

## **Hybrid Cultural Identity of Tara Banerjee Cartwright in Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter***

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**Abstract:** Tara Banerjee Cartwright in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* becomes representative of hybrid cultural identity which according to the postcolonial scholar Robert Young is a breaking of two, yet also a merger at the same time. The merging of the Indianness and the Americanness of Tara Banerjee leaves her completely hybridized. There is a split in her identity due to the uprooting of her Indian origin as a result of her long stay in America and her marriage to an American named David. Her visit to India after seven years stay in America occurs as a revelation and realization of a new self. Homi Bhabha referred to this phenomenon of a hybrid cultural identity as the 'third space' where a new position that is not just the sum of two parts but something that is new exists. The ways in which we engage in cultural ways of being represent a new and hybridized way of acting. Tara's reaction towards certain incidents in terms of her Indian self and her presumption of the reaction of her American husband bears testimony to that new way of acting.

**Keywords:** Hybrid, split, new self, cultural identity.

### **Paper:**

Hybridity is one of the most widely employed terms in post-colonial theory and has been frequently used in post-colonial discourse meaning cross-cultural exchange. Hybridity has become a major reality in an increasingly multi-ethnic and pluralistic society. Large scale migration has a significant social, cultural, political and economic impact on societies and these migrations are continuously producing hybridized identities since the encounters between various cultures have an effect not only on the use of various languages but also on the manner individuals come to locate and identify themselves. The phenomenon of contacts and cultural encounters bound us to take into account the importance of culture and issues of identity. The encounters and interactions between different cultures offer a possibility for the intermingling and fusion of cultures leading to hybrid cultures and this intermingling of cultural identities gives birth to hybrid cultural identities.

Diasporic writing is one of the prominent areas where hybridity is captured. A diasporic writer is constantly in a state of flux and his writing is affected at multiple levels by both the cultures – the culture of the writer's homeland and the culture of host country. According to Martin Baumann, the exile also provides a possibility to meet other people, to benefit from exchange and encounter and to find inspiration for new ideas. It is this exile that brings the writer

out from the private home sphere to a new impersonal world where they witness the hybridized cultures. Bharti Mukherjee, born in 1940 is one of the major novelists of Indian Diaspora who has captured evocatively the Indian immigrant experiences in her fiction and two collections of short-stories. Her works reflect Indian culture and immigrant experience and also feature cultural clashes. They mostly deal with the theme of representation of cultural encounter which is natural in any society where pluralism of culture is prevalent and where people from different backgrounds and origins mix up with each other which in turn leads to the fusion of cultures.

“Women writers of Indian origin have no doubt dealt with the issue of identity in their works quite effectively, particularly the complex process of hybridization in the women protagonists” (113) writes Dr. Subhendu Mund and *The Tiger's Daughter* bears no exception to the fact as Mund further argues that Tara Banerjee Cartwright of *The Tiger's Daughter* offers “multiple portraitures of the same persona undergoing changes in succeeding phases of hybridization” (114).

Bharti Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) is an autobiographical story about an East Indian immigrant who finds it difficult to adjust to the North American culture and at the same time is painfully aware that she will never again belong to the culture she has left behind. Tara was sent abroad by her father at the age of fifteen which brought a terrible change in her outlook. As a result of this shifting, the identity of the character becomes hybrid as she spends substantial period of time in more than one cultural context and is exposed to different cultures. Initially, she finds herself constantly “being pushed to the periphery of her old world” (13). She feels isolated and insecure and this insecurity gives rise to a sense of discrimination. She gets highly disturbed even at the slightest indifference shown to her by her roommates. She even prays to the goddess ‘Kali’ for strength and continuously strives to defend the dignity of her country and people. But it does not take much time for her to perceive the changes America had brought to her overall personality and she realizes that she had for the first time started to think for herself.

Tara Banerjee Cartwright in *The Tiger's Daughter* becomes representative of hybrid cultural identity which according to the post colonial scholar Robert Young is a breaking of two, yet also a merger at the same time. The merging of the Indianness and the Americanness of Tara Banerjee leaves her completely hybridized. There is a split in her identity due to the uprooting of Indian origin as a result of her long stay in America and her marriage to an American named David. Her visit to India after seven years stay in America occurs to her as a revelation and realization of a new self. This trip home to India gives her a feeling of being “an apprentice to some great thing or power” (157) and the whole experience appears to her pointless and vague.

In America, she yearns for her home and travels to India without being accompanied by her husband. But she fails to connect to her homeland and the experiences in India give rise to certain uncertainties and confusions in her mind that she regrets her decision of homecoming and misses her husband immensely. “Tara could no longer visualize his face in its entirety, only bits and pieces in precise detail, and this terrified her. . . . It was hard to visualize him because she was in India, Tara thought. In India she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner, and this foreignness was a burden” (78). But at certain instances when she feels too carried away,

her letters to David tend to bring her back to her American self and she even buys foreign newspapers and magazines “hoping the foreign news would bring her closer to David” (99).

Tara’s welcome in India, although quite warm makes her nervous and she feels quite awkward when she is called by domestic names like ‘Tultul’ and ‘Taramoni’ by her relatives. They do not realize that the America returned Tara was no more their old ‘Tultul’ or ‘Taramoni’ of the East but she was now Tara Banerjee Cartwright of the West. Her name itself suggests the fusion of two identities, of the deep rooted Indianness and the adopted and acculturated Americanness.

The reason why Tara is sent to America by her father is the uncertainty regarding a better future for her in the post colonial India. It was an attempt to protect her from the economic and communal chaos and later when Tara has to confront that chaos, she becomes incapable to cope with it. When once she pays visit to a place called Tollygunge owned by Mr. Roy Chowdhary taken over by certain refugees and squatters, she was highly bewildered to see the dusty, deteriorated poverty stricken place. She even loses her senses when a poor shabby girl covered in muddy bandages suffering from leprosy comes close to her and stops her way demanding food and money. She gets so terrified that she ends up falling over the little girl. The picture offered by Bharti Mukharjee of the post-colonial Calcutta is not very pleasant and it upsets the heroine of the novel who witnesses many changes in the city and is unable to react or respond to those changes. Tara, to her great astonishment feels offended and repulsive of most of the things when she judges them with a western perspective at the cost of appearing too European and self-centered to others. Sushma Tandon comments ;

Since Tara is exposed to the west and has absorbed its values, she must be necessarily alienated and, therefore, even if she tries to voice her continued attachment for, and identity with India, the voice does not carry conviction because it is at variance with the usual stance of indifference and arrogance as these are associated with the westernized Indian. (32)

The communal riots and the disturbances in the city shatter her completely and she regrets her visit to India and longs to go back to her husband in America. She becomes a hybrid of both cultures, belonging to both entirely, but not to either at the same time. Such kinds of hybrid identities are not only true in case of the immigrants who cannot identify themselves as belonging only to one culture but even to people who have not immigrated can have hybrid cultural identities as a result of large scale cultural movements spread across the globe in the present times. To observe this process of hybridization in post-colonial context is to observe the impact the colonial power has exercised on the colonized nations. It has influenced the minds of people and exposed them to many foreign notions and trends which they try to inculcate and adopt and at the same time they remain bound to their own original cultures. But it is not true that only the colonized get influenced, when the dominant ones come into contact and experience the new cultural trends and modes, even they come under the impact and this in turn causes the emergence of newness. Dr. Mund has written in this context that;

It seems that postcolonial discourses largely dwell on only one side of the issue: that dominant cultures cannibalize the non-dominant ones, whether in

the colonial or the neo-colonial context. The other side is, the non-dominant cultures of the minority groups equally tend to hybridize the dominant ones. (115)

Tara emerges as a new individual who is different from the one who once felt insecure and uncomfortable in the American atmosphere and longed for home whereas after a long stay in America, she finds it tough to adjust with her friends and relatives in India and even with the traditions of her own family. She is aware of the distances that have been created and for which somewhere she considers herself to be responsible since “she had willfully abandoned her caste by marrying a foreigner” (63) and that had greatly offended her mother. After all those years when she has to confront her past memories once again she remembers that how as a child “she had sung *bhajans* in that house. . . . But that had been a very long time ago, before some invisible spirit or darkness had covered her like skin” (67). Tara gets really moved by the faith and devotion of people when once she pays visit to Kananbala Mata along with her mother and “It was not Kananbala Mata who moved her so much as the worshipers themselves” (207). But she is at the same time enraged to see the unhygienic conditions prevalent at such places when she sees a man suffering from some visible skin disease collecting the sweet boxes from the devotees. “Tara disliked physical defects and worried about germs polluting the sweetmeats, which the *chela* had taken to be blessed” (206).

Tara has not even completely assimilated into the American culture and she finds herself in a dilemma, caught between the two confronted cultures. Tandon holds the view that “With a combination of malice and charm, irony and sympathy, Bharti Mukherjee describes how Tara is pushed to the edges of her old world, and yet exiled from the new, and how she tries vainly to reconcile the two worlds in her heart” (36). Tara thought her act of marrying an American by her own wish was an act of freedom, willfulness, emancipation and thus progress. She expected admiration from her friends for this emancipated gesture but “Her friends let slip their disapproval of her, they suggested her marriage had been imprudent, that the seven years abroad had eroded all that was fine and sensitive in her Bengali nature” (70). Thus she felt that it was foolish on her part to expect admiration and that “The years away from India had made her self-centered. She took everything, the heat, the beggars, as personal insults and challenges” (107).

Tara’s loyalty towards her original homeland and deep attachment to her new adopted home keep her in a new state of existence and provides a new identity to her. The inheritance of American culture might have changed her outlook and personality or influenced her mind in many ways but still she had not acquired the essential assets like that of protecting herself and she depends on others for her safety. She is seduced by the man named Tuntunwala but still she prefers to remain voiceless. Her reaction towards the declining state of Calcutta is also not that of a visionary or a reformist but that of a patient and passive observer since she thinks “that it is fatal to fight for justice; that it was better to remain passive and absorb all shocks as they come” whereas her American husband “David wanted her to take a stand against injustice, against unemployment, hunger and bribery” (157).

Homi Bhabha referred to this phenomenon of hybridity as the ‘third space’ – a space where a new position that is not only the sum of two parts but something more, exists. When we engage in cultural ways of being, that represents a new and hybrid way of acting. Tara’s new

way of acting is her reaction to certain incidents in terms of her Indian self and her presumption of the reaction of her American husband towards the same situation. "Tara wondered what David would do if he ever came to India. He was not like her. Would he sling his camera like other Americans and photograph beggars in Shambazar, squatters in Tollygunge . . ." (130).

A hybrid cultural identity seeks to describe what it means to belong to two or more distinct cultural groups simultaneously and the conflicts that can arise between these two or more identities present inside an individual. It focuses on the cultural conflict between ancestral culture and the dominant mainstream culture. Tara also undergoes the same conflict as she dwells in two different worlds, trying to fit in two different cultural identities and is unable to be accepted completely by either, when in reality she belongs to both.

If Tara would have been converted into a pure American, she would have looked at the city with the eyes of a detached observer and reacted to it as a complete outsider. She would have felt surprised and amused to see the devastation and the immense suffering of people. She would not have been as much bewildered as she is because she knows that this was her place of origin, a place she belonged to. If instead, Tara had remained a pure Indian, she might not have lost patience over her own people. She might have tried to sympathize and associate with the people she felt her own rather than escaping from the circumstances and deciding to return back to America. Hence, Tara has not remained a pure Indian and has not even become a complete American. She has rather become a combination of the both, an Americanized Indian that can be referred to as the hybrid cultural identity of Tara Banerjee Cartwright.

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