

# Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*: A Study in Incongruous Relations

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## Abstract

*Bharati Mukherjee's novel, The Tiger's Daughter brilliantly portrays the trauma and plight of an immigrant woman psyche, which is full of incongruities in so many shades and shadows. Displacement and the multicultural reality in the process of assimilation is quite natural, confrontation with these multiculturalism ethos may lead to imbalanced personality. Tara, is an example of a weak personality with a flaw in her character that leads her towards the struggle in maintaining balance in her relationships eventually spoiling her life and failing to maintain her relationships at all levels. The paper throws light on the fact that the parents caught up in the rat race of society should understand the limitations of their children. A modest attempt has been made by the researchers in portraying the protagonist as an agonist who fails to adjust with those important people who act as touchstone in her life.*

**Keywords:** agonist, confrontation, displacement, incongruity, touchstone.

The novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* brilliantly portrays the trauma and plight of an immigrant woman psyche, which is full of incongruities in so many shades and shadows. Lack of harmony at different levels, along with identity crisis hinders the adjustment process of woman protagonist of the novel. She walks in despair and meets to her doom.

Ruth Maxey rightly **observes:**

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, post-1968 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. (*Understanding Bharati Mukherjee* 11)

Tara, the protagonist has been educated in western ways since her childhood. Pragmatic approach is followed

when she is sent to St. Blaise's in Calcutta, where she has been taught all about decency and femininity, maintaining the conscious adherence to Western ways. She has been delineated as a sensitive person full of ethnic imagination and faces cultural heterogeneity. She seems to be tossed in an environment of ambivalence, subjugation and sees herself as sojourner from an alien shore. Displacement and the multicultural reality in the process of assimilation is quite natural, confrontation with these multiculturalism ethos may lead to imbalanced personality. Tara, is an example of a weak personality with a flaw in her character that leads her towards the struggle in maintaining balance in her relationships eventually spoiling her life and failing to maintain her relationships at all levels. Bharati Mukherjee speaks about her debut novel:

When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society ... I attempt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is

to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country (An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee 3).

Mukherjee has figured Tara, as a blessed child. She is a daughter of Bengal Tiger, a wealthy open minded person, who raised her up with all lavish facilities and sent her to convent, keeping in mind her future prospects and her interest. Moreover, he sent her to Vassar, speculating her inclination towards foreign culture. Tara, on the contrary, fails to return his love and care. Neither she confides her new experiences and problems, nor she reveals the fact that she wants to come back when she says, "As each atom of newness bombarded her she longed for Camac street where she had grown up." (*The Tiger's Daughter* 10) She is not sure about her holiday stay. She complains of homesickness but not very firm on that. When her adviser, who is concerned about her and notices her loneliness through her behaviour, suggests some task to engage her, but she does not co-operate rather makes the following irrelevant remark:

Do you type?" Tara thought a table lamp could throw a cruel shadow of middle age spinster "no "she answered, tracing the blocks of light and dark with an imagery finger "my father's secretary goes out of his way to help us. When Rajah Cocker Spaniel died and we were so heartbroken, he even arranged a sacred night burial for him without waiting for our permission. He's always done everything, all our typing etc. That's why I've never had to learn, you see. (14)

Tara never shares her problems with her friends but feels as if they are envying her freedom and cannot be empathetic towards her problems. While they send her elaborated letters updating her about the life in Calcutta to manifest their concern, she fails to catch their affection. When she goes to buy some products for them, she does not do that out of compassion or a sense of belonging towards them, but she does so to perpetuates this relationship reluctantly only to show loyalty towards them. She gets apprehensive when they show their concern. Following excerpt from the novel proves this:

Tara's Camac Street friends did not forget her. They wrote her long and beautiful letters, meticulously addressed with periods and commas; in their letters

they complained wittily of boredom in Calcutta, the movies at the metro, the foul temper of the whiskered nun from Mauritius, the weather's beastliness but not once they detect Tara's fears. (10)

Tara is diffident to follow her parent's advice, when she imagines herself in love with a student Manik Mukherjee during her studies. On the other hand her father, without any objection, not only approves her interest but also takes a step ahead and inquires all about the boy. Tara, herself shows a circumspect attitude, and marries David Cartwright without informing them. She does so, either to show her resentment towards them, or she wants to exhibit herself capable enough in taking her life's decision, but fails in establishing harmony in this relationship too.

She refuses to accept David as her husband and does not adopt his title Cartwright. Further, she does not share her family background with him, while he shares all about his family and background. Only a fortnight after her return to India, her relations with him also gets incongruous. While latter shows his concern towards her, shares his activities at Vassar, tells him about his purchase, but she infers it as her husband does not consider her capable enough to explain about India and so, he has bought books on India and without any solid reason assumes as he has lost interest in her. This can be proved with the following quote:

So David had bought books on India this innocent information enraged Tara. She thought letter was trying to her that he had not understood her country through her, that probably he had not understood her either. (50)

Tara is insecure in her marital bond, and she assumes her husband as a foreigner, who cannot bridge the gap between their lifestyle and culture, hence, after her return to her homeland she starts feeling the bond shattering. As it has been shown in the novel, "Tara was afraid he no longer wanted to make her over to his ideal image, that he longer loved her." (50) Not only this she gets skeptical and insecure of his remark about Susie Goldberg, which is quite clear from the following excerpt from the novel, "Congenitally suspicious she turned to David's remarks about Sussie Goldberg, who, Tara now

slowly remembered, had her rather charming moments. Tara sensed the beginning of a long headache that was just fastening itself to her neck and eyeballs." (50)

Tara pins her eyes constantly on her adopted land, hence, she finds everything disgusting and sickening. The condition of her native place, emerging violence, riots, and confrontation between different classes of society makes her disturbed, skeptical in she starts behaving in cynical manner and when she meets her friends after seven years, she is not empathetic towards their curiosity and excitement. She showcases herself different than them all, but when they call her Americawali, she feels offended and showing her resentment towards them, she leaves them and accompanies Tuntunwala. She fails to restore their old friendship bond. In spite of their affectionate behavior and specially organized get together, she stays away and gets judgmental when she calls that as a false show though, she recalls once she was one among them. It is depicted in the novel, "Seven years ago she had played with these friends, done her homework with Neelima, briefly fancied herself in love with Pronob debated with Reena in British Council." (43)

Tara is not reciprocal to her friends, she is inquisitive about their fears, their life in Calcutta, but if they get inquisitive about her life in America and show their reaction she envies them. To show this, she slits from them and moves towards Mr. Tuntunwala, in spite of her own speculation, and her husband's warnings. She does so either to prove herself an American, or she is enraged with the revelation of David about Susie Goldberg. She gets caught in the trap and let the dirty politician rape her without any protest while she could have saved herself. As "She could wait a few minutes longer if she were a more aggressive woman better able to protect herself like Antonia Whitehead, she knew she would have walked out of suite with her maid." (197)

Despite the unconditional love of her mother, Tara fails to balance this relationship as well. While her mother makes no difference between their relationships and asks her to join the ritual of the puja but she does not attend the Bhajan Programme. At Vassar also she says that she cannot worship in foreign land as she cannot feel the emotions "I just can't pray here, it does not come to. Do

you know what I meant?" (49) But in her homeland also, she does not even want to attend the puja rituals which are organized specially for her, but starts feeling insecure in her bonding with her mother. It is apt to quote, "Perhaps her mother, sitting serenely before God no longer loved her either. After all Tara had willfully abandoned her caste by marrying a foreigner. Perhaps her mother was offended that she, no longer a Brahmin, was constantly in and out of this secret room, dipping like a crow." (49)

After a thorough analysis of her character we can say that Tara, the protagonist faces incongruity with all her relations because of a congenital flaw in her character that checks her in establishing any sound relationship with anyone. We can compare this flaw to Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), mental disease which leads the person towards unstable identity, a fraud, a social illusion. Her training during her childhood was sufficient in tailoring her with Identity crisis and other adjustment problems. In this era of globalization, there are parents who send their children abroad, and feel proud in getting expensive gifts from them. They want their children to stay abroad but follow Indian values to select a spouse. Mukherjee throws light on the fact why the protagonist of the novel suffers, and fails to cope up with her relationship with all. There are number of factors responsible for incongruous phenomena including dislocation, displacement, subjugation and cultural heterogeneity. Being an extra privileged child she could have achieved glorious milestones and could have used her knowledge and prosperity to facilitate others' lives but in place of doing so she got trapped in her own congenital flaw drifting from one place to another with no gain. It is quite apt 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)

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