

Cross Cultural Struggles In Bharat Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*

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Keywords: cross-cultural issues, cultural conflict, homeland, host land, immigrant woman.	Abstract The purpose of this article is to illustrate how an Indian woman living in an alien land experiences many difficulties. Bharati Mukherjee explores the profound cultural struggles faced by Tara Banerjee Cartwright, a young Indian woman who returns to Calcutta after living in the United States for seven years. Caught between her traditional Bengali heritage and a Westernized identity, Tara experiences a profound sense of alienation and cultural displacement between India and the United States. As Tara recaptures her lost sense of belonging, the novel explores themes of cultural conflict, identity crisis, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. Through the stark contrast between India and the United States, Mukherjee highlights the psychological and emotional toll of cultural displacement. This study explores the internal and external conflicts, providing insights into the broader diaspora and postcolonial experience.
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Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *The Tiger's Daughter* stands as a sharp exploration of rapidly changing cultural identities, displacement, and the complexities of belonging. It delves into the experiences of immigrant women, the tensions in their lives between Eastern and Western cultures, and their struggle to reconcile personal identity with cultural heritage.

Through the protagonist, Tara Banerjee Cartwright, Mukherjee crafts a story that spans two distinct worlds, India and America, vividly portraying the emotional and psychological turmoil of navigating between them. This paper examines Tara's cultural struggles, focusing on alienation, the clash between tradition and modernity, and the broader socio-political context that amplifies her internal conflicts.

In this context, writer Sangamithra says, "This novel was selected for two reasons. First, the protagonist of this novel is a first-generation immigrant. The protagonist is the story of a young Indian woman who experiences cultural conflict both in and out of her own cultures" (764). *The Tiger's Daughter* follows Tara, a young Bengali woman who, after spending seven years in America, marries an American named David Cartwright and returns to her hometown, Calcutta, now Kolkata. Her experiences of travelling in a train with Marwaris and Nepalīs leave her more confused than comforted. When Tara decides to return to her native place, she thinks about, "Now, on her way back to Calcutta, the gestures she had forgotten, the tones of voice," the exile and disorientation suddenly returned with dizzying certainty. Seven years in another country, a husband, a new blue passport she had not thought it could all be erased so easily" (25).

The novel's narrative truly begins here. As Uma Parameswaran notes in her 1989 essay "Home is where your feet are," Tara's journey is not merely a physical one; it is an exploration of her longing for reconnection and self-reflection on her own culture. Mukherjee uses Calcutta as a symbol of postcolonial

decay, mirroring Tara's inner turmoil. Parameswaran emphasizes that Tara's Western education and marriage to David Cartwright, an American, alienate her from her Indian peers, leaving her an outsider in both cultures. While Tara seeks to reclaim her roots, what unfolds for her is instead a profound sense of displacement.

While living in America, Tara yearns for her homeland, Kolkata, but her return reveals a stark contrast between her nostalgic dreams and the reality she encounters. Mukherjee said, "In New York, she dreamed of returning to Kolkata, but what she brought back was only wounds" (25). This quotation captures Tara's deep longing for Kolkata during her time in New York, where distance and memory idealized her homeland. However, the "wounds" suggest emotional or psychological disappointment upon her return, indicating that the reality of Kolkata fails to match her expectations. This disillusionment is further emphasized when she revisits familiar places from her past, "Seven years earlier on her way to Vassar on Marine Drive, had throughout then fashionable, but now their shabbiness appalled her" (18). Here, Tara recalls a time when Marine Drive, a symbol of her earlier life, seemed vibrant and stylish. Yet, upon returning, she is struck by its deteriorated state, which shocks and disheartens her. Together, these reflections illustrate how Tara's romanticized view of Kolkata, nurtured during her years abroad, crumbles in the face of its changed and disappointing reality.

Tara returns to India as a Western woman after her marriage. Having adapted to life in America, she finds herself caught between two identities neither fully Indian nor fully American. This inner conflict becomes a major struggle in her life. Though she is welcomed back with great values and warmth, she does not feel truly happy. She seeks happiness and a sense of self-identity in her family members, friends, classmates, and relatives. At the same time, she tries to recapture the joy of her childhood, but her efforts prove unsuccessful. This limited space becomes the centre of her multicultural struggle. Mukherjee skillfully portrays Tara's sense of alienation through her early impressions of Calcutta.

The city she once knew has now become a chaotic, unrecognizable entity marked by poverty, political unrest, and social decay. Her father, once a powerful and respected figure, is now politically marginalized. Her childhood friend, Amrita, is a cynical and disillusioned woman trapped in an unhappy marriage. It reflects the vast disintegration of the old social order in post-independence India. The emotional burden of the bustling streets, the oppressive heat, and the sharp contrast between her memories and reality overwhelm Tara emotionally. The city has changed, or perhaps she herself has changed, there's no way back.

An irreconcilable gap emerges between her past self, rooted in Indian culture, and her present self, shaped by Western influences. Tara's alienation is not only external but also deeply internal. Her Westernized outlook, refined by her education at Vassar and her marriage to David clashes with the expectations of her family and friends in India. They view her as a prodigal daughter. She is a drifter from the social fabric of upper-class Bengali life, and they expect her to seamlessly rejoin. Tara's American habits, her desire for privacy, and her discomfort with the constant intrusions of relatives mark her as an outsider.

Fakhrul Alam, argues that "the novel embodies a 'foreign feeling', where the characters oscillate between longing for their homeland and the inevitable transformation brought on by Western exposure" (38). Alam notes that Tara's return to Calcutta is not a homecoming, but rather a confrontation with a changed reality. This is echoed in Mukherjee's own life as an Indian immigrant in North America. Through Tara's experiences, Mukherjee explores themes of alienation, longing, and the inevitable clash between tradition and modernity.

At the heart of the novel lies the tension between tradition and modernity. Tara's return to India exposes her to a society caught between the weight of colonial legacies and the pressures of modernization, grappling with its identity crisis. Her family, representing the traditional Bengali elite, remains entrenched in rituals, social hierarchies, and gendered expectations. Meanwhile, Tara embodies a modern, individualistic ethos shaped by her American experiences. This clash is subtle yet manifests in significant

ways, that "She is an Indian touched by America, and nothing can undo that now" (47). Tara's irrevocable transformation after her time in America, reflects her Americanized identity with the expectations and realities of her Indian roots.

Tara's relatives are confused by her marriage to a foreigner, viewing it as a betrayal of cultural norms. Her husband, David, becomes a symbol of Westernization—a contentious point that highlights her departure from traditional Indian values. Meanwhile, Tara struggles to reconcile her American-raised feminist sensibilities with the patriarchal structures she encounters in Calcutta. The constant visits from male relatives and the expectation that she conforms to traditional roles as a wife and daughter clash with her sense of autonomy.

R. K. Dhawan argues, "Tara's struggle is compounded by the gendered expectations of Indian society, which clash with her Americanized independence. This intersection of gender and culture adds another layer to her cross-cultural conflict" (87). Tara's inner contradictions and her disillusionment with India reflect the broader tensions of cultural hybridity in a postcolonial context, highlighting the broader implications of navigating identity between conflicting cultural influences.

Tara's return to India reveals her profound cultural dislocation amidst a society in upheaval. The novel mirrors the era's social unrest through scenes of student protests, bombings, and curfews, yet Tara, shaped by her privileged upbringing and American experience, struggles to comprehend their significance. This detachment isolates her, underscoring her inability to reconcile her identity, reshaped by one culture, with the collective struggles of another. As the narrative reflects, "She had once believed she could walk in two worlds, but now found herself trapped in the confusion between them neither fully Indian nor fully American, a stranger in both lands" (87). This statement, describing Tara's inner turmoil, captures her realization that she belongs fully to neither India nor America, highlighting her alienation. Through Tara's contradictions, Mukherjee illustrates the broader cultural tensions within postcolonial India, where individuals grapple with the pull of tradition and modernity in a rapidly changing society.

Before she returns to India, Tara romanticizes India. She clings to the memories of a harmonious, beautiful past. These memories sustain her during her years in America, where she faces the challenge of subtle racism and integration. However, her return to the home land shatters this incident. The India she encounters is not the land of her childhood, but a place marked by decay, corruption, and violence. Her longing leads to disappointment. This oscillation between longing and rejection is a powerful commentary on the diaspora experience. Tara's struggle mirrors the predicament of many who leave their homeland. Mukherjee explores this poignantly in Tara's interactions with her childhood friend Pranab, who has stayed in India and embraced its complexities. Pranab's acceptance of the chaos of Calcutta contrasts sharply with Tara's disgust. It highlights how her culturally mixed identity fractures her sense of belonging. She is unable to reclaim her Indian identity or fully embrace her American identity, leaving her in a perpetual state of restlessness, Mukherjee says:

"Tara stays in the United States has changed her outlook on Indian life. Her American attitude life is sensed easily even by her relatives. It is again the American influence on her that makes her to feel Bombay railway station more like hospital. Tara expects to find the city she fondly remembers from childhood, but she is also surprised to notice all these changes within just seven years. She is both shocked and disturbed by the riots, and violence on the streets" (292).

Another layer of Tara's cultural struggle manifests through language and communication. In America, she adopts English as her primary mode of expression, distancing herself from her mother tongue, Bengali. Upon returning to India, she finds her fluency in Bengali eroded, while her American-accented English further isolates her. This linguistic shift becomes a metaphor for her broader disconnect. Language, often a bridge between cultures, transforms into a barrier for Tara, reinforcing her status as an outsider.

Tara's letters to her American husband, David, further illustrate her cultural isolation. Written in English a language that distances her from the visceral reality of Calcutta they become futile attempts to translate her experiences into terms he might understand. David's replies, though well-meaning, are marked by naïve questions that only underscore the cultural chasm between them. Rajni says in his article, "Tara's inability to articulate her Calcutta experiences to David mirrors Mukherjee's broader critique: cultural hybridity becomes psychogenic illness when the self is irrevocably split" (238). This failure of communication deepens Tara's alienation, she can neither fully articulate her turmoil to David, who struggles to grasp the weight of her Indian heritage, nor share it with those in India, who view her as an Americanized outsider.

Tara's journey to India reveals that returning "home" is invariably impossible, while her American life remains an incomplete fit. Through this tension, Mukherjee critiques the romantic notion of cultural reconnection as she captures the lived reality of countless individuals navigating the intersections of culture, migration, and self. She exposes the ruptures that emerge when one straddles two worlds. The "cultural struggles" in *The Tiger's Daughter* transcend the specificity of the Bengali-American experience. They speak to the universal challenge of defining oneself in an era of fluid boundaries and shifting identities. The novel is fierce but fragile, and the alienation that comes with having to navigate a landscape that she doesn't fully own is a testament to this complexity. When Tara was in America, she couldn't stop thinking about India, but now that she's back in India, she misses David and fears losing him.

Emmanuel S. Nelson criticizes the novel as, "a precursor to Mukherjee's later works, such as *Jasmine*, where the characters actively reinvent themselves. In contrast, in *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara is unable to reconcile her dual identities and is trapped in a borderline state. The immigrants search for a permanent home" (45). Tara's intercultural struggle is not only external, but also deeply psychological. Her sense of self is shattered, leading to feelings of isolation and existentialism. The novel deals with the heroine's experiences of cultural hybridity. It also covers the early years of Mukherjee's marriage, and thus, Tara's psyche is always tragic as a result of the tension that develops in the mind between two socio-cultural environments, feelings of rootlessness, and longing. Mukherjee says about Tara, "Even when she tries 'voice' her continuing attachment for and identity with India, the voice does not carry conviction for it is at variance with the usual stance of indifference and arrogance, one is generally associates with the westernised Indian" (74). Mukherjee explains, the authenticity of the emotional connection that some Westernized Indians claim to have with India. She points out that when such individuals try to express their attachment to Indian identity or roots, it often lacks sincerity. The reason for this lack of conviction is because their usual demeanour is marked by "indifference and arrogance", traits often stereotypically associated with Westernized Indians who have distanced themselves from the cultural and emotional core of India. She feels simultaneously trapped and abandoned. She cannot find refuge in either her old Indian self or her newly discovered American self. This difficulty in choosing lies in her refusal to completely condemn either world. If she could find her old home despicable, Tara might have been able to leave her past untouched, but she is not. She no longer fits in. The result of this conflict is her split personality.

Thus Tara's story is a reminder that the intersection of cultures, while enriching, is often fraught with conflict and emotional complications. Ultimately, Mukherjee's work also challenges to think about home, belonging, and the price of cultural integration in an ever-changing world.

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