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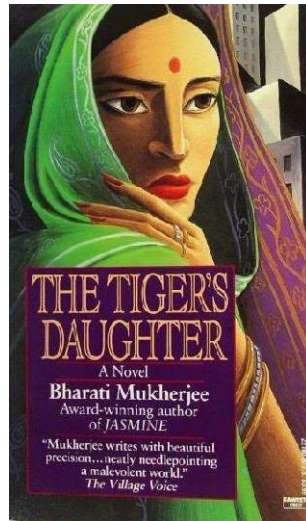
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Cross-Cultural Conflict in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee, an India-born American novelist, is a familiar voice in the Indian Diaspora. Her fiction depicts the cross-cultural crisis faced by her women in her novels. She found herself

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difficult to adapt to the culture, customs, and traditions, which she depicts through her female protagonists' cultural crisis.

Bharati Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) deals with an upper caste Bengali girl named Tara Banerjee Cartwright, who goes to America for higher studies..

This paper throws light on the cross-cultural conflict of the 22-year old heroine when she revisits India after a seven-year stay in the United States. It highlights the cultural turmoil faced by Tara when she refuses to accept Calcutta as her home again. This paper also analyses how Tara, caught in a gulf between the two contrasting worlds, leads to her illusion, depression, and finally her tragic end in a violent incident. The author also attempts to portray how the novelist herself intimately projects her own self through the heroine in this novel.

Fusion of American and Indian Traits

The Tiger's Daughter and *Wife* are about two different problems of expatriates. *The Tiger's Daughter*, Mukherjee's first novel, is about the cultural conflict of Tara Banerjee, a Bengali girl, who goes to America for higher studies at the age of sixteen. Having married a white American, she returns home for a holiday trip to visit her parents. The fusion of Americanness and Indianness in the mind of Tara and the resulting of split personality due to the cultural conflict is the theme of the novel. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Mukherjee creates a heroine Tara, who like herself, returns to India after several years in the West to discover a country quite unlike the one she remembered. Memories of a gentle lifestyle are usurped by new impressions of poverty, hungry children and political unrest.

Bengal Tiger

The novel is given an interesting title, which can be variously interpreted. The novel's location is Bengal. Bengal is known for its Tiger. Bengal's well-known Hindu deity is Kali, a fearsome goddess, who rides on a tiger or lion. Perhaps, Tara is compared to Kali, who tames the powerful force and rides on the powerful animal. Valiance amidst adversity is represented here. Tara Banerjee, the protagonist of the novel, is from Bengal. *Bengal Tiger* is also the nick name her father earned because of his entrepreneurship.

Tara's heritage does not begin with her father. Her grand-father Harilal Banerjee was also a renowned *zamindar*. Bengal tiger represents not only elegance, awe, strength, vitality and vigor but also money - Indian coins used to have the visual of a powerful and vibrant Bengal tiger! Tara comes from a prosperous and powerful family. Tara, who is portrayed as a daughter of a tiger, represents all these characteristics, undergoes tremendous strain and stress and intellectual confusion, and creates her own cage because of her reasoning prowess. When liberation was in sight, her life is snatched away by violent hunters.

Last but not the least is an amusing feature. *White tiger* has become an interesting phenomenon in several zoos around the world, including those in India, Kali is also the name of the rare white

tiger in the Knoxville Zoo (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zv1Yg-Iea10>). Does it mean that the cub of an original Bengal Tiger becomes a *White Tiger*, losing some of her original features and adopting some strange features alien to her? A semantic nuance or meaning born out of contradictory terms? Tara's reincarnation - predicament, misunderstanding, incomprehension in her cross-cultural encounter - is brought out more vividly through this metaphor.

Leaving Home Land to Study in a Far Off Land

At the age of fifteen, Tara goes for higher study. "For Tara, Vassar had been an unsalvageable mistake" (10). In Poughkeepsie, Tara, senses discrimination when her roommate refuses to share her bottle of Mango chutney. So she feels sad and homesick. She is unable to share her thoughts with pale dry skinned girls. Choudhury observes in this connection:

She had been desperately homesick, lonely, and desperate to belong - in fact she was in the typical position of an immigrant. ... She had to adjust to things which had been outside the purview of her previous idea of life as a hole. (82)

Defending Her Family and Her Country in America

Like other Indians she defends her family and her country. She also prays to Goddess Kali for strength, so that she would not break down before Americans. New York has driven her to despair. Here, in the beginning she could not digest the culture of the United States because of her deep-rooted Indianness. As ill luck would have it, Tara falls in love with an American named David and marries him. David is totally western and Tara finds it difficult to communicate the finer nuances of her family background and of her life in Calcutta. It was because of the cultural difference. "Her husband asked naïve questions about Indian customs and traditions. She felt insecure in an alien atmosphere. Madison Square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner" (Shinde quoted in R. K Dhawan 50).

Permanent Loss of Old Perceptions

In the second part, when Tara visits India after seven years, she fails to bring back her old sense of perception and views India with a keenness of a foreigner. She is now totally Americanized. In India, she finds herself a total stranger in the inherited milieu. She experiences a cultural shock. Tara is confused because "her old milieu, her family, her ideas of yore seem to confront the 'American' Tara as it were." (Choudhury 82). She feels herself a misfit at her home and among friends. Tara finds in India nothing to her liking and she realizes that there is no escape from Calcutta. As Shoba Shinde has rightly observed, "An immigrant away from home idealises his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it" (58) and Tara does the same in America.

When Tara comes back to India, she confronts a restive city which forces weak men to fanatical defiance and dishonesty. In spite of her Americanized personality, the Indian pulse vibrating in

Tara makes her realise that the life in Calcutta, in spite of all the dark spots and drawbacks, has its own features, not found anywhere else and which her husband David would not be able to recognize. However, the Americanism dominates her Indianness and she looks at her home through her Americanised eyes.

Loss of Indian Identity and Sensitivity

Tara has no more an Indian identity and is always in clash with the culture of her native soil. The clash is deeply felt in the psyche of Tara who finds it difficult to adjust with her friends and relatives in India; and sometimes with the traditions of her own family. At the Bombay airport she responds to her relatives in a cold and dispassionate manner. When her relatives call her “Tul Tul” it sounds strange to her Americanised ears. The railway station looks like a hospital with so many sick and deformed men sitting on the bundles and trunks. In the compartment she finds it difficult to travel with a Marwari and a Nepali. Now she considers America a dream land. When surrounded by her relatives and vendors at the Howrah railway station Tara feels uncomfortable. It is likely that she hates everyone and everything in India where she was born, brought up and taught many values, all because of her acculturation in America.

A Misfit in Indian Surroundings – Feeling Alienated

Her personality now resists digesting the changed atmosphere in her native place and in her friends. Slowly her changed personality makes her a misfit in the company of her old friends. She feels alienated when her relatives call her ‘Americawali’ and her husband ‘mleccha’. The foreignness of her spirit refuses to establish an emotional kinship with her old friends and relatives. The greatest irony of her return is that she feels loneliness in her native land.

Pretentious Pious Life

Tara’s mother Arati is a saintly woman and she spends a great deal of time in her prayer room. At home Tara is compelled to lead a pious life. Her mother urges her to sit and listen to Sanskrit slogans, but she tries to tolerate prayers and Saraswathi Poojas. For Tara, who could sing ‘Ragupati ragava raja ram’ it has now become artificial to sing the song after her return from America.

Constant Conflict

Tara’s mind is constantly at conflict with the two personalities – one of an Indian and the other of an American. Caught in the gulf between these two contrasting worlds, Tara feels that she has forgotten many of her Hindu rituals of worshipping icons she had seen her mother performing since her childhood. It is the American culture that has covered Tara like an invisible spirit or darkness. In the deepest core of her heart, Tara has an intense desire to behave like an ordinary Indian but her re-rooted self in America made such common rituals alien to her. . She realises that she has become rootless now. She is convinced of her “... little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and centre” (54)

When her mother requests to share piety with the family, she thinks "... in the end she would not stay" (54). She has become an outsider looking at her own life, from outside. She sees everything with an American eye and comments on everything from the point of view of an Americanised Indian. She finds herself marginalized on the psychological level and suffers from a split self.

Give Us All Foreign Things, But No Marriage to Foreigners!

The third part of the novel deals with Tara's life at Calcutta with her Catelli-Continental friends. She hopes that her friends would offer peace to her confused mind. To her surprise, they behave in a different way. "Her friends let slip their disapproval of her, they suggested her marriage had been imprudent, that seven years abroad had eroded all that was fine and sensitive in her Bengali nature" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 55). The attitude of her friends that they approve foreign manner, foreign etiquette, foreign fashions but they do not approve the foreign marriage ironically makes a criticism of the conservative attitude of the Indians who feel crazy for foreign things and dresses and items but they do not approve marriage with foreign people. The novelist, through Tara, calls them "racial purists" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 86)

A Foreigner to Both Friends and Family

When Tara writes to David regularly she fails to communicate her feelings and failures in her homeland. Tara becomes confused for she cannot share her feelings with her American husband. She remains a foreigner both to her husband and to her friends. Her foreignness seems to be a 'double-edged weapon' M. Sivaramakrishna comments on her feelings of rootlessness and lack of identity thus:

Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* finds it difficult to relate herself to her family, city, culture in general since her marriage to an American, her western education are enough signs to brand her as an 'alienated' westernized woman. The implicit logic is that since she is exposed to the west and has absorbed its values she must be necessarily alienated. (74)

Conflict between Old Sense of Perception and Changed Outlook

Tara is able to understand the changes in her personality due to her total Americanisation. Inspired by her Westernization, she cannot face the disease and despair, riot and poverty of people in Calcutta. There occurs a conflict in her mind between her old sense of perception in Calcutta and her present changed outlook. Jasbir Jain observes in this connection:

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 (13)

Tara's stay in the States has changed her view and vision of India. It has opened her eyes to the gulf between the lives of the poor and those of the rich in her own country. Being a westernized Indian she looks at India as a land of the poor living in a poor environment and suffering from starvation and disease.

Beyond Calcutta

The fourth part of the novel deals with Tara's visit to Darjeeling and her coming back to Calcutta with the sense of boredom and alienation and her final victimization in a mob. Unable to reconcile with these things, Tara feels like going back to America. But to entertain her, her friends make her a trip to Darjeeling to spend her summer. But Tara gets consolation and peace nowhere. She becomes upset when a heart specialist passes sarcastic remarks on her: "I think your years abroad have robbed you of your feminine propriety" (*The Tiger's Daughter*, 187).

At Nayapur, when she happens to meet one Marwari named Tuntunwala, it leads to her rape by this wicked man. But Tara hides this incident of seduction from others for fear of disgrace.

She could not share her knowledge of Tuntunwala with any of her friends. In a land where a friendly smile, an accidental brush of fingers, can ignite rumors – even lawsuits - how is one to speak of Mr. Tuntunwala's violence (199).

Here, because of her acculturation, Tara looks down upon Indian culture, as a typical westerner. She is unhappy about the conservative culture of India in which she was brought up as an orthodox girl in a disciplined rural environment.

Rapid Violent Incidents – Irony of Situations

The ending of the novel is full of rapid and violent incidents. Calcutta is burning with the violent agitations of labourers against their masters. The discovery that Tara makes at the end of the novel is that the greenery and the forests that she had associated with the India of her childhood, her version of pastoral – were no longer there, something or the other had "killed" them (*The Tiger's Daughter* 207) "In New York she had dreamt of coming back to Calcutta, but "the return had brought only the wounds" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 25).

When everything becomes frustrating and horrible to Tara, she finally decides to go back to America. While returning home, after booking a flight ticket to New York, Tara becomes a victim of violence, caused by the violent agitators.

The irony of the novel is that Tara who survived racial hardships in a foreign country comes to her native soil seeking peace is at last killed in her native land. Her desire to find a place of love and security ends in frustration of death.

A Tragic Story of Internal and External Conflicts and Death

Bharati Mukherjee's life is a story of exile, expatriation and dispossession that constitute her unique diasporic consciousness which is responsible for her creative expression. Therefore, her writings largely reflect her personal experience in cross-cultural boundaries.

Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist Tara suffers from the cultural turmoil as the novelist herself suffered in her real life. It seems that the novelist, in fact, projects herself through the character of Tara, a victim of split personality and identity crisis. One can find Mukherjee's shadow behind her characters. This novel is autobiographical for it reflects the cross-cultural experience of Mukherjee and her feeling of disinheritance.

Thus, the novel is designed to capture the predicament - the cultural conflict - of someone returning to one's homeland after a period of self-imposed exile: to such a person, home will never be home again, and a life in exile in an alien country or the expatriation is more desirable than what "home" has become.

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