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## **Cultural Turmoil in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter and Wife***

**Mr. M. Dhanasekaran<sup>1</sup>, Mr. R. Ramesh<sup>2</sup>**

1. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sethu Institute of Technology, Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, India.
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sethu Institute of Technology, Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, India.

### **Abstract**

Writers of Indian Diaspora have occupied the centre stage in the last decade generally because of their realistic portrayal of women, who are marginalized, oppressed and exploited in the alien shore. As the women carry the cultural baggage of her native land to her new country, they are caught between cultures. They also encounter the feeling of in-betweenness and the problem of trying to maintain stability between their dual affiliations. The present paper analyses the cultural turmoil encountered by Indian women in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter and Wife*.

**Keywords**

Marginalization; Nostalgia; Alienation; Assimilation; Belongingness; Bharati Mukherjee; *The Tiger's Daughter* ; *Wife*.

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Bharati Mukherjee, who was born in a Bengali Brahmin family in Calcutta, dealt with alien culture early in her life because of her family's three years stay in London when she was nine years old. After completing post-graduation in English from India, she went to the United States to join the Creative Writing Programme. Consequently she obtained a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Iowa, where she met Clark Blaise (the Canadian novelist, Professor and Journalist) and married him. After fourteen years in Canada, Mukherjee travelled to America. Her migratory experiences in these two nations fall under the categories of 'expatriation' and 'immigration' respectively. Mukherjee admits in one of her interviews:

I have been murdered and reborn at least three times, the very correct young woman I was trained to be, and was very happy being, is very different from the politicized, shrill, civil rights activist I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States. (Connel, Grearson, and Grimes 18)

Bharati Mukherjee always concentrates on the themes related to the phenomenon of migration, the condition of immigrants, and the feeling of disconnection repeatedly experienced by expatriates. She has focused on Indian women and their nostalgia in some of her early novels. Her personal divergence with identity has appeared in many of her novels.

Mukherjee's female characters are more practical, modern and lifelike. They are emblematic representatives of young women, particularly of the Third World countries, who nourish the dream of emigrating to America for higher education and higher wages, and then after their arrival there, they long to settle there permanently. Their situations and difficulties are also virtually exposed. There is a fixed pattern in all her stories. In the opening part of each story, she

focuses on narrating the situation of an immigrant who is in the process of immigration or settling down and in the following part the protagonist is continuously given to making love with a spouse of the opposite sex who is well-established in the American soil. According to Josna Rege, Mukherjee uses her stories to “reflects [reflect] her conviction that immigrants remake themselves when they come to America, breaking with their pasts, [and] infusing their various cultures and worldviews into the American cultural mix.” (65)

Search for the elucidation of self, cultural confusion and marginalization are the main features of her women characters. They cannot completely isolate themselves from their past and at the same time they do not have any conviction in the future too. Mukherjee’s novels and her collections of Short Stories describe clearly the network of female world to us. Her female characters retain a conscious or subconscious attachment to traditions, customs, values, religious, cultural patterns and languages of the ancestral home.

*The Tiger’s Daughter*, Mukherjee’s first novel deals with the cultural conflict of Tara Banerjee Cartwright, a sixteen year old Bengali Brahmin girl who goes to America for higher studies. After seven years she has returned home for a holiday trip to visit her parents, having married a white American. In India she discovers herself as a total alien in the innate environment. She often 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.” (Chowdhury 82). The novel starts with a reference to fate and astrology. Mukherjee wrote the novel when she was an immigrant in Canada. In Canada, Mukherjee suffered from a psychological and cultural renunciation of her basic Indian identity and sensibility which led to the birth of the novel *The Tiger’s Daughter*. Tara’s husband David was entirely Western; she was dutifully devious in her marriage. She could not communicate the finer nuances of her family background and life in Calcutta. Shobha Shinde observes in this regard: “Her husband asked naive questions about Indian customs and traditions. She felt completely insecure in

an alien atmosphere. Madison Square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner” (qtd. in Dhawan 50).

The writer interlocks the events-such as Tara’s trip to funeral pyre at the river bank, her meeting with a tiny beggar girl affected with leprosy, the vision of child beggars eating off the street, the superficialities in the lives of her friends, the insurrections and manifestations and her claustrophobic rape by the politician Tuntunwala to bring out the shock in Tara’s visit to India. Tara’s visit to Darjeeling is also spoiled by revolting and brutal happenings. Many of Tara’s doubts and divergences are set on by the potency, willpower and pride of her parents. Tara understood that her previous responses to Calcutta had also been equally annoyed, threatening and similarly guiltless. The trip to the ashram of Mata Kananbala Devi makes her share her love for her mother as well as the worshippers. The Indian dream is trampled but the writer leads the women protagonists to a final reconciliation. The final few lines of the novel express Tara’s love and warmth for David and her country:

And Tara, still locked in a car across the street from the Catelli-Continental, wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she didn’t whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely. (The Tiger’s Daughter, 210).

The paradox of the novel is that Tara, who survived racial adversity in the alien shore 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 and death. Bharati Mukherjee’s catastrophic protagonist Tara suffers from the cultural turmoil as she suffered in her real life. Mukherjee projected herself through the character of Tara, a victim of dual personality and identity crisis. Lakshmana Rao rightly comments in this regard “it may be said that Mukherjee does not really come to grips with the problem of the immigrant’s psychological adjustment to the new culture, in her first novel” (117). The immigrant is, at last demoralized and mistreated. Like Naipaul, Mukherjee presents the Asian Indians’ American dream, their acculturation and their dilemma.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975) was published four years after *The Tiger's Daughter*. It expresses the experience and fate of the immigrant wife Dimple Dasgupta. It represents the pathetic life of the female protagonist uprooted and exiled from her culture and transplanted into a completely alien culture. The main focus of Bharati Mukherjee is on the female protagonist's disillusionment in her life. She tries to suggest that to stay alive in the United States one must turn into American in one's thoughts and actions like her protagonist Dimple. Chowdhury comments in this regard: "It is no use being Indian and living in a claustrophobic ghetto-not a physical one, but a ghetto all the same, it being on the psychological plane. Those who are incapable break down like Dimple" (84). To quote the words of Seema Suneel:

At the surface level, *Wife* is the simple story of Amit and his wife Dimple, newly-married immigrants to the U.S.A. Amit and Dimple leave their country in search of their dreams. This migration of "cultural transplant" leads not only to a crisis of identity but greatly affects their personal relationship as husband-wife (221).

*Wife* is a story about Dimple Dasgupta, a daughter of Calcutta's middle class family that values obedience and submissiveness in women. From the very opening we experience that Dimple is not like a usual girl, she believes that marriage is a blessing in disguise. It will bring her freedom, fortune and happiness. At last her father Mr. DasGupta has arranged a marriage for her daughter with Amit Basu. The house of Basu is not so attractive; hence she does not feel comfortable there. She does not like Amit's mother and sister too. Her mother-in-law dislikes her name 'Dimple' and wants to call her 'Nandini'. Dimple Basu has forever lived in an extraordinary world, a world which is fashioned by herself. But when she faces the tough realities of life the feathers of her imagination are clipped. Amit was not the man Dimple has imagined for her husband. As the time passes by the exhilaration of marriage lessens and she becomes pregnant, she feels a strange sensation. Pregnancy is a boon for Indian women, but Dimple is remarkable in that "she thought of ways to get rid of ...

whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes” (*Wife* 31). So she makes a decision to terminate her pregnancy and she never regrets for her cruel deeds. Rosanne Klass comments on such a cruel act of Dimple thus:

For an Indian wife, childlessness is a disaster, pregnancy the achievement that seals her status. To overturn such ingrained values would involve a major emotional upheaval; yet Dimple acts on the vaguest and most undefined impulses, and thinks no more about it (88).

Dimple wants to do away with the traditional mark of a wife and she becomes an escapist, lost in her world of fantasy. The killing of a mouse to her is a symbolic suicide of herself. Dimple passes time by helping Meena Sen in domestic works and spends her time in watching T.V. or reading newspapers. But Dimple lives always under fear. Very often she hears about murder, smugglings in the basement of the building. In the party at the Mullicks, she acquires a liberal opportunity to meet both Indians and Native Americans and study their culture. She meets Ina, the notorious wife of Bijoy Mullick whom other Indians hate because she wears pants and mascara. She is “more American than the Americans” (*wife* 68) and smokes, drinks and flirts with other men. When compared to the American society, Indian society is highly patriarchal and it does not permit women to move in such a way. The Sens advise Dimple to keep out of touch with Ina as she will corrupt her (Dimple) with her American life-style and crazy ideas. To quote Kalpana Wandrekar’s words:

Within the circle of Indian immigrants too, Dimple finds herself an alien. The Indians in America who have adjusted themselves to the American ways of life make her feel an outsider. In her own community too she feels to relate and experiences rejection (68).

Then Dimple understands that Amit is a misfit to succeed in the aggressive economic jungle of New York. Likewise, she finds herself a misfit, a woman of her nature born and bred up in a totally different culture and environment, to adjust to American ways. “The cultural and social gulf dividing the two worlds

are too vast and deep for her to bridge over.” (Pandit 39) She is irritated because of her lonely existence and her husband’s jobless state. These things lead to her despair and neurosis. She realizes that her marriage with Amit is a total failure of her American dream.

The name Dimple is quite amusing and enticing but it means any slight surface depression. This depression on the surface is again symbolic of the depression within her consciousness, which is borne out of her petulant responses to the things around her. In the novel Bharati Mukherjee presents the world of Dimple. A world of day dreams and nightmares and her morbid psyche through a series of fantastic images are some of the qualities of Dimple. Her morbidity is obvious while she is still at her parental home in the way she permits her conscious mind to be completely dominated by the colourful romance showed in the advertisements and the stories of magazines. The trouble with Dimple is that she loses touch with reality. She feels guilty of her extra-marital affair with Milt and worries about her hiding the matter from her husband. She suffers from insomnia like Lady Macbeth. She is tattered by her intuitive and emotional tensions and takes an intense step of murdering her husband thinking that she cannot tolerate this sort of life forever. She, in a calm and cool manner, takes a knife out from the kitchen drawer and dives it down on a spot near his hairline repeatedly hitting at the same place for seven times. She does not even think about the consequences. It is not just the cultural conflict or a feminine need for freedom, but the problem of utter rootlessness in Dimple that leads to Dimple’s psychic disorder and the consequent murder of her husband.

She deals with problems of rootlessness and cultural perplexity of her characters in a foreign land who try to adapt to the new culture. All her novels record the tone of her diaspora experiences through the female protagonists. Through her novels, Mukherjee has fascinated her readers with varying portraits of the immigrant self. Her novels are, in fact, sarcastic and cautionary tales about the journey of Asian Indians to partake in the American dream.

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