
**The Cultural Dilemma: Examining Conflict and Identity in
“The Tiger’s Daughter” and “Wife”**

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Abstract:

This paper explores the haunting presence of native land and the cultural shock caused by the cultural clash of two different worlds that are at the core of Mukherjee’s novels i.e. “The Tiger’s Daughter” and “Wife”. Misunderstanding, confusion and incomprehension are the inevitable markers generated by the cultural drift and conflict owing to the transculturation of the protagonists of “The Tiger’s Daughter” and ‘Wife.’ The anguish generates the aesthetics of ‘reworlding’ underlying and unifying the body of Indian diasporic literature. One distinct feature of immigrants as projected by Bharati Mukherjee in the novels taken into consideration, is that while they physically live in one country, through their memory and imaginations, they are eternally caught in a state of nostalgia. Life on a dual plane, i.e. straddling between two worlds creates challenges to the diasporic identity. Immigrants look both ways. On one hand, they try to identify with the new land while on the other hand, they continue to look back with nostalgia and regret to the motherland. It leads to a sense of alienation, a displaced sensibility, a hyphenated and fractured existence. They believe in the restoration of their “sanctified” ancestral home and define themselves by identifying with their homeland.

Keywords: Immigrant, Discrimination, Dislocation, Cultural shock, Isolation

Introduction

“The Tiger’s Daughter” and “Wife” address the challenges faced by immigrant characters, specifically the themes of cultural conflict, strain, dislocation, and survival amid cross-cultural interactions. Misunderstanding, confusion, and incomprehension are the inevitable consequences of cultural drift and conflict resulting from the transculturation of the immigrant women protagonists in the novels. Instability and disquietude arise from the imbalance in their transculturation process due to the conflict between their willingness to embrace or reject a new culture. Bharati Mukherjee, in “The Tiger’s Daughter,” explores her fixation on exile and her hometown of Calcutta through the experiences of her protagonist, Tara Banerjee Cartwright, who returns to Calcutta after a seven-year sojourn in America.

Times Literary Supplement's review of Tara's predicament in "Oh Calcutta" needs to be quoted here, "Tara's westernisation has opened her eyes to a gulf between the two worlds that still make India the despair of those who govern it" (736).

Tara's struggle mirrors Mukherjee's conflict as a woman navigating the dualities of Indian and American cultures. Mukherjee recognised the conflict during her 1973-74 residence in Calcutta, which she recounts as her experience of being an outsider in India in "Days and Nights in Calcutta." "The Tiger's Daughter" is regarded as Bharati Mukherjee's "elegant novel." Tara's predicament in the novel is effectively encapsulated in Mathew Arnold's phrase: "Wandering between two worlds / one dead, the other powerless to be born, with nowhere to rest my head."

Immigrants' Plight

The immigrant authors have articulated their dissent and emotions regarding discrimination and the infringement of immigrants' rights. In addition to other concerns, they advocate against the discrimination and oppression of immigrants. Bharati Mukherjee's works prominently feature Indians who have endured both physical and psychological racist assaults as a central theme. She empathizes with these victims of racial discrimination and their traumatic feelings of entrapment and claustrophobia.

Tara's perception of discrimination intensifies if her roommate declines to share her mango chutney. Shobha Shinde highlights this expatriate vulnerability, stating, "An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it." (Shinde 58) Removing all her silk scarves and draping them throughout the apartment to create a more Indian aesthetic while praying to Kali for the fortitude to confront the antagonistic demeanour of Americans. She derives strength by finding solace in her culture.

Tara fell in love with Canadian David Cartwright in America, and they subsequently married. Tara's spouse, David Cartwright, embodies a wholly Western disposition, which consistently causes her apprehension. She is unable to disclose her familial background to him or the intricacies of life in Calcutta. Their inability to do so is grounded in their cultural disparities. In India, marriage signifies the union of two families, whereas in Western nations such as the United States, it is merely a contractual agreement between two individuals. David exhibits animosity towards lineage and frequently confuses his affection for family with excessive reliance. He poses innocent inquiries regarding Indian customs and traditions, while she experiences profound insecurity in an unfamiliar environment, as "Madison Square was intolerable and her husband was, after all, a foreigner."

Tara intends to visit India after a seven-year hiatus. For years, she envisioned this resurgence and now believes that all her uncertainties about living abroad and lingering fears will be effortlessly alleviated upon her return to Calcutta, yet this never transpires. The newly Americanized Tara is unable to reclaim her previous perspective and views India with the curiosity of an outsider. It appears that her entire viewpoint has transformed. Tara in America experiences a similar sentiment; however, upon confronting the altered and antagonistic

conditions of her homeland, all her romantic aspirations and ideals are dismantled. Tara experienced persistent tension during her residence in America, perpetually aware of her foreignness.

She previously felt unanchored, but her situation in India has not improved. Tara contemplates the exotic nature of her soul, which inhibits her from forming emotional connections with her longstanding relatives and friends. Before commencing her journey home to Calcutta from Bombay the following evening, she had anticipated that after “years of aeroplanes and Greyhound buses” she would be “elated to travel on an Indian train.” Conversely, she perceives the journey as disheartening. Her response to the railway station is one of disdain. She perceived the station as resembling a hospital, as numerous ill and deformed men sat apathetically on bundles and trunks. Tara now perceived her relatives' apartment on Marine Drive as dilapidated and congested.

Marwari P.K. Tuntunwala and Nepali Ratan disrupted her train journey with their frivolous conversations and inappropriate conduct towards her. Tara descends into "dismal self-examination": Her journey from Bombay concludes at Howrah Station, where her family greets her on the “crowded platform too noisy and filthy of course to allow her any insight into the world to which she had returned” (Mukherjee 29). While preparing for worship with her mother, Tara forgets the subsequent step of the rituals and immediately comprehends, “It was not merely a trivial loss...” The neglect of mandated behaviour constituted a minor demise, a callousness of the heart, and a fracturing of axis and centre. She has become estranged from her intrinsic values, resulting in a profound sense of rootlessness. She begins to interrogate the legitimacy of her own identity. Tara's nephews in Bombay refer to her as "the American auntie," while their parents call her husband "the American jamai." Bharati Mukherjee depicts Tara as an individual who experiences dual cultural disorientation. The first pertains to her journey to the USA, while the second concerns her return to India as the spouse of a foreign national.

Cultural- Conflict

During her Catholic education, Tara absorbed Western culture at an early age. She received instruction from nuns who were racially and morally superior and employed Western educational materials in their pedagogy. Brinda Bose emphasizes this aspect: “Duality and conflict are not merely a feature of immigrant life in America; Mukherjee’s women are brought up in a culture that presents such ambiguities from childhood. The breaking of identities and the discarding of language actually begin early, their lives being shaped by the confluence of the rich cultural 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.” (Nelson 50)

Tara envisions a conflict between two distinct socio-cultural environments, characterized by inertia and a perception of inertia in foreign territories. She experiences simultaneous feelings of entrapment and abandonment. She cannot find solace in her former

Indian identity nor in her newly embraced American identity. This challenge condemns any singular world. Tara might have found it simpler to disregard her past had she perceived her former residence as repugnant. This conflict results in a dissociative identity disorder.

Tara's confusion regarding her status and identity inhibits her ability to assert herself. Nor can she seek refuge in a religion whose arrogance no longer appeals to her. Consequently, Tara struggles to establish her life trajectory in the unfamiliar territory. She reveres the sanctity and tranquillity experienced by her mother, yet perceives the delicate nature of such a life, a viewpoint shaped by her exposure to the external world. However, her Western exposure fails to provide any conclusive answers, compelling her to integrate both approaches as effectively as possible, thereby making her aware of the underlying pathos in such efforts at synthesis. She was unaware of her gradual transition following her marriage to David Cartwright.

However, her return to India jolted her back to reality, and her unfulfilled aspirations prompted a negative reaction. Her transformed personality rendered her an outcast in all environments. Her fragmented identity also incited doubt regarding her husband, who fails to comprehend nation through her perspective and consequently deduced that he would not have grasped her essence. She anticipated that her friends would perceive her marriage as an act of liberation and commend her for her audacity, but she was appalled by their conservative stance. They embraced all aspects of foreign culture, from fashion to cuisine, yet disapproved of a foreign partner. She experiences a contradictory tension upon realizing that she is esteemed by neither side. Her relatives and friends view her liberated marriage as servitude; meanwhile, David, who is painfully Western, does not acknowledge her efforts in "cleaning bathrooms." Tara perceives herself as an outsider among her family and friends, experiencing solitude and a lack of affection.

The novel concludes in media res, amidst violence, ricocheting off "banners" and "picked signs". Tara is ensnared within the tumultuous crowd, rendering her husband's presence imperceptible. Tara is ensnared in a cross-cultural conflict. The chaos outside reflects Tara's internal mental condition. Mukherjee highlights the irreversibility of these conflicts. A significant impact of cultural conflict is evident in the novel. Near the conclusion of the novel, Tara participates in a tumultuous protest led by Joyonto Ray Choudhury. This incident epitomizes the brutal demise of the old world order. Pronob, the young man, endeavours to rescue her but sustains injuries in the attempt.

Tara's conclusion remains enigmatic as she comes to terms with the notion that she has achieved harmony with the city and desires nothing further. Her journey imparts the lesson of re-evaluating both of her worlds with clarity; however, Tara lacks the capacity to express her discoveries. The external turmoil reflects Tara's internal state, placing her amidst the chaos; Mukherjee highlights the irreversibility of such conflicts. Tara's delusions partially stem from her unstable identity, as she perpetually feels anxious about her position as the Bengali spouse of an American man. The final sentence of the novel effectively highlights her discomfort: "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" (Mukherjee 247-248).

In the novel, Mukherjee illustrates that when tradition is denaturalized, it forfeits its significance and authenticity. Recovery becomes unattainable. Tara's pursuit of self-identity gradually culminates in disillusionment, depression, and alienation, ultimately resulting in tragedy. The most profound irony of Tara's narrative is that she endured racial adversities in a foreign nation yet ultimately fell victim in her homeland. The location she had yearned to visit since her time in New York, where she sought tranquillity, became alien to her. The novel exemplifies the feelings of rootlessness and alienation experienced by an immigrant. Fakrul Alam in his book "Bharati Mukherjee" says, "What she really wanted to be was a writer not writing about exiles but about expatriates and immigrants"(Alam 33).

Displacement and Alienation

Bharati Mukherjee's second novel, a finalist for the Governor General's Award, "Wife" (1975), explores the intricacies of the immigrant experience. The story centres on the life of a middle-class married Bengali woman who relocates from Calcutta to New York. The dislocation from native cultural traditions and values, the erosion of indigenous language, and the relegation of individuals to the status of outcasts or unaccommodated aliens collectively illustrate the theme of 'identity atrophy' in the novel *Wife*, which explores displacement and alienation. The novel depicts the psychological confinement and the ensuing destructive inclinations of the protagonist, Dimple Dasgupta. The narrative presents a distressing portrayal of the clash between Western and Indian cultures, as well as modern and traditional customs, as experienced by Dimple. At the commencement of the novel, Dimple exhibits signs of psychic dislocation, specifically her aspiration to wed a neurosurgeon who could provide her with a 'distinctive lifestyle.' To her, life signified "an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to a new market for nylon saris." (Mukherjee 3).

Her aspirations for marriage are sustained by the belief that it would provide her with liberation, social gatherings on manicured lawns, and philanthropic dinners for esteemed charities. Marriage would "bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns and fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love." (Mukherjee 3).

Dimple aspires to reside overseas. With these aspirations, she enters into matrimony with Amit, an aspiring engineer poised to immigrate to the United States. However, she is exasperated by the postponement in securing Amit employment overseas. She experiences discomfort in Amit's residence. She believes that all her issues are transient and that they will ultimately be resolved with the approval of her immigration status. Dimple embodies a realm of potential with her ambitions and aspirations. Although possessing an adventurous spirit, Dimple is astonished by her immersion in American culture. Nagendra Kumar has succinctly articulated her predicament: "How a boorish, innocent Indian wife can keep her nerves in a country where murder was like flapping the bugs?" (Kumar 49)

Amit and Dimple are unable to communicate within the alien culture. They encounter frustration at various levels. A discontented Dimple leads a solitary existence, aiding Meena Sen, viewing television, or perusing newspapers. An effective facilitator, yet insufficiently knowledgeable to assist her in navigating foreign culture, she is limited to a televised representation of an alternate reality. She is exposed to violence through the media. Dimple experiences alienation in a society unfamiliar with Durga Puja. Dimple's affinity for the rituals reflects the essence of Indian culture within her. Mukherjee evaluates her impulsive existence in Calcutta and the hazardous life in New York as follows:

“She is scared of self-service elevators, of policemen, of gadgets and appliances. She doesn't want to wear Western clothes as she thinks she would be mistakenly taken for a Puerto Rican. She doesn't want to lose her identity, but feels isolated, trapped, alienated and marginalized.”(Mukherjee 84)

America has outsmarted her, leaving her engulfed in nostalgia. She is uncertain about residing there. The foreign conditions exacerbate her hypertension and propel her towards regression and abnormality. She struggles to endure the harsh torment of a solitary existence in a foreign land. She starts to perceive the violence as “right, even decent” and the darkness as “unbearably exciting, taut with angry premonitions, promises.”

Conclusion

Dimple's cultural shock transforms her into a neurotic individual. A character depicted by Bharati Mukherjee in her literary works is a discontented, solitary individual who recognizes the ethical importance of minor details and grapples with issues of identity-related to race, class, gender and community. Dimple progressively loses faith in the lofty aspirations for success that Amit holds until the end. She is the first to acknowledge that he is too spineless to thrive in New York's competitive economic landscape. Simultaneously, she realizes that for a young woman like herself, raised in a markedly different environment, adapting to American customs is quite challenging.

The cultural and social divide between the two realms is too extensive and profound for a bridge to span it. The monotony and isolation of her existence in the apartment induce feelings of depression and neurosis. Over several weeks, she considers nine distinct methods of suicide. Additionally, she perceives neglect from her husband. The fulfilling romantic life they experienced at home during the initial months of marriage now seems to her a distant memory. Amit, regrettably, does not recognize his wife's yearning for affection and nurturing. The distance she experiences from her parents and college friends in Calcutta exacerbates her predicament.

Dimple, in a state of desperation, effectively seduces Milt Glasser, for whom a casual sexual liaison with an admired woman is commonplace. However, due to her Indian heritage, Dimple undergoes a profoundly traumatic experience, feeling altered following her act of betrayal towards Amit. It provides her with sufficient strength to repudiate India and its customs by fatally stabbing her unsuspecting husband in the neck. The profound irony lies

in the fact that all the meticulous planning Dimple undertook regarding the nine methods of suicide ultimately culminates in her murder of Amit.

Narayan in his review of "Wife" aptly observes, "Dimple the wife is torn between the old heritage and the new environment; she painfully attempts to adjust to American life and in the third part asserts herself over her cold husband in an act of violence in the violent, urban setting of Manhattan"(475). The sudden conclusion of "Wife" serves as Bharati Mukherjee's incisive critique of Indian aspirations for success in the West and the challenges of adapting to culturally disparate lifestyles.

Willam Swanson in the review of Wife aptly asserts, "Wife is a tightly crafted novel which examines the ironic tension between the Bengali ideal of the docile wife and the reality of Dimple Das Gupta Basu, who lives according to the ideal simply because she is totally unaware of any alternative." (380).

The novel vividly depicts Dimple's perplexing realm of reality and imagination. She struggles to reconcile her fractured identity, "but of course, it was her imagination because she was not sure anymore what she had seen on TV and what she had seen in the private screen of three a.m.... Women on television got away with murder" (Mukherjee 212-13).

She despises Amit for denying her a legitimate position, perceiving her perpetually as the "other," and coercing her to adhere to her designated role as a submissive wife. Dimple's fate, at least in part, illustrates an immigrant's cross-cultural challenges.

Emmanuel S. Nelson in 'Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora' aptly says:

"Wife describes a weak-minded Bengali woman who migrates to New York with her engineer husband in search of a better life, but her sensibilities become so confounded by her changing cultural roles, the insidious television factitiousness and the tensions of feminism that, ironically, she goes mad and kills her husband." (Nelson 55)

Bharati Mukherjee has depicted both Tara and Dimple as "intermediaries" between their country of origin and their country of adoption. Both encounter cultural disorientation in the presence of hardships. They ultimately resort to extreme measures to escape the cultural maladjustment that hinders them. They are migrating both geographically and mentally, as they feel discontent in both their native and foreign cultures.

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