertainty in the minds of owners of business firms, factories, and companies. Many European as well as Indian factory owners shut down their units and moved to other parts of India. Because of this capital flight Calcutta lost its pride of place as the leading centre of Indian industry.

Bharati Mukherjee lived in a mansion quite separated from the city. She and sisters were always taken in a car to an elite 'walled' school that was run by the Irish nuns. The violent atmosphere and the Irish nun's hatred and devaluation of the Bengali culture and everyday life of Calcutta created a feeling of alienation in Mukherjee's mind. She was taught not to learn Bengali traditions and learn to be 'English' and not Bengali. Her school encouraged her to perform in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and practice English elocution lessons and this ensured that she did not live in the native language. This process alienated her from her native place. Therefore, she does not write about the suffering masses or common people in her novels and short stories. All these factors alienated her from the mainstream Bengali tradition and culture. Her *The Tiger's Daughter* reflects fear of her bourgeoisie class comprising landowners, businessmen and factory owners. In her novels she does not highlight the voice of dissent that emerged from the subaltern sections of the society. She has tried to suppress the voice of revolutionaries. Therefore, it creates a false image of India in her novels. Mukherjee expresses her empathy for her own class through a sympathetic treatment to Tara and her upper class friends and expresses a fear of dispossession and ruin of Calcutta. She is upset at the sure loss of the rights and privileges bestowed by their social position. It is seen in Tara's conversation with her friends on the terrace of a posh Calcutta hotel and their hatred of the procession of demonstrators that goes past the hotel. They look at the riot from their narrow bourgeois perspective and regard it as a scuffle. In *The Tiger's Daughter* we see an image of a postcolonial India still controlled and governed by the elite who had taken over from the parting British rulers. She does not challenge their dominant position in India after independence. There is a mood of nostalgia for the bygone era of peace, prosperity, and privileges enjoyed by Mukherjee's class during the colonial period. She justifies the tendency of her class to keep a distance from the masses and does not feel ashamed of the anti-social political acts of her class and its struggle to maintain its hold on the power structure in the postcolonial India.

In her novels Mukherjee presents India as a land of beggars, homeless, and diseased people that would never change. She is a high caste, upper class, self-centered woman who is reluctant to come out of her complacency. She does not want to face reality of the 'other' or plural India. Therefore, she and her female counterpart Tara feel disgusted with India. Both forget their moral obligations to their native land and its people because of whose cooperation and tolerance she and her class could enjoy all the social and economic security and privileges. Tara's hatred of the people of her own country is seen in an episode when she comes to Bombay. She is disgusted by the crowded and dirty railway station which seems to her as if it were a hospital. She dislikes the site of a number of sick and deformed people. The beautiful houses that she had seen on the Marine Drive seven years ago now looked pale, ugly and uninspiring. Mukherjee has similar opinion about Calcutta. She says that Calcutta is terrible city that devours those who live there and

also those who come there for shelter. On her return to Calcutta Tara finds that except Carmac-Street, the city has drastically changed in the course of time. She finds that her old Calcutta is fast disappearing and everywhere there was a construction boom due to which the greenery around the city was fast receding. She is disappointed to find that even the new Calcutta is also crowded with buses, trams, beggars, poverty, squalor and diseases. This is her vision of the modern India. As a Westernized bourgeois Indian she creates an image of India as a land of poverty, starvation and suffering. She finds the old world of India highly repressive. She also finds a wide gulf between the well-established wealthy classes and the semi-clad, poverty-stricken masses. She observes India's subtle shift from agrarian stable economy to a disintegrating industrial economy which is controlled by the corrupt politicians who are busy driving the peasant class from their farms and villages. This reflects the horror of the modern industrial world which is devoid of any human values. Her protagonist Tara is nostalgic of her past but she does not want to belong to her native land. She dislikes the conservatism of the Indian culture and hypocrisy of the Indians. Therefore, she does not disclose her molestation by Mr. Tuntunwalla to her friends and family for the fear that they would be horrified to learn about this and would treat her as if she were an untouchable person. She ridicules Indians for their love of foreign things, dress and items and their opposition to an Indian's marriage with a foreigner. She calls them the racial purists who love to see the photos of the famous Western film stars in movie magazines such as Nat Wood and Bob Wagner in faded Photoplays. They like English accents of Worthington at the British Council but they do not accept foreign marriage patterns. This view of Mukherjee seems to justify the colonial life style and rejection of the traditional Bengali/ Indian way of life. She wants to cut off her cultural ties with the native land by becoming the cultural citizen of America by aping the Western ways. She attempts to imitate the master narrative of the First World. She suggests that in India the age-old social and cultural structure is very strong and discouraging so much so that life in India is always dominated by the ideas of caste, gender and clan. Mukherjee criticizes the social structure of Calcutta (India) and deplores that where the high class women like her have no place at all. For this reason she justifies her decision of migrating to America. Her rejection of her Indian past and identity is an act of justification of the cultural colonization of Indians like her by the western imperialist tendencies. Her Indian mind shows affinity with the Western colonial powers.

At the background of her short stories and novels there is an invisible image of India that peeps out of her narrative again and again. In an interview with Marilyn Clark, Mukherjee explains the reason for choosing the name 'Dimple' for the protagonist of her novel *Wife*. Mukherjee claims that the protagonist was named after the famous Bollywood young actor Dimple Kapadia who was the heroine of the Raj Kapoor movie *Bobby*. The novel deals with the unique issues faced at the time by the Indian women as they had to marry someone in India who had been selected by their parents and then moving to America. According to Mukherjee, in Dimple's generation of the 1970s in Calcutta (India) such young women indulged in romantic daydreams about marriage. They were crazy to experience freedom from the traditional way of life and enjoy new social and economic phenomenon of Immigration to America. With the liberalization of immigration laws by Robert Kennedy, the young ambitious, well-educated, urban Indian professionals began to arrive in cities like New York on "immigrant" visas. During the 1970s Indian middle class parents of young unmarried women always gave preference to such young men as desirable sons-in-law who were earning in dollars.

Bharati Mukherjee focuses on the issue of the arranged marriages in the Indian society. She tries to explore the Indian women's reflections on marriage in India and that of the expatriate women in the Western world. She is critical of the traditional concept of marriage which makes a woman a secondary and decorative member of the household. Both Dimple and her mother have had arranged marriages as per the middle class custom of their generations. While talking about the Hindu marriage system, Mukherjee evokes the traditional Hindu marriage model of Sita from the Hindu epic, *Ramayana*. It means Sita is a role model for Dimple. The Hindu religious code expects her to follow Sita by being a devout and obedient wife to her husband. It is inculcated in the minds of young married Hindu women that the ultimate goal of their life lies in pleasing and serving their husbands without challenging their authority. Dimple represents a transition in the life of the middle class women in India and challenges her traditional society's value system and its efficacy in the context of women. She also challenges the meaning and validity of taboo; however, she lacks the confidence to establish her own values.

In her novel *Jasmine* (1989) there is an image of India of the 1980s. Mukherjee has used the history of India of the 1980s when the Sikh separatism and terrorism were at their zenith. The Sikh terrorists killed the Hindu men whom they called rapists and killed the Hindu women whom they called whores. They wanted a separate Punjab for the Sikh community under the tutelage of Pakistan, so they were waging a war against the Indian nation. It had created a fear of disintegration of India. In this novel *Jasmine's* husband Prakash becomes a casualty of terrorism for upholding secular values and nationalism. He is killed by his Sikh friend Sukhwinder for his nationalist ideas that "There is no Hindu state! There is no Sikh State! India

is for everyone". This statement is very significant as it upholds the secular values of our Indian nation and culture that celebrates "Unity in Diversity". While expressing her distrust of the Sikh community she ignores diversity in that community, its service to the nation and the possibility of its genuine legitimate political demands. Mukherjee presents India as a backward looking and suppressive land under the control of feudal lords for ages together. In such an undeveloped and savage land women have little voice of dissent and it needs to be governed and guided by the modern progressive ideologies of the West. The murder of Prakash by Sukhwinder reflects the volatile political situation that threatens Mukherjee's middle class vision of India. She suggests that in India the people of her class are not safe and migration is the only available alternative before them. This reflects a narrow and parochial middle class attitude that indirectly justifies colonialism. It creates an impression that leaving India and settling in America is the only viable option for people. This attitude does not reflect any sense of belonging to the native land even though in the age of post-colonialism and post-modernism the idea of nationalism has become obsolete. Mukherjee seems to adopt a casual attitude to the social and political history of India. She does not offer proper historical contexts for important political events and presents a fictionalized account of her native country's recent past as authentic to the Western readers in an unconscious way to perpetuate the Orientalist project.

Her novels are likely to create a wrong image of India in their minds. In various interviews of Mukherjee it becomes clear that she has rejected the native history and embraced the contemporary history of America but this attitude of hers creates a gloomy and precarious position for India from the point of view of her future. It is enacted through the choice of her protagonists, Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* and the eponymous *Jasmine*. Both abandon their native identity steeped in the socio-cultural history of their motherland in pursuit of the American dream. Mukherjee's justification of her protagonists' decision to move to America creates an image of a regressive India that may rise or fall in future. This reflects her little understanding of Indian history and social reality. She is accused of misrepresenting Indian culture and society. It may be due to her schooling in the convent run by Irish nuns, her education and stay in foreign countries that she has a little grasp of the contemporary reality of India.

Mukherjee portrays India as backward and static society that needs transformation and presents the Western society as dynamic, modern and progressive. She considers the Europeans as superior and depicts the native Indians as inferior. She is evasive on the subject of the imperialist influence and exploitation in India that still exists in the independent India in invisible forms. In her novel *Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee presents a vision of India but it is not that of the contemporary India but it is the India of the past that emerges from the memories of her female protagonists. India exists in her characters Parvati and Padma's mind in the form of tradition and cultural memory. The image of India with its great tradition exists in the mind of Parvati. The Indian spiritual thought and her father's renunciation of worldly pursuits find reflection through her opinion about her father. Her character Tara is a migrant in America. She faces the problem of a double identity which is fluid. In America she reconstructs the idea of India, her homeland. Her sister Padma also experiences the double identity in the consumerist America. Though her dream to settle in America is fulfilled, she cannot forget her mother land i.e. India. She strives to preserve her Bengali tradition and her traditional identity in America. Thus her life in America cannot sever her cultural bond with India but rejuvenates it. Mukherjee presents her vision of India through the perspective of an expatriate Indian. In this novel Mukherjee presents a vision of her native country but it is not that of the contemporary India but it is the India of the past that emerges from the memories of her female protagonists.

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