

## Diasporic Palpitation in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*

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### **Abstract**

*Bharati Mukherjee successfully portrays the journey of a woman through her novels with extreme sensibility. Her protagonists pass through a phase of growth, self-discovery, alienation and a conflict of generations which leads her from innocence to knowledge. Women have often been victims of male coercion and treated like beasts of burden. The last few decades have witnessed a remarkable change in the outlook of women in Indian English fiction and it have been mainly because of numerous female writers in India who view this subject in their unique way. They have transformed the formulaic suffering woman to an aggressive or independent person trying to seek identity of her own through her various relationships within the family and in the society. It is an extremely contagious and fascinating study of a Brahmin girl named Tara Banerjee in the *Tiger's Daughter* who moves to America for higher education. Tara's heritage does not*

*begin with her father. Tara who is portrayed as a daughter of Tiger, represents all these characteristics, under goes tremendous strain and stress and intellectual confusion, and creates her own cage because of her reasoning prowess.*

**Key words:** aggressive, contagious, innocence, numerous, tremendous.

Mukherjee in her writings reflects that the basic idea is self-empowerment, which is essential for any human being. She has tried to create a new relationship between man and woman based on equality, non-oppression, non-exploitation so that the creative potentials of both are maximized as individuals and not gender dichotomies. The novel's location is Bengal. It 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 forces and rides on the powerful animal. Valiance amidst adversity is represented here. Being



totally ignorant of the American custom, in the procedure of alteration, she enters into wedlock with a foreigner named David. He is totally western and Tara finds difficult to communicate the nuance of the family backgrounds of her life in Calcutta.

The novel begins with Tara's revisit to India after seven years in America early as a student at Vassar and later as the Indian wife of her foreign husband, David Cartwright. When she landed at Bombay her relatives are all at the airport to welcome her. She is introduced as 'the American auntie' to the little nephews. Her stay in America has given her this sort of introduction. Her depression starts at this stage when she notices the variation found in the behavior of her own relatives. Tara compares and contrasts her ideas on India that she had seen during her childhood days and India she sees now. The relatives are reluctant to send her alone in train. But, she asserts that she had no fear and she can travel with two men who happen to be her co-passengers. They find the Americanism in her that she has gained through seven years stay in America. This was the reason at times for her feeling of being ostracized. It is a nightmare for her aunt for a girl to

travel with two men spending two nights on the train. However, America has given her the power and hope to have such travel.

Tara feels thrilled to travel in an Indian train. She thinks of her travels in airplanes and Greyhound buses. She is often vexed about her husband David. Such thought of Tar reveals her affection and love towards her husband, David wherever she is. She longs for his nearness. They diagnosed her melancholy as "love sickness", and offered to cable David to join her in Calcutta. For nice Bengalis, thought Tara, to be depressed was to be stupid. Tara wonders at the Nepali and Mr.P.K. Tuntunwala, the Marwari's attempts to impress through their talks on various subjects. Tara is in a very lonely feeling and this shows the brimming of love for a husband though married to an American. According to her, David is the male in her life after her father, the Bengal Tiger. Tara's self-analysis brings about an unhappy conclusion. For years, she has dreamt of a return to India. She believes that her heart will be filled with content if she could just return home to Calcutta. But it has only reopened fresh wounds. Everything seems merely alien and hostile. This hostility kindles the barrenness in her

consciousness. The co- passengers, Ratan and Mr.P.K. Tuntunwala boast about themselves. At school, Tara has learned gentle humor to put them back in their places. But, her seven years stay in America has refined her. She forgets all her teenage humors. Later she manages them. These men have desecrated her shrine of nostalgia. Her fear of being lost in the dissatisfactions pushes her psyche towards dejection. The scenes at Howrah stations outrage her. It is overcrowded and confusion prevails everywhere. Her earlier thoughts of Calcutta slowly start to disintegrate. Coolies knock her down as they came to help her. An attendant sneezes on her raincoat and offers an old dusty rag to wipe the mess. A blind beggar who slips in and begins to sing, rattling his cup is physically thrown out of the train by Tuntunwala. Tara's parents and relatives have come to receive her in two small delivery trucks from the tobacco firm. But, now that they were actually in front of Tara, they had nothing to say to her. After the journey from Bombay, Tara takes rest for a full forty eight hours. Tara and her mother visit her aunt Jharna's house in the Southern Avenue. Her husband Sachin died of Cancer and the child of her is clubfooted.

Tara in order to spare herself the humiliation of the scene asks aunt Jharna whether she has tried plaster casts and special shoes. But the words of Aunt Jharna make her embarrassed. She considers her as an American and does not consider her consoling words. She had not remembered the Bombay relatives' nickname for her. No one had called her Tultul in years; her parents called her Taramoni when they wanted to show special affection. It was difficult to listen to these strangers. A fortnight after her return to India Tara receives a letter from her American husband, David Cartwright. From the letter she thinks that David has not understood her country through her that probably he has not understood her either. This creates a monstrous fear in her. At once other suspicions and questions quickly appear. Arati, Tara's saintly mother no longer loves her due to her willful abundant of her caste by marrying a foreigner. Her mother is offended that she, no longer is a real Brahmin.

Transgression of these unsaid rules is treated as a sacrilegious act. This facet of gender conditioning is discernible in character sketched of Arati, Tara's mother.



She is depicted as a religious and ‘saintly woman’, who spent a great deal of time in the prayer room (TTD 47). Given to religious dreams she regularly sings Bhajans and makes small prophecies. Whereas Mukherjee is careful to portray her husband with sufficient individual details, her treatment of Arati is rather sketchy. She has been given a stock description. She comes across as a traditional wife and mother who dittoes her husband’s desires and is embarrassed when Tara asks uncomfortable questions to her Aunt Jharna. When she revisits to India after seven years she thinks that she is an absolute stranger to her native. Tara splurges her life in searching her actual self that is, whether she is an Indian or an American, but lands at no proper conclusion. As a result, mystification reigns ultimate. In this jaunt to Bengal her husband became very enthralled by the contiguous magic of the myth and culture of Bengal. The story gets its stature when the political picture of Calcutta gets discovered by Tara after coming back to the country. Mukherjee addresses personal difficulties of being caught between two worlds, homes and cultures and is an assessment of whom the protagonist is and where she fits in. The

novel represents about an East Indian immigrant who is not capable of regulating to North American culture. Nevertheless at the same time she is devastatingly conscious of the verity that she will never return to the culture again.

Tara recalls the occasion when an Australian religious fanatic was invented to stay in their house for a fortnight. Arati tries to keep him out of the prayer room. Her own reason of justification is that she trusts them only when they were in proper place. She is disturbed by the authentic religious emotions of her mother and her forgetting of the prescribed rituals makes her an alien in her own house. As a child, Tara remembers that she has sung Bhajans and Raghupati Raghava Rajaram in this house but now some invisible spirit of darkness has covered her like skin. She is unable to satisfy the simple request to share piety with her family. “The witnessing of riots is the fear factor of Tara’s insecure feeling. The scenes of a riot make her heartbeat of the slogan ‘Blood bath.’” (TTD 171) The incidents in the riot frighten her and make her long for the presence of her husband at times of terrible thoughts. In India, she feels that she is married to a foreigner and this foreignness



brings a sort of burden. David is hostile to genealogies and often mistakes her affection for the family as overdependence. She later wishes that she would have come to India with her husband. The Indian feeling of Tara binds her memories with her husband in spite of his absence. The incidents that push her towards frustration and dejection occur without interval and so automatically, her consciousness becomes depressed. Riots, brutal rape, politics make her take this decision. She regrets for not being accompanied by David. She finds it a wrong decision to have come alone. The death of a three-year old kid during the protest makes her realize the seriousness of the riots. In an encounter with Mr.P.K. Tuntunwala in the carnival, Tara is surprised and shocked to hear his address, attacking communists in Calcutta, general strikes, looting of private homes and predicting murders of rival leaders. Mr.P.K. Tuntunwala seems to be a dangerous man. He can create whatever situation, whatever catastrophe he needs. Tara tries to avoid him. Finally, she becomes a prey to his desire. Tara is unable to get out of the impending danger in spite of being aware of the quick arrival of it through this politician. The adverse state of

politics and politician without any consideration towards the needy and the poor put Tara in a state of dilemma and repression. The condition of India creates profound jealousy over America. Tara reveals her hatred towards present Calcutta.

Tara realizes that her previous thoughts about Calcutta seem to shatter and the present Calcutta menaces her. She tells Reena that things begin to upset her and she has been outraged by Calcutta. She longs for the Bengal of Satyajit Ray and children running through cool green spaces. But, she begins to hate Calcutta as it has given her kids eating yogurt off dirty sidewalks. Reena responds in a different way. "How is it you've changed too much Tara?" Reena asked "I mean this is no moral judgment or anything, but you've become too self-centered and European" (TTD 105). The changes Tara has made to her own life only make her more vulnerable when she returns makes herself and her education appear 'an almost unsolvable mistake' (TTD 10). She can no longer share her mother's piety or father's strength. But neither can she share the idle abandonment of her friends. At an extreme, she is troubled by the strange, absurdly incongruous figure of Joyonto Roy

Chowdhury, the rich old man who has given up, whose compound in Tollygunge has been taken over by squatters.

Tara feels more like an American rather than an Indian when someone, even a very close person criticizes her thoughts and words. Tara, bewildered in Camac Street writes a letter to David. She admits poverty as art which Americans will never master, by illustrating her Tollygunge trip. Tara confides the regrets to her husband in her letters to him. And, David too mails so many letters to her. Though these letters give temporary relief, Tara feels more depressed as days pass by. A depressed mind can never be consoled without proper guidance and counseling. The letters seemed to Tara to make the same points. David was outraged. He accused her of “stupid inanities” and “callousness.” He thought the customs she praised merely degraded the poor in India. (TTD 131) Tara recalls frustrating moments at Vassar when idealistic dormitory neighbors ask her to describe the slums of India. She thinks that Joyonto is taking them to see a real bustee. But, there she visualizes certain senses that make her think that she would have refused Joyonto’s invitation. It is an exposure to ugliness and danger to

viruses that stalk the street, to dogs and cows scrapping in garbage dumps. Her observations are obvious. The life-style of the bustee-dwellers annoys her. She is embarrassed to watch the conditions of the squatters and their children. Finally, Calcutta begins to lose its joyful childhood memories in the mind of Tara when she sees a little girl raising her arms for an offer.

The starvation, collusions, dilapidated houses and the demolished crew before her seem to be the real vision of modern India. What confronts her is a restive city, which forces weak men to fanatical defiance or dishonesty. The newspapers are full of epidemics and fatal quarrels, which make her feel, estranged in her homeland. She faces a more different Calcutta than that she had left behind when she emigrated from her nation of origin. The Darjeeling trip makes her take the imminent step to return to the United States especially she longs for the nearness of her husband, David. Tara at first is happy at the thought of going up to Darjeeling as she considered it a relief from Calcutta. But the later incidents lead her to think that she should have avoided such a trip. She feels Darjeeling to be a happy place for death.



Tara is moved by her first full view of the hill station. Compelled into self-analysis, Tara discovers that her seven years abroad have not been the sole source of her cultural alienation in India.

In fact, she traces the roots of her alienation, not to America, where she had “Watched the New York snow settle over new architecture, blonde girls, protestant matrons and Johnny Mathis” (TTD 37). But, to her native Calcutta among her Camac Street friends, she seems to be an eccentric and an imprudent creature whose marriage has been a reason that bars her from sharing the dependence on her St. Blaise’s friends. She is identified through her husband’s identity, an Indian way of approach. Her identity as an Indian and as a friend begins to erode. She is seen as an immigrant wife of an American husband. This alienation screens on the loss of her identity. The loss of identity that she has never expected is the reason for the sadness. They fluttered around her in the parlor, anxious for news and for snaps of her husband. They were hysterical with pleasure when she produced a pass-port size photograph from David’s latest letter because she considered his observation frighteningly appropriate. Tara

feels proud to hear her father’s comment on David as a brilliant and lovable boy. The Bengal Tiger reveals his vigorous dreams about his old age. Tara feels emotional and energetic to note her father’s wish of settling in America during his old age. The visit to Mayapur, a new township in a complex of coalmines, steel foundries and plants for hydro-electricity make Tara, a victim. Tata’s belief on Tuntunwala shatters when he tries to seduce her. The seduction of Tara has been executed with no apologies or recriminations. Her depressions intensify when she reads the letters of David during the monsoons as she is reminded of her infidelity either voluntarily or involuntarily. Tara tells her parents about her preparation to return to David and the United States. She decides that it was high time for her to bid farewell to India and move to America. Though the Bengal Tiger and his wife are unable to face Tara’s new implacable and firm determination, they pray that the last days of Tara’s holiday not to be interrupted by the riots. David’s letters during the monsoons also intensified her depression. He wrote that he had been reading Ved Mehta’s journals on India and that even in New York they brought home to him the

dangers that surrounded her every day. He told Tara he saw Calcutta as the collective future in which garbage, disease, and stagnation are man's estate. Though the Bengal Tiger tried to protect her from the excesses of the city, Tara told her parents that she was preparing to return to David and the United States. Tara frightens over the effects of racism when she views the fierce-looking men armed with bamboo poles and axes in approaching Catelli-Continental. The moment of cultural contestation symbolized by the Naxalite rebellion fractures the immigrant's remembered unity of home.

Being locked in a car outside the Catelli-Continental Hotel, Tara is unable to tolerate the terrible condition prevailing in Calcutta. Tara is surrounded by a violent mob of Naxalite protesters. Pronob's head bleeding due to the mob's horrific act of throwing a soda bottle and Joyonto's poor condition of being kicked and tossed by the same mob's are incidents that give a very insecure feeling to Tara. Joyonto seems part of the panic, the surreal which surface here, which has no issue, it seems but violence and death. The cultural unavailability is well understood by the rude acts of the rioters

towards the old man Joyonto. The acts of the marchers are precise because Tara views a Calcutta far from her cultural demands.

The cult of violence gaining ground in public life in Calcutta and the American culture she is introduced to by her husband David make her new to both situations. Later she prefers David and thereby America. She finds no real pleasure in calling on relatives, attending get-together parties. Her analysis of its genesis makes her realize the spirit of forgiveness and the sense of alienation. It also undermines the unassailability of Calcutta as a place in which Tara believes she can locate and secure her identity as "a Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin, the great-grand daughter of Hari Lal Banerjee" (TTD 10). She is innocent and passive in her family situation. Tara is all the time conscious about the distinction between Indian values and American tradition. She fails to assimilate the American society and Calcutta with its distinctive culture and the nostalgia of Bengali tradition which haunts her.

Tara suffers from chronic feelings of threat, insecurity, and intolerance to the forces operating within her and upon her in





her struggle to survive and to maintain the integrity of herself. Alienation perverts all human values. The result is that fails to develop the good conscience and free moral value of humanity. Tara stands in splendid, tragic isolation. She resigns herself to aloneness, receives shocks and reaps disappointments. She tries to give up her new independents in order to regain her old scrutiny. She is not free to live, to develop and to enjoy her life properly. The voice of the women is yet to be heard though women

in India have been fortunate enough to occupy high and honorable places of power.

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