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## The Trauma of Torn Individuality in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*

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### Introduction

A cross-cultural writer Bharati Mukherjee is one of the lively and illuminating stars of the writings of the Diaspora. She had established herself as a powerful member of the American Literary scene. Her creative writings reflect her pride of her Indian heritage as well as her celebration of her American identity. She has captured the chaos of the 'melting pot theory' of South Asians particularly that of the experience of the Indian immigrants in America, very well in her novels and short- stories. In her creative span of more than four decades, she has produced several short- stories and eight famous novels, all delineating the underlying truth of cultural conflict.

Bharati Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) is a fine manifestation of cultural conflict. It is an extremely catching and interesting study of a Brahmin girl named Tara Banerjee who goes to America for higher studies. Being totally unaware of the American way of life, in the process of adjustment, she enters into wedlock with an American. When she returns to India after seven years she feels that she is a complete stranger to her inherited milieu. She spends her life in finding her real self that is, whether she is an Indian or an American, but arrives at no proper conclusion. Consequently, confusion reigns supreme.

As depicted in the novel, Tara Banerjee is the great granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee and the daughter of the Bengal Tiger, the owner of the famous Banerjee & Thomas (Tobacco) co. Ltd. At the early age of fifteen Tara goes to America for higher studies where encountering American life her reaction was 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 grand daughter 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.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 10)*

Hari Lal Banerjee was the Zamindar of village Pachapara. After the marriage of his daughters he fell a prey to an unseen assassin. With his death the reputation and influence of the Banerjee family also died. No one knew at that time that,

Years later a young woman who had never been to pachapara would grieve for the Banerjee family and try to analyse the reason for its change. She would sit by a window in America to dream of Hari Lal, her great grand father and she would wonder at the gulf that separated her from herself.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 9)*

This young woman is nobody else but Tara Banerjee. She always felt homesick in Poughkeepsie. She had become very sensitive and even a small unfavourable action offended her. For example, she felt discriminated if her room mates refused to share her bottle of mango chutney. As a typical Indian who is proud of its family, culture and country, she defended them all. She sometimes even breaks down and prays to goddess Kali for strength. When at the end of May, that first year abroad, girls around her prepared to go home, she was caught by a vision of terror:

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.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 13)*

The circumstances however forced her to fall in love with David, an American. Mukherjee's description of Tara's chance of meeting with David betrays her faith in the inevitable. To quote the novelist:

Within fifteen minutes of her arrival at greyhound bus station there (at Madison), in her anxiety to find a cab, she almost knocked down a young man. She did not know then that she eventually would marry that young man.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 14)*

She married David Cartwright, a westerner. Tara could not communicate to him about her family, her background and of life in Calcutta. This failure of communication is rooted in their

cultural differences. In India a marriage is not simply a union of two individuals, it is a coming together of two families as well. But in western countries like America, a marriage is simply a contract between two individuals. He asked credulous questions about Indian customs and traditions while she felt completely insecure in an alien atmosphere because after all her husband was a foreigner.

After a gap of seven years Tara plans a trip to India. For years she had dreamed of this return and she thinks that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of her stay abroad would be erased quite magically when she returns home to Calcutta, but this never happened. It was so because she was no more Tara Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin, but now she is Tara David Cartwright an Americanized lady – who fails to bring back her old sense of Indianness. Her entire outlook has changed. Shobha Shinde, a critic, refers to this expatriate weakness thus:

An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it.

*(Commonwealth Writing, 58)*

So does Tara in America but when she sees her own changed outlook, she feels broken. She realizes that she has lost her childhood memories in the crowd of America. Her landing at Bombay airport made her realize:

For five years she had dreamed of this return to India. She had believed that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could just return home to Calcutta. But so far the return had brought only wounds. First the corrosive hours on Marine drive, then the deformed beggar in the railway station, and now the inexorable train ride steadily undid what strength she had held in reserve. She was an embittered woman, she now thought, old and cynical at twenty two and quick to take offence.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 5)*

To her Bombay railway station was like a hospital where so many sick and deformed men were sitting listlessly on bundles and trunks. Even her nick name sounds strange to her Americanized ears.

Her seven years stay at Vassar had changed her outlook on life, though America did not fascinate her. Staying at her paternal house in a peaceful mind she recalls the images of New York:

New York, she thought now, had been exotic. Not because it had Laundromats and subways. But because there were 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 prices of rice or the stiffness of final exams. Because people were agitated over pollution. The only pollution, she had been warned against in Calcutta had been caste pollution. New York was certainly extraordinary, and it had driven her to despair.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 34)*

In America Tara was always under stress being conscious of her foreignness. She felt rootless but things do not appear better in India also. Tara herself wonders at the foreignness of her spirit which never permits her to develop any kind of emotional bonding with her friends and relatives. At one place, the novelist writes:

How does the foreignness of spirit begin?.....does it begin right in the centre of Calcutta, with forty ruddy Belgian women, fat foreheads swelling under starched white head-dresses, long black habits intensifying the hostility of the Indian sun?

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 37)*

She meets her friends but even their company can not soothe her. She recalls:

Seven years ago she had played with these friends, done her homework with Nilima, briefly fancied herself in love with Pronob, debated with Reena at the British Council. But now she feared their tone, their omissions, and their aristocratic oneness.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 43)*

Tara forgets the next step of ritual while preparing for worship with her mother and she realizes that it was not a simple loss. At once she becomes aware of what America has done to her because religion plays a central role in any culture and the forgetting of the ritual upsets her. This gradually leads her to develop a split personality:

When the sandalwood paste had been ground Tara scraped it off the shiny 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 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. But her mother came quickly with the relief of words.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 51)*

She begins to rethink over the validity of her identity. The only place she would find pleasure was The Catelli-Continental Hotel on Chowringhee Avenues and she spends much of her time in that hotel with her friends. Many parties, many teas and many dinners were hosted in the honour of Tara's return by her friends. At first Tara looks forward to these parties but later the

conversations of her friends aggravated her discomfort and unease in her marriage burdening her heart. It seemed to her that by marrying a foreigner she had committed all the seven deadly sins:

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 made.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 62)*

Tara notices a lot of change in her surroundings and feels agitated at the lack of seriousness in the group of her friends. Everybody wants to hear about her experiences in America. In this scenario, she misses David excessively. Though she writes to David regularly, she fails to communicate her feelings to him because:

It was hard to tell a foreigner that she loved him very much when she was surrounded by the Bengal Tiger's chairs, tables, flowers and portraits. How can she describe in an aerogramme the endless conversations at the Catelli- Continental, or the strange old man (Joyonto Roy Choudhury) in a blazer who tries to catch her eye in the cafe, or the hatred of aunt Jharna or the bitterness of slogans scrawled on walls of stores and hotels.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 63)*

Tara visits a funeral with Joyonto Roy Choudhury the owner of a tea estate in Assam. There she had an encounter with a Tantric who asks her hand for forecasting but she misunderstands his intentions and thinks that the man needs *bakshees*. This misunderstanding again shakes her belief in her identity. Joyonto Roy shows her the vast compound of Tollygunge which is now occupied by the refugees:

Tara was bewildered by her first view of the large and dusty compound. She thought if she had been David she would have taken out notebook and pen and entered important little observations. All she saw was the obvious goats and cows grazing in the dust, dogs chasing the friskier children, men sleeping on string beds under a banyan tree. Children playing with mud beside a cracked tube well. Rows of howels and huts.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 116)*

Tara loses her balance of mind when she sees a little girl suffering from leprosy and she almost screams out of fear of touching her. Tara had never been a part of the crowd. She had always been protected as a child and later as a woman. Disease, suffering and poverty are part of Indian existence and a common Indian ignores it or rather accepts it as an integral part of life. Once Tara also used to ignore all these, but her stay in the United States created a gulf between the lives of poor and those of rich in her own country. Like the people of the West now she had started looking at India as a land of poor people living in hostile, unhygienic conditions, quite

accustomed to sufferings, starvation, decay and disease. Tara also testifies to the fact that she has not been able to understand the complications of American culture. In this way her mind is constantly at conflict with the two personalities – one of an Indian and the other of an American. During such moments she feels like going back to David, her husband because she would be more at ease there.

Tara moves to Darjeeling with her family and friends for a brief holiday where she enjoys the evergreen beauty of hills, but some ugly and violent incidents destroy her trip. Like while accompanying Pronob and an American Lady Antonia on a horse ride, she is teased by some hooligans. Again she is insulted by one of the judges of the beauty contest, while giving some suggestion. All these incidents disturbed and troubled Tara's heart.

Everything appears frustrating and horrible to her on finding that conciliation is impossible and she frets to go back to David. She reserves a seat on a flight to New York. After a short while she becomes a victim of violence caused by the marchers who were proceeding towards the Catelli-Continental in a mob. The old man Joyonto Roy Choudhury is unfortunately killed by the mob. The end of Tara remains mysterious but it is predicted that she does not survive in the violence of the mob. Locked in the car she only thinks about her husband David, and the novel ends with these lines:

And Tara, still locked in the car across the street from the Catelli – Continental, wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she did not, whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 210)*

Thus Tara's journey to India, her own native land ironically proves frustrating gradually leading to illusion, alienation, depression and finally her tragic end. The greatest irony hidden in the story of Tara is that she survived the racial hardships in a foreign country where nothing unbecoming happens to her but she becomes a victim of her tragic end in her native soil, which she has longed to see since her stay in New York. Her desire to find a place of love and security which she missed in New York ends ironically in frustration, and the irony is that this Indian born woman feels greater love and security in the arms of her American husband and thinks only about him at the time when her end is approaching. In this way the immigrant's return to her own country proves frustrating both physically and metaphorically. The gulf of western liberation and Indianness cannot be bridged and Tara's psyche remains split like other immigrants.

In *The Tiger's Daughter* Mukherjee sets about exposing how it feels for a fifteen year old girl to leave a sheltered home hedged by class privilege and wealth and settle in an alien land. In her phase of womanhood she breaks all the social taboos by marrying a foreigner and then again coming back to her homeland to see whether she can find her place at home again. Tara Banerjee the main protagonist of the story, an upper class Indian Bengali Brahmin, finds herself sandwiched between two cultures. Her America, far from being a land of promise, is a land of violence and aristocracy. It is a land of strangers and all her attempts of assimilation proved to be a failure due to her otherness with the culture. She breaks her family tradition by marrying David who is an American. This action of Tara is an attempt to get security in an alien land. But again

her marriage proves to be a failure because it was an emotional marriage, a decision taken impulsively. In spite of trying hard she is not able to develop a compatibility with David while he and his society always remained different to her. Being in India she always wanted to communicate with her husband about her experience, but she could not. She was unable to write a letter to David because of the lack of suitable words and in an appropriate voice:

Her voice in these letters was insipid or shrill, and she tore them up, twinging at the waste of seventy five naya paise for each mistake.

*(The Tiger's Daughter, 65)*

This strangeness from David's side as well the non acceptance of her marriage by her friends and family made her feel that her marriage was a wrong decision of her life. Even when there is an encounter with the tantric, Tara does not want to show her palms to the tantric because she is conscious of her sin of marrying an American without matching her horoscope.

Tara's situation becomes miserable oscillating between the two identities one of an Indian Bengali woman, and other of an American wife. In an attempt to Americanize herself she loses her Indian identity miserably. Tara Banerjee is not only an immigrant but also a woman. This creates a difference in the Indian context. In India a woman's fate is decided very early in her life because the parents start discriminating between their male and female child from the very beginning. It is constantly hammered on the girl's consciousness that she has to move somewhere else so she must be submissive and assimilative in every situation. Thus a woman starts a life of duality and conflict since her childhood. After marriage she is in the hands of new people that belong to an entirely new set up. This in itself is a kind of migration – a migration from one's own former self to an imposed one. This conflict and duality gets multiplied with migration to another country, and Tara's situation should be looked at from this angle. Brinda Bose thinks in this context:

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.

(Nelson, 50)

Roshni Rustomji Kerns, however, describes her failure to her constant haunt regarding her role as a Bengali wife of an American or an American wife of an American:



Tara's petulance and constant nervousness regarding her role as a Bengali wife of an American, visiting her family in Calcutta; overshadows her well – intentioned efforts to understand her worlds of diverse cultures.

(*Massachusetts Review*, winter 1988-89, 657)

There is a strange fusion of the Americanness and the Indianness in the psyche of Tara and they are always confronting each other. She makes efforts to establish her American self but it always disturbed the Indianness within her. In her visit to Calcutta, her American self could not take the sight of the refugees in her own country. She behaves like western tourists.

The uneven road to Tollygunge troubles her a lot. She cannot bear the dust and foul smell of squalor. This outcome is because of her split self. Finally she becomes depressed and disgusted with the deteriorating situation of India finding it difficult to adjust with the situation, desiring to go back to the USA to her husband.

Tara realizes that America has transformed her completely. She is not able to give an Indian outlook to her own country. Now she finds only disease, despair, riot and poverty in India and it is the ugly aspect that borders her consciousness. In her mind there is always an ongoing conflict between her old sense of perception for country and her changed outlook. To quote Jasbir Jain, a critic, in this context:

Tara's consciousness of the present is rooted in her life in the states and when she looks at India anew it is not through her childhood associations or her past memories but through the eyes of her foreign husband David. Her reactions are those of a tourist, of a foreigner.

(*Journal of Indian Writing in English*, 13)

To conclude, Bharati Mukherjee has very deftly handled the inner psyche of the culturally uprooted expatriates. Their trials of adjusting themselves to a new culture and the traumas of their torn individuality are very well reflected in the character of Tara. Tara is shocked to find herself unable to sing the particular *bhajan*, an Indian devotional song, which she used to sing in her childhood. She has an intense desire to behave like an ordinary Indian but her rerooted self in America has made such common rituals alien to her. She is haunted by the question of her identity, as to who she is and which place she belongs to. Tara is really astonished and wonders how this foreignness of spirit begins in her heart. Bharti Mukherjee writes:

How does the foreignness of spirit begin? Tara wondered, does it begin right in the centre of Calcutta, with forty ruddy Belgian women, fat foreheads swelling under starched white head dresses, long black habits intensifying the hostility of the Indian sun? The nuns had taught her to inject the right degree of venom into word like. Common and vulgar... Did the foreignness drift inward with the winter chill at Vassar, as she watched

the New York snow settle over new architecture, blonde girls, Protestants  
Matrons and Johnny Mathis?

(*The Tiger's Daughter*, 37)

What the critic actually finally arrives at is that the distance Tara has traversed cannot be retraced as there is no way out, for the immigration is not only of the place but of the mind too. It is impossible for the immigrants to again relate themselves with their own country, and this is what Bharati Mukherjee has presented in *The Tiger's Daughter*.

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