

Rising from Shadows: The Fight for Female Identity in Bharathi Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee's oeuvre predominantly delves into the trials encountered by women amidst migration, the tensions stemming from cultural dissonance, and the ensuing sense of estrangement. Mukherjee's own life mirrors these themes; following her marriage, she relocated first to Canada and subsequently to the United States, where she grappled with substantial cultural conflicts that engendered a profound sense of alienation. This personal journey profoundly informs her literary work. Her female protagonists often navigate analogous psychological turmoil while steadfastly preserving their identities. Mukherjee's recent writings reinforce her status as a singular voice within American immigrant and multicultural literature.

Keywords: Emotional Turmoil, Gender and Feminine Identity, Cultural Conflict, Identity Crisis

Bharati Mukherjee's debut novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), explores diaspora themes through the character of Tara Banerjee, whose mental trauma parallels Mukherjee's own experiences. Tara, who marries a Canadian writer, faces cultural conflicts that threaten her Indian identity. Despite her determination to maintain her heritage, she feels increasingly alienated in her new environment, struggling with the complexities of dual identities and a belief in the superiority of her culture over Western norms. Upon returning to her village, she encounters a profound identity crisis, unable to reconnect with her roots and experiencing shame and loss. Mukherjee vividly portrays Tara's struggle with her conflicting identities and the trauma of navigating two cultures, illustrating her ultimate sense of isolation and frustration. The novel adeptly highlights Tara's quest for feminine identity as she, a Brahmin woman educated in America, confronts the challenges of cultural adjustment. Her internal struggle and feelings are poignantly conveyed through her narrative:

For Tara, Vassar had been an 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 ladylike in all emergencies, she would have rushed home to India at the end of her first week. (10)

Initially, Tara believes she can easily adapt to the new culture. However, as time passes, she comes to realize the challenges of integrating into this unfamiliar environment. Her situation becomes more

complicated when she marries Cartwright, an American Canadian writer. At first, she feels joy in marrying the person she loves. Over time, though, her initial happiness gives way to a deeper understanding of the difficulties she faces.

Bharati Mukherjee channeled her personal disillusionment with her birthplace into her novel *The Tiger's Daughter*, using the character of Tara to reflect her own inner turmoil. Ruth Maxey rightly opines:

Tiger's Daughter is several things at once: social satire; auto ethnography; political fiction seeking to reflect civil unrest, sociopolitical change, and the demagoguery of politicians in a transnational, post1968 setting and an epistolary, inter textual novel with nods to Shakespeare, English poets, and novelists galore as well as Satyajit Ray, Doris Day, Erle Stanley Gardner, and Ved Mehta. As a comedy of manners it relies upon specific set pieces to reflect the narrow parameters of Tara Cartwright's Calcutta world.

(11)

Mukherjee was deeply unsettled by the changes she observed upon returning to Calcutta after her marriage. In the novel, Tara Banerjee, daughter of a notable figure known as the Bengal Tiger, is sent to America at fifteen for her education due to worsening conditions in Calcutta. There, she faces intense alienation while striving to uphold her cultural heritage and family values. Despite her challenges, Tara seeks strength from the Goddess to endure American cultural pressures and finds solace among fellow Indians. Her situation becomes increasingly strained when she falls in love with an American named David, intensifying her sense of isolation as her Indian friends return to their families, leaving her feeling more alone and disheartened. In her dreams, she envisions:

She saw herself sleeping in a large carton on a sidewalk while hated men made impious remarks to her. Headless monsters winked at her from eyes embedded in pudgy shoulders.... She suffered fainting spells, headaches and nightmares....She complained of homesickness in letters to her mother, who promptly prayed to Kali to save Tara's conscience, chastity and complexion. (13)

Tara marries an American named David but is conflicted about her native culture. She perceives American ways as superior yet is reluctant to share her traditions with him. Her split identity and discomfort with her new environment amplify her doubts about India. She conceals her true feelings from David to avoid negatively portraying her homeland, but comments from her American friend Antonia prompt her to return to India, driven by dissatisfaction with her American life. Despite her desire to go home, she feels she belongs neither in America nor in India. In Bombay, Tara's Westernized outlook leads to disappointment. The familiar sights of her homeland now seem unclean and disheartening. Her former admiration for Marine Drive has turned into disdain, as she views India through a critical, Western lens, feeling increasingly alienated and disillusioned. "Tara, lagging behind with several nephews, thought the station was more like a hospital; there were so many sick and deformed men sitting listlessly on bundles and trunks" (19).

When Tara returns to Calcutta, she is dismayed by how much her homeland has changed. The city's violence and social turmoil shatter her idealized memories and leave her feeling disillusioned. Unlike Maya from Anita Desai's novels or Kim from Rudyard Kipling's stories, Tara finds no charm in India and instead seeks refuge in the Catelli-Continental Hotel. Her relatives, viewing her through a Western lens, criticize her for losing touch with her cultural roots. As she struggles to reconnect with them, Tara feels increasingly out of place and disconnected from her childhood memories.

Tara's interactions with her relatives reveal her internal struggle as she grapples with her Bengali identi-

ty and the challenges of adjusting to her native environment. Despite her attempts to reconnect with her past, she feels increasingly alienated from her family and friends. Her difficulties with fitting in and concerns about her marriage's reception add to her anxiety. Her friend Reena remarks, "Is it that you have changed too much, Tara? I mean, this is no moral judgment or anything, but you have become... European" (105).

Tara is acutely aware of the harsh realities of American life, where women face significant challenges and are often confined to domestic roles. It is fitting to quote Brinda Bose: Duality and conflict are not merely a feature of immigrant life in America; Mukherjee's women are brought up in a culture that presents them with such ambiguities from childhood. The breaking of identities and the discarding of languages actually begin early, their lives being shaped by the confluence of rich culture and religious traditions, on the one hand, and the new learning imposed by British colonialism in India, on the other. These different influences involve them in tortured processes of self-recognition and self-assimilation right from the start; the confusion is doubled upon coming to America. (50) Unlike her friends' idealized view of America, she knows firsthand about the violence and ghettos that mar the American experience. While her friends see her as a worldly traveler with romantic tales, Tara's reality is far less glamorous.

Each aerogramme caused her momentary panic, a sense of trust betrayed, of mistakes never admitted, Tara thought. In India she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner, and this foreignness was a burden. It was hard for her to talk about marriage responsibilities in Camac Street; her friends were curious only about the adjustments she had made. (62)

Her friends admire her foreign manners, etiquette, and fashion, but as conservative racial purists, they cannot accept her foreign marriage.

They liked foreigners in movie magazines- Nat Wood and Bob Wagner in faded Photoplays. They loved Englishmen like Worthington at the British Council. But they did not approve of foreign marriage partners. So much for the glamour of her own marriage, she had expected admiration from these friends; she had wanted them to consider her marriage an emancipated gesture. But emancipation was suspicious- it presupposed bondage. (86)

Tara's return to Calcutta reveals a profound disconnect from her homeland. She is disillusioned by the city's changes and struggles to reconnect with her Bengali identity, feeling alienated from her family and friends. Her retreat to the Catelli-Continental Hotel highlights her estrangement. Despite her attempts to bridge the gap between her American and Indian lives, Tara remains troubled. She feels marginalized on a psychological level and experiences a fragmented sense of self: "Tara was literally, neither here nor there. She was a misfit with her Calcutta milieu and she was always under stress in America- trying to be correct, trying not to be a gauche immigrant, trying to be American. Tara is intelligent, highly educated and capable of self-analysis. She is conscious of her instability, insecurity and unhappiness" (Chowdhury 95).

Tara finds India less appealing than she remembered and feels out of place both in her native environment and with her American husband, David. Her inability to recall traditional rituals and her frustration with cultural differences underscore her inner conflict. However, Rustomji Kerns also believes that Mukherjee intended for readers to feel uneasy about her characters: "Mukherjee has taken her own fears and struggles, as well as the fears and struggles of many among us who have remained without a voice to speak of the immigrant experience, and presented some of the more violent and grotesque aspects of cultural collisions" (35). Tara's eventual realization that she no longer feels at home

in either place leads to her decision to return to America. However, violence near her hotel marks a tragic end to her quest for identity, reflecting her deep sense of isolation and struggle between two worlds.

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