



# A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* Reveals The Ambivalence of Diasporic Experience

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## Abstract

In the late 20th century, postcolonial theory and literature rose to prominence as a way of analysing the shared struggles and experiences of people from former colonies as they navigate the post-independence world. The experience of diaspora, a recurring theme in English literature, is a crucial component of postcolonial studies. Diaspora is a type of psychological dislocation in which immigrants experience a sense of displacement, marginalisation, and loss of identity in addition to their physical movement from their country of origin to the foreign country. Some immigrants struggle with a fractured and split sense of identity because they feel ambivalently "in-betweened" and torn between the two cultures. Other immigrants, on the other hand, make an effort to fully integrate into the new culture and live as expatriates. *The Tiger's Daughter*, written by Bharati Mukherjee and included in the category of immigration literature, is the subject of this study. The experiences of diasporic Indian immigrants in the United States are recaptured in this book, but from different angles. It is impossible to generalise about the Indian Diaspora as a single shared experience due to the cultural diversity within and among the concerned nations as well as the variety of individual voices within the postcolonial novel.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, postcolonial, Cultural diversity, Bharati Mukherjee; *The Tiger's Daughter*

## Introduction

The academic terms used to describe an outsider's occupation of a nation and its effects are colonialism and post colonialism. In actuality, the theory of post-colonialism is typically concerned with the colonial projects of European powers, the independence of these colonies during the 19th and 20th centuries, and the experiences and issues that people from these former colonies faced after independence, both at home and abroad. Additionally, it looks at how colonialism is still present in Western ideology and heritage, as well as how racial prejudice is

portrayed in literary works.

The Greek word "dia speiro," which means "to scatter" or "to sow over," is the source of the English word "diaspora." The exile of the Jews outside of Palestine in the sixth century B.C. is referred to by this phrase in Hebrew. In contemporary usage, it most often refers to the migration of people and cultural groups of the same religion or ethnicity to various locations around the globe while frequently still feeling a strong sense of cultural and racial attachment to the place of origin.

Diaspora is not just a result of post-colonialism because colonists may continue to feel a connection to their ancestral home or gradually forge their own national identity in the new nation. Diasporas may be unintentional, brought on by the forced migration of people as a result of conflict, disaster, or political oppression. They might also be brought on by people moving around for commercial reasons. In these situations, diasporas can be either temporary, with migrant workers planning to earn money in the new country before returning home, or permanent, with immigrants planning to stay in the new country permanently. Bhikhu Parekh, an Indian political theorist, describes the Indian Diasporas as:

“like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world.”<sup>[10]</sup>

This study analyses *The Tiger's Daughter* by Bharati Mukherjee, which was released in 1971. A woman who spent a significant amount of time working as an academic in the US was born, raised, and educated in India. While *The Tiger's Daughter* tells the story of an Indian woman who was married to an American and lived in the U.S. but later returned to India. Even though the novel is acknowledged as a significant contribution to the writing of the Indian diaspora in the latter 20th century, there have been few direct comparisons and few in-depth studies of it. This study aims to take a closer look at the text of the book and how its author's perceptions of diasporic experiences vary. It is impossible to generalise about the Indian diaspora as a single shared experience due to the cultural diversity within and between the relevant nations as well as the variety of individual voices within the postcolonial novel.

### **Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* Explores Diasporic Experiences**

Bharati Mukherjee's first novel was *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971). Mukherjee was born in Calcutta, West Bengal, and later moved to the United States for postgraduate studies as an adult. She then spent ten years in Canada, primarily in Toronto and Montreal, where she wrote *The Tiger's Daughter*. According to Mukherjee, Canada experienced the first "visible effects of racism" in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Mukherjee has stated that her novel's goal is to depict the American immigrant experience for an American audience:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries which are placed by civil and religious conflicts...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.

Tara Banarjee Cartwright, the heroine of *The Tiger's Daughter*, is, like Mukherjee, a Bengali from Calcutta, an upper-class Bengali Brahmin. The novel, however, begins in 1879, at the wedding ceremony for the daughters of Hari Lal Banerjee, a landowner in Pachapara and Tara's great-grandfather. The scene depicts the family's grandeur, their home, and their sense of settled roots. Mukherjee, on the other hand, provides a forewarning for what is to come. Hari Lal is unable to predict what lies ahead for India because "the shadows of suicide or exile, of Bengali soil sectioned and ceded, of workers rising up against their bosses could not have been divined by even a wise man in those days." The novel makes it clear from the start that postcolonial issues will be a central theme. Tara is studying in America for a master's degree (again, like Mukherjee). Her initial thought is:

"... 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." (p. 15)

At the end of her first year abroad, as her classmates prepare to return home for the summer, she has a nervous breakdown:

"...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". (p.18)

She is ill as a result of cultural dislocation. Mukherjee thus combines, in the first few pages of the novel, the larger political issues of colonialism with small everyday feelings of ambivalence toward emigration and the diasporic experience. The fortunes of the Banerjees were shattered by history, which manifests itself in the individual misery of one of the family's scions. Tara feels out of place and homesick in America even after she marries:

"On days when she thought she couldn't possibly survive, she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them, and hung them to make the apartment more "Indian." She had desperately curried hamburger until David's stomach protested". (p.39)

Tara tries to resist the relocation system by incorporating her native culture into her new one. She finds it difficult to communicate with her husband David about her background and life in Calcutta, and he asks naive questions about Indian culture. She values family, which is important in India, but he sees this as excessive reliance on her family. Both America as a whole and her husband's inability or unwillingness to understand her represent her feelings of cultural alienation: "Madison Square was unbearable, and her husband was a foreigner after all." According to Feroza Jussawalla:

"South Asian immigrants [in the United States] have struggled to belong to the majority culture while attempting to maintain their identity more than any other immigrant group." Their reception has been mixed, owing largely to their refusal or inability to completely integrate." [26]

Tara believes she is being forced to completely assimilate, to choose between rejecting her past and never becoming fully American.

Reversing the juxtaposition, Tara makes a long-awaited trip back to Calcutta after living in America for seven years. She is, however, horrified by India and her response. With fresh eyes, she only notices the poverty and deterioration: "shrivelled women," "a colony of beggars," and "walls patterned with rust and mould." (p.8) She may be trying to hide her feelings of alienation by including a lot of unimportant, everyday information in her

letters to her husband because to "articulate it is to acknowledge that she is dispossessed."

On the other hand, David desires that Tara protest "unjustice, against unemployment, hunger, and bribery." (p.136) Tara admitted that she would never be able to tell David about the deplorable conditions in her city. She held the opinion that "fighting for justice was fatal; it was better to remain passive and take all blows as they came." (P.31) While she may be too Indian to feel at home in America, she now finds that she is too American to feel at home in India, contrary to her expectations. She had hoped that the trip would close the gap of cultural alienation.

India has long been Tara's dream. The narrative of Hari Lal at the book's beginning makes it clear that:

"... years later a young woman who had never been to Pachapara would grieve for the Banerjee family and try to analyse the reasons for its change. She would sit by a window in America to dream of Hari Lal, her great-grandfather, and she would wonder at the gulf that separated him from himself. (p.14)

The allusions to Tara's memories of India imply that her feelings of homelessness and alienation were not limited to a brief initial period. But because of the issues brought on by the demise of the British Empire and the start of independence, she never got to see India as she had imagined. Bengal was divided between India and Pakistan and played a significant role in the overthrow of British rule, with many Bengalis being killed or exiled. Along with rebellion and the overthrow of colonial rule, colonial ideology and ways of thinking must be abandoned as part of the decolonization process. According to Pramod K. Nayar,

"Decolonization seeks freedom from colonial forms of thinking, to revive native, local and vernacular forms of knowledge by questioning and overturning European categories and epistemologies".<sup>[28]</sup>

This process can be seen in Tara's attempts to resist total assimilation and her attempts to daydream about returning to the Bengal of her great-grandfather, as well as in Dev and Adit's self-aware parody of "Englishness" and "Indianness" stereotypes. They are the first generation to experience life after independence, so their efforts to challenge colonial ways of thinking can only be partially successful.

Tara is repulsed by Calcutta's post-colonial issues when she returns to the real, contemporary India. She is also constantly reminded of this fact in her interactions with family and friends. She has lost some of the vocabulary she once used with her friends in Indian-English: "she had forgotten so many words. (p.112) When getting ready for worship with her mother, she forgot to take the next step, losing some of her religious convictions. She later said, "It was not a simple loss... this forgetting of prescribed actions; it was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and centre." (p.56)

Whether Tara intended it or not, leaving India was an act of forgetting. In this situation, forgetting is a collective act. The idea of "collective memory" as it relates to "social frameworks" by Maurice Halbwachs shows how external social and historical forces influence how groups remember their past. [29] People in groups depend on one another to summarise and remember their inherited experiences. Memory, according to Michael Rothberg, "constitutes one of the most significant fronts in the struggle against empire," which tends to erase the pasts it deems irrelevant or dangerous. This is why it is especially crucial in a postcolonial context. [30]<sup>1</sup>

Tara performed a cultural reclaiming act in remembrance of her grandfather. Given her husband's opposition to Tara's adherence to her own cultural practises and the expectation that she will inevitably adopt American traditions, this act of memory could be seen as gendered. As a result, memory assumes a special significance in this context. Some women in the Diaspora have refused to accept the label of "Others" about themselves throughout the act of recalling and documenting memories. [31] On the other hand, Tara is betraying the group by forgetting the language, religion, and customs that bind her to her family and friends, which could explain why her former friends are hostile toward her. The dilemma of the story, such as it is, is for the characters to select which nation they feel most at home in. According to Roger Kennedy:

“ the idea of home goes beyond building blocks into the area of the interior of the soul...  
If exiled, we may be able to carry the sense of home with us, yet there is often a poignant yearning for the original home”.<sup>[32]</sup>

However, Tara's dilemma is that her long-awaited trip back to her "original home," India, was not at all what she had anticipated, forcing her to confront all of her beliefs and preconceptions. Most likely, immigrants who live in the diaspora engage in a "interstitial space" between the country they left and the country where they now reside. Diasporics are expected to recognise the "grey area" as "home" between the "host country" and India, between two cultures, ways of life, and values. [33]

The novel's ambiguous, unresolved ending, in which Tara is trapped in a violent demonstration in the city and it is unknown whether she manages to flee, perfectly captures this in-between-state. Thus, the protagonist of the novel is treated very harshly, and some critics have found the protagonist to be cold. "Tara's petulance and constant nervousness overshadows her well-intentioned efforts," says Roshni Rustomji-Kerns. [34] Rustomji-Kerns, however, also holds that Mukherjee wanted the reader to be uneasy around her characters:

“Mukherjee has taken her own fears and struggles, as well as the fears and struggles of many among us who have remained without a voice to speak of the immigrant experience, and presented some of the more violent and grotesque aspects of cultural collisions”.<sup>[35]</sup>

## Conclusion

In this novel Indian protagonist is living outside India, and the problems of cultural contact appear in the novels to some extent, most sadly in Tara's distance from her husband when he fails to understand or attempt to understand her cultural background. Most importantly, the novel concerned with the idea of belonging- the belonging to a culture, or whether it is possible to belong to two. This raises questions of hybridity and assimilation and whether they can ever benefit the postcolonial subject as it does the dominant culture.

Bharati Mukherjee seems to suggest in *The Tiger's Daughter* that it is not possible to have both. When Tara makes herself part of an American family and takes on American values, she is unable to see India in the same way. The message of the novel seems to be that once one starts testing the sores left by postcolonial experience and cultural alienation, one will never be able to fully heal them again. Thus, this experience serves as a driving force to reconsider who one is? To conclude, the immigrants who integrate by mediating between cultures, the native culture and the new culture are better adapted than those who cultivate by orientating themselves to one culture. In the end, integration and assimilation work best in a multicultural society! This depends on one's education, upbringing, religious beliefs and cultural influences.

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