Chapter II

Tara: The Expatriate
Bharati Mukherjee’s first novel The Tiger’s Daughter details the experiences of a sensitive young Bengali lady on her return to India after a seven-year stay in America. The story is drawn on Mukherjee’s own experiences and those of her sister Ranu who had gone to study at Vassar, America. Mukherjee calls it the wisest of her novels because “I was detached enough from India so that I could look back with affection and irony, but I didn’t know America enough to feel any conflict. I was like a bridge, poised.”¹ The novel received “rave” reviews when it was first published in 1971. It was described as an “elegant first novel” and “charming and intelligent.”² It was considered a “beautiful novel of contemporary India seen through the eyes of a sensitive and confused daughter of Bengali Brahmins.”³

However, the novel’s reception in India was not so favourable. Jasbir Jain thinks that the novel reflects a world which refuses to hold together both at the individual and cultural level. She feels that the reactions of Tara, the protagonist, are those of a tourist, of a foreigner. Sivaramakrishna thinks that Mukherjee’s protagonists are victims of a life which is “visionless because it is voiceless.” And since Tara is alienated, “even when she tries to voice attachment for and identify with India, the voice doesn’t carry conviction....”⁴ Maya Manju Sharma counters the
charges of these two critics. She disagrees with Jasbir Jain’s argument that the novels of Mukherjee imply a total rejection or a ruthless questioning of tradition. Opposing Sivaramakrishna’s stance that Mukherjee has yet to find her authentic voice, she says Mukherjee has a “markedly individual voice but it is one that the nationalistic individual refuses to hear as authentic.” Sharma rightly points out that *The Tiger’s Daughter* presents the dynamic of growth from expatriation to immigration.

Brinda Bose feels that Mukherjee’s novels are a celebration of the spirit of America. Her women battle for their identity and their “assimilation and acceptance in the new culture appear impossible if the past is not forgotten. This forgetting .... can hardly be accomplished without guilt and pain – and this is the rite of passage for Tara that *The Tiger’s Daughter* documents.” Debjani Banerjee examines the novel from a historical perspective. She rightly feels that Mukherjee’s “interpretation of the historical context is unifocal, drawing on the hegemonic point of view.” Christine Gomez feels that Mukherjee’s protagonists share the expatriate characteristic of being ill-at-ease both in the native culture and in the alien one. “They represent the dilemma faced by expatriates.”

Shobha Shinde, discussing the “Cross-Cultural Crisis” in *Jasmine* and *The Tiger’s Daughter*, says that Bharati Mukherjee “pushes both her heroines to the edges of their worlds and liberates them for a new world
order.”

T.Padma feels that Tara’s predicament is that of a divided self “suspended between two worlds and rooted in neither.”

As it can be seen from the foregoing, most of the critics have discussed the themes of transition from expatriation to immigration and the question of identity in Mukherjee’s novels. When the novel was written, Mukherjee was “poised” between two worlds, that of India and of North America. She presents the perspective of the class that she knows well and to which her protagonist Tara belongs. She said in an interview, “In The Tiger’s Daughter, I was writing about my class at a certain period in Calcutta history, about a class and a way of life that’s become extinct.” It is the perspective of the aristocracy that is presented in the novel so much so that as Debjani Banerjee says, “Mukherjee’s text pleads ignorance of the ‘Other’... the subaltern classes of Calcutta, and as she adjures the multivalent perspective, lines of communication remain unabridged between the two classes.”

Though Mukherjee denies that the novel is autobiographical, the character of Tara is obviously modelled after her own and her younger sister Ranu’s experiences in North America. Mukherjee’s husband Clark Blaise and Maya Manju Sharma give the details of the sisters’ moving over to America and their experiences: “The journey starting in 1961 from Calcutta to student time in Iowa (of Mukherjee) and romance and marriage American campus style to Canadian citizenship in 1966 and immigration to
the U.S. in 1980 covers 21 years... Tara is modelled in her homesickness on Ranu’s experience at Vassar. But her strength to endure that, marry the young American David Cartwright; live at 124th Street at Broadway, and go back after seven years is drawn out of the stuff of Bharati Mukherjee herself.”

In the novel it is not mentioned why Tara returns home but Mukherjee reveals why she herself came back. “I was tired and irritable and because I thought of myself as a careless person on a callous continent. In India I would relearn the precautions taken by a people fluent in self-protection. Of course I had other reasons for going to India. I was going because I had discovered that while changing citizenships is easy, swapping cultures is not.”

Mukherjee documents the experiences of Tara in India between her arrival and her purported departure. Some of Tara’s experiences on her return to India are reflections of the author’s reactions upon returning home. Mukherjee says, “There were just so many aspects of India that I disliked by then. So a lot of my stories are really about transformation, especially among women.”

The first part of the novel is short and serves as the prologue to the story of the protagonist Tara Banerjee Cartwright. It is divided into four chapters. The first chapter describes The Catelli-Continental Hotel on
Chowringhee Avenue. It is symbolical and is the meeting place of Tara’s friends. It is the place where Joyonto Roy Chowdhary sees Tara and decides to protect her. It is an “important symbol of Tara’s expatriate sensibility.”

The remaining three chapters of Part I provide the background of Tara. In the village of Pachapara, Tara’s great grandfather Harilal Banerjee performs the marriages of her two daughters, Santana, the grandmother of Tara, and Arupa. Harilal’s friends who attend the marriage are very complacent and do not expect the stability of their lives to be threatened by “the shadows of suicide or exile, of Bengali soil sectioned and ceded, of workers rising against their bosses.”

A vision, presumably the vision of change, is referred to in the novel intermittently. A hint of it is given in the beginning. “An imprisoned and gigantic spirit had begun to move and all things on its body – towns, buildings, men – were slowly altering their shapes. The alterations were not yet impressive; none suspected they might be fatal.” (9) The last sentence is indicative of the novel’s perspective. The changes are obviously fatal to the world of Harilal and his friends.

Two years after his daughter’s wedding, Harilal is knifed by someone when he rides out to stop a feud. After his death, the family loses hold of Pachapara. The Banerjees are replaced by Roy Chowdharys. After
partition, Pachapara went to Pakistan. Before that, Santana’s husband, a barrister, sold the Banerjee house he had inherited by marriage and moved to Calcutta. He was successful in Calcutta but withdrew from the Bar after being unofficially reprimanded for defending two nationalists. He bought a lumber yard in Assam and a tobacco factory in Calcutta.

Tara is referred to at the end of the third chapter: “Years later a young woman ... would grieve for the Banerjee family and try to analyze the reasons for it’s change. She would sit by a window in America, and dream of Harilal, her great grandfather, and she would wonder at the gulf that separated him from herself. But her dreams and her straining would yield a knowledge that was visionless.” (9)

Chapter Four introduces Tara’s father known in his circles as “The Bengal Tiger”. He provides the novel’s title. While all around him people were responding to Calcutta’s sullenness with anger and threats, Tara’s father remained jovial, impartial and was absorbed in his duties, his business, and his charities. He expanded and improved his business firm. But “beneath that stem affability, however, there must have run a deep suspicion or pain which had urged the Bengal Tiger to send his only child, a girl of fifteen, out of India for college.” (9) And thus, Tara, not yet fifteen, finds herself at Poughkeepsie, Vassar. She feels homesick and clings to the memories of her old friends, the Camac Street girls. The girls at Vassar try to draw her out by lending her books, records and hand lotions unasked.
But little things pained her. If the roommate did not share her mango chutney, she sensed discrimination. She prayed to Kali who sat under the folds of her silk sarees for strength.

The girls at Vassar discussed every thing freely. And Tara learnt to think for herself in the dormitory at Vassar. Towards the end of her first year at Vassar, Tara meets a young man at a gathering of Indian Students Association. She imagines herself in love with him. But the young man goes to Sweden and does not once call her after his return. Tara goes back to her studies.

When the summer vacation begins and the girls around her begin their preparations to go home, Tara is seized by a vision of terror. She begins to suffer from fainting spells, headaches and nightmares. Her academic adviser, watching her “sudden defoliation,” decides to keep the young woman occupied and sends her to Madison for summer school. After arriving at Madison, in her anxiety to find a cab Tara almost knocks down a young man, whom she would eventually marry.

Tara had gone to Vassar when she was just fifteen. She returns home after seven years. Part Two of the novel begins with Tara’s arrival in India. The details of Tara’s marriage and her married life in America are not given though a few hints of her life there are given in the later part of the novel.
When Tara arrives in Bombay, all her Bombay relatives turn up at the airport to receive her. They greet her with garlands and sweetmeats and take her to their apartment on Marine Drive. Seven years ago, Tara had admired the houses on Marine Drive but now their shabbiness appalls her. As her father is held up in Calcutta, Tara sets out alone for Calcutta by train. A Nepali and a Marwari were her co-passengers. Both look ugly and the Marwari reminds her of a spider. They vie with each other to hold Tara’s attention. The Marwari is P.K. Tuntunwala who is to play a major role in Tara’s life and in her enlightenment.

Looking outside the window, Tara thinks, “I have returned to dry holes by the sides of railway tracks, ... to brown fields like excavations for a thousand houses. I have returned to India.” (21) The deepening darkness outside the window gives her time for self-analysis. She had dreamed of this return to India for years. All her hesitations and fears would be magically erased if she could just return to Calcutta, she thought. “But so far the return had brought only wounds. First the corrosive hours on Marine Drive, then deformed beggars in the railway station, and now the inexorable train ride undid what strength she had held in reserve. She was an embittered woman, she now thought, old and cynical at twentytwo and quick to take offence.”(25)

The squalor and the confusion at Howrah Station outrage her. Only her father, his usual authoritarian self, seems to be real to her. But she feels
in her absence he too has moved out of the private world of filial affection and seems to have become a symbol of the outside world. To the observant Tara, all Calcutta seemed “touched by rages and ideals.” (29) She realizes her vacation would not be an easy one.

Tara’s parents’ house on Camac Street was designed to be restful. In this palatial house which maintained a Victorian life style, Tara takes rest for two days. She is reminded of New York which had been exotic because girls like her were being knifed in elevators in their apartment buildings. New York had “driven her to despair” at times. When she felt she could not survive, she had taken out her silk scarves and hung them around to make her apartment look more Indian. She “had curried” hamburger desperately till David’s stomach protested and burnt incense sent from home till the hippie neighbours began to take an undue interest in her. “Now she was home,” Tara thinks, “She was home in a class that lived by Victorian rules… She was in a city that took for granted most men were born to suffer, others to fall asleep during committee meetings of the Chamber of Commerce. She was among the ordinary and she felt rested.”(34)

When Arati, Tara’s mother, takes her to aunt Jharna’s house, Tara has the first taste of the resentment her relatives feel towards her marriage. Aunt Jharna’s daughter is club-footed and they tried all kinds of remedies. When Tara and her mother arrive, the girl is seen dangling her feet over incense smoke while her mother sits on the floor, fanning the clay incense
burner. Tara is revolted by the scene. She asks an innocent question which enrages her aunt. She asks whether they had tried plaster casts and special shoes. Aunt Jharna reacts with unexpected violence: “You think you are too educated for this, don’t you? ... You have come back to make fun of us, haven’t you? What gives you the right? Your American money? Your Mleccha husband?” (37). The dumb-struck Tara is left wondering about her own foreignness of spirit – whether it began right in Calcutta with the Belgium nuns at St.Blaises or at Vassar or at Madison.

The Fifth chapter introduces Joyonto Roy Chowdhary, the owner of tea estates in Assam. He is a regular visitor to the Catelli Continental. On a morning when Tara’s friends come to the Catelli to meet her, Joyonto happens to see her. He watches her talking to her friends and tells himself that she must be protected. Tara’s friends, elegant young men and women, greet her with extraordinary emotion. They study her with obsessive attention. “Tara was startled at their tremendous capacity for surfaces. She sat in their midst, cowed and nervous while her silence drove them to more indelicate, more damaging remarks about her appearance.” (42)

Then they begin to talk about Calcutta, about the changes and the riots. Unable to respond to their talk, Tara feels very uncomfortable. But she feels they were “shavings of her own personality.” Seven years ago she played with them. But now “She feared their tone, their omissions, their
aristocratic oneness." (43) They ask about the things she brought back but do not ask once about her husband. This hurts Tara.

Tara's friends switching over to the riots in Calcutta, rage against the revolutionaries. They refer to them as goondas and regret that Calcutta was going to the dogs. Joyonto who sits nearby watching and listening to them feels sorry that these elegant young men and women were the last pillars of his world. They did not realize that a revolution was on its way. They were content to rage against the small riots. Joyonto thinks that they deserve to die, "all except the luminous girl who sat like a grateful outcaste." (p.46) Joyonto vows to seek out this girl and preserve her from others.

Sitting in her mother's prayer room, Tara remembers David's letter, the contents of which disturb her. He talked about his friend Susie Goldberg and the difficulty he was having with his novel. Tara feels perhaps David no longer loved her enough. With that suspicion comes another - that she is not welcome in the puja room, being married to a foreigner. But her misgivings are dispelled by her mother who asks her to stay on and bathe the sivalingam. Tara is touched. After she grinds the sandal wood paste, Tara forgets the next step and she fears, "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 center." (51)
Many parties are given in honour of Tara's return. It seems the westernized high society of Calcutta has fallen in love with her. At first Tara looks forward to these parties. But soon the "beliefs and omissions" of her friends disturb her. Their talk causes discomfiture in her as they "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... The best that could be said for David, she sensed, was that he was, nominally at least, a Christian and not a Muslim."(55/56)

Tara feels terrified as she could no longer visualize her husband's face. She feels that she is always being reminded that she is married to a foreigner and this foreignness is a burden. Trying to compose a letter to David, Tara finds it difficult to convey her feelings to him. She wishes she had not come to India without her husband.

Tara meets Tuntunwala again at a Charity Carnival. She follows him from stall to stall and finally he takes her to his own stall of textiles. She is moved by his desire to show her his stall. He looks so different from the men she knew. His ease and mastery, she thinks, is frightening and she feels intuitively that he is incapable of defeat. Though she does not like him and thinks he is ugly and spider-like, she is strangely attracted to him. At his stall he motions to Tara to join him for a group photograph with the girls who were posing as nymphs in the stall. She does not like the
peremptoriness of his gestures but she knows she would obey him without much questioning. She feels he is a dangerous man. He would create whatever situation, whatever catastrophe he needed. It was no use criticizing him, Tara feels.

Tara visits the Catelli once a week without her friends so that she could read foreign newspapers and magazines. On one such day Joyonto approaches her and introduces himself as her father’s friend. He sits at her table indulging in small talk. Tara is reminded of Pronob’s warning against talking to strangers. But when Joyonto invites her for a ride, she agrees as she remembers David’s accusation that she was becoming lazy. As they argue about which car to take, Tara senses the start of a small adventure. She thinks an adventure would come in handy when she wrote David her biweekly letters.

Joyonto takes her to the river bank to show her the funeral pyres. A tantric suddenly appears and wants to read the hand of Tara. Tara panics and runs to take shelter behind the car. She watches the tantric reading Joyonto’s palm. Joyonto returns chanting Rupert Brooke’s poem, “When I die...” and sits in the car beside Tara and suddenly falls sick. Tara had always disliked people with minor imperfections. She feels Joyonto had no business to fall ill. She snaps at his chauffeur: “Do something. What’s the matter with your sahib? He’s dying or something?”(83) Joyonto’s chauffeur takes control, tells Tara not to worry and carries his master to his
car. Tara feels she had acted foolishly. She had not listened to the caution of her friends and she had abandoned a sick old man by the funeral pyres. Time and again Tara is found to react to events like this impetuously and then repenting.

After this incident a terrible depression overpowers Tara. Her friends try to cheer her up but to no avail. She wants to talk to Joyonto but he is not seen again. Her friends write long letters to David who writes back sarcastically that the letters were priceless. They discuss picnics and after considering many places, settle for the factory premises of Banerjee and Thomas (Tobacco) Co. Ltd. They sit at Kapoor's Restaurant and prepare the lists of guests. Listening to her friends dismiss with contempt a girl who had married a Nigerian and gone off, Tara desperately thinks they were racial purists:

They liked foreigners in movie magazines. They loved English men like Worthington at the British Council. But they did not approve of foreign marriage. So much for the glamour of her own marriage. She had expected admiration from these friends. She had wanted them to consider her marriage an emancipated gesture. But emancipation was suspicious. It presupposed bondage... In New York she had often praised herself, especially when it was time to clean the toilet or bath tub... There was no heroism for her in New York. It appeared
there would be no romance, no admiration in Calcutta either. (86)

Part Two of the novel ends with the picnic. Part Three begins with a conversation between Tara and Reena. They are at the Catelli Continental and Tara confides in Reena. She tells her that little things have begun to upset her. She is troubled by the changed Calcutta and longs for the Bengal of Satyajit Ray – children running through cool green spaces, aristocrats despairing in music rooms of empty palaces. Reena remarks that Tara has become much too self-centred and European. She asks Tara not to be a "puss pot." That Indian English phrase calms down Tara. Their talk switches over to Pronob and the Jaycees club and the American exchange students. Reena tells her that their guest is a McDowell and her mother expects disaster that Reena would follow Tara’s example and marry a mleccha. Tara takes offence again. She had never thought of David as a mleccha. She begins to argue angrily with Reena. Tara thinks, "It was useless to pursue this anger. Reena and others were surrounded by an impregnable wall of self-confidence. Through some weakness or fault, Tara had slipped outside. And reentry was barred."(110)

Reena begins to tell amusing stories about her mother’s preparations to receive the American guest. As they begin to laugh, Joyonto comes over and greets them. Tara introduces Reena to him. Joyonto invites both of them to his place in Tollygunge which is occupied by squatters. Though
she is apprehensive of riding through dangerous streets to look at insolent strangers, she trusts the eccentric old man who had, without preliminaries, shown her the funeral pyres. So in spite of Reena’s protests, Tara decides to accept the invitation of the old man and persuades Reena. But as they approach Joyonto’s compound, they are appalled by the dirt and squalor. If Tara had anticipated their exposure to ugliness and danger, to viruses that stalked the streets, to dogs and cows scrapping the garbage dumps she would have refused Joyonto’s invitation.

When the squatters of the bustee surround them, Tara has a premonition of some disaster that would involve her. She fears that she would get hurt or die at vulgar hands and that David would never know how much she loved him. Joyonto tells the rude-looking men that they have not come to collect rent but just to look around. The young men are pleased and offer to take them on a tour of their bustee. At the end of the tour, Joyonto tips them lavishly. And when they are about to leave, a young girl begins to circle them, screaming “she wanted a saree just like that” and pointing to Tara. The girl had bleeding sores on her feet and hands. As Reena remembers later, Tara was beside herself with rage when the girl touched her. She had screamed hysterically tearing at the spot the girl had touched. She is dragged to the car and the driver takes them home. All through Joyonto remains a silent spectator. Reena reassures Tara that the
girl didn't have leprosy. Once again Tara feels ashamed of herself, worries about making a fool of herself, and apologizes to her friends.

Time and again it is shown that Tara is given to exaggerated fears and apprehensions and yet she puts herself at risk and evolves herself ever so gradually. As Maya Manju Sharma says, “the change is not arrived at by petulant challenge of tradition, but by deliberately putting the self at risk abroad (Wife) and at home (The Tiger's Daughter).”\(^{18}\) And as it is seen, the testing is done in the outings with Joyonto and Tuntunwala, and it is left in doubt whether Tara comes out victorious or not. She is left feeling bitter at the end of each episode.

Tara writes to David about the happenings in Calcutta. Two days later she receives many angry letters (due to the eccentricities of overseas mail service) from him which accuse her of “stupid inanities” and “callousness.” She feels she could never explain her feelings to David. So she deftly manages not to give her own feelings away in her letters to him. “It was so vague,” Tara feels, “so pointless, so diffuse, this trip home to India.”\(^{(130)}\)

Tara meets Tuntunwala for the third time at Dhakuria Club, where a rally is held for him. Though Sanjay makes a hero of Tuntunwala in his editorials with epithets like “Savior of Calcutta,” some like Pronob remain suspicious of him. At Dhakuria Club Sanjay interviews Tuntunwala. Tara
admires Tuntunwala’s energy and the way he handles things. Chaos is created when bombs explode at the club. A journalist and a writer are arrested. Tuntunwala slaps the handcuffed journalist. The sight sickens Tara. She thinks, “This man is our enemy... savior or not. She had seen terrifying hate on his face, the instant before he had slapped the young man from the newspaper; and now he was being praised for his courage.”(137)

It was time for the arrival of the American exchange students. Reena thinks that their guest McDowell is an Irish American. But when the boy’s photograph arrives, the family is shocked to find that he is a black. Reena’s mother is so upset that she wants to call off the whole thing. The day of the students’ arrival coincides with a minor city-wide riot. The Bengal Tiger fixes two red crosses to Reena’s Fiat and asks her father to pose as a doctor. When McDowell is brought, his appearance further shocks them. He is very tall, a high school basket ball star. His hair grew in a foot wide halo round his face. He straightaway calls Reena’s parents mom and pop. They wait at the air port till 4 P.M. by which time the rioters are supposed to disperse and then troop out. But they are stopped at Shambazar by a group of young rioters. McDowell gets out and shakes hands all around. He teaches the awe-struck boys to shout slogans like ‘Brown is Beautiful’. The performance is repeated at every barricade and Reena’s father beams happily.
Tara is asked to serve as a bridge between McDowell and others till dinner time. After the preliminary enquiries, Tara wonders what further conversation she could make with McDowell. She knew very few blacks in America. She thinks McDowell is more American than David and for him she was just another Indian. Sanjay arrives for dinner impeccably dressed and with well-prepared topics. He leads McDowell out into the veranda. Reena and then Tara follow him. The older people are relieved as they now need not struggle with English. Sanjay hands over a clipping of his recent editorial to McDowell and asks his opinion. Reena explains they were in the midst of a blood curdling election campaign and all those "goondas" who stopped them were on the other side. Tara feels that the moment requires her bridging functions. But it would be impossible to explain to Reena that McDowell was on the other side and that when he returned to Watts he would make fun of Camac Street girls like Reena. Later McDowell leaves them and joins the students and Tara's apprehensions are proved to be correct.

In May, the families of all Tara's friends leave for Darjeeling. Reena's and Tara's families go together and are the last to leave. In the airlines limousine which carries them up, a white girl and an old English man are also seen. The two families put up at Kanchan Janga Hotel. That evening they find Neelima talking to a young man and greet her. But she ignores them. Tara is infuriated and wonders why Neelima is embarrassed
by them and is trying to avoid them. Reena tells her, "She's embarrassed by you, not me, my dear, ... She probably thinks that little man will run away if he finds out one of her friends arranged her own marriage."(165) Tara finds both the snub and it's explanation infuriating. She feels, "She was just an eccentric and imprudent creature whose marriage has barred her from sharing the full confidence of her St.Blaises' friends."(165)

The next morning Tara accompanies her mother to a local shrine. They ride in a palanquin because of Arati's rheumatism and Tara is embarrassed. On their way they meet Pronob and Antonia and the four together go to the shrine. The chief Chela receives them and takes the boxes of sweetmeats from Arati to be blessed by the Mata. He suffers from a visible skin disease. Tara who dislikes physical defects worries about the germs polluting the sweetmeats. Mata Kananbala Devi is fair, short and very beautiful. The atmosphere in the shrine affects Tara. She is strangely moved and finds herself shouting "Ma, Mata" along with the rest. It is not the Mata who moves her so much as the worshippers themselves. In that atmosphere of religious ardour she forgets her instinctive suspicion, fears of misunderstanding and her guardedness. She feels close to her mother, to the other worshippers, even to the Chela with his skin disease. Like her mother she now believes in miracles and religious experiences. But Antonia is unimpressed. She says India needs less religious excitement and
more birth control devices. Arati gets angry. When Antonia expatiates on her topic, Tara tells her she is making a fool of herself.

The manager of the Kanchan Janga Hotel organizes one of his many annual beauty contests. The mothers of Darjeeling are thrown into a panic as they prepare their daughters to the contest. A small incident takes place on the afternoon of the contest. Tara goes for a horse ride along with Pronob and Antonia. On the way back a band of rough-looking holidayers obstruct their path. They make rude comments about Antonia and Tara and take out their cameras to take countless shots of Tara. Tara shouts at Pronob to do some thing. "They can’t take my picture!", (p.179) she shouts. Pronob asks her to simply ignore them. The young men forget Antonia and surround Tara and begin to tease her. They try to pull the reins out of her hands. She begins to scream and kicks a man in the stomach. The men stand sullenly and swear revenge. Pronob suddenly charges into their midst and the men scatter. Then the three friends rush towards the mall. Antonia feels that Tara has handled the situation disgracefully and viciously. But Pronob is sympathetic. He feels nasty things always happened to nice people. The incident is another instance wherein Tara responds impetuously. When told of this incident, the Bengal Tiger’s friends feel outraged. But the women’s reaction is not sympathetic. "Well, she made a love match. Surely she can look after herself"(180), they said. Tara, being a married person, is not eligible to participate in the contest. So
she is made a judge. After dinner, young Anglo-Indian and Punjabi couples begin to dance. Neelima is decked up and her mother hoists her on a bar stool so that parents of eligible bachelors could see her. Arati says she is doing it all the wrong way. Reena’s mother’s rejoinder shows her resentment of Tara’s marriage. Tara’s father comes to the rescue of his wife with praise of David. He calls David a brilliant and lovable boy. Tara wonders whether he really means what he says.

After returning from Darjeeling, Tara’s father becomes busy with office routine. Tara and her mother, fearing that he would work himself sick, try to lure him away but to no avail. Finally, Arati plans a long weekend trip to Nayapur, a new township in a complex of coal mines, steel foundries and plants for hydroelectricity. Tara’s father is at first enthusiastic about it, as he wants to show off Bengal’s industrial progress to his daughter. But two days before the planned trip, he had to leave for Delhi on urgent business. Arati decides to accompany him and makes arrangement for aunt Jhama to move into Camac Street for a week.

Tara’s friends fear that she would not acquit well with her aunt and plan a trip to Nayapur by themselves. Tara is entrusted with chaperoning duties for the unmarried girls by their mothers. At Nayapur guest house, they find Tuntunwala standing in the veranda surrounded by men. Tuntunwala offers Tara to show the township. Tara is overwhelmed by the countryside. When they return, Tara finds that her friends have gone to a
movie. Tuntunwala remarks that they have left her alone to cope with his wiles. Tara replies that she is the chaperon and her reputation is not at stake. He escorts her to the dining hall. He orders both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food and devours it with incredible speed. The sight sickens Tara. Her headache turns to nausea. Tuntunwala notices that she is sick and takes charge. He takes her to his suite on the pretext of giving her homeopathic medicine. Tara’s maid is ordered to wait in the veranda. The man’s tone is so authoritative that the maid does not think of the impropriety of the suggestion. Tara knows she should protest, but she doesn’t. Tired and sick she feels curious about the man’s intentions. “If she were a more aggressive young woman like Antonia Whitehead, she knows she would have walked out of the suite with the maid. But she was neither forceful nor impulsive. At that moment the Marwari appeared to her strong, sensible and curiously akin to the Bengal Tiger and Harilal Banerjee.”(197) He offers to rub vicks vaporab on her forehead. She rejects the offer but he is not accustomed to rejection. He expresses his amorous desires to her saying that she is liberated and advanced and he admires her greatly. Tara does not get angry. She mildly answers that admiration is no reason to yield to him. His disappointment changes to dull anger and he tells Tara in a decisive tone that she has no choice. And so a weakened Tara is not able to resist and protect herself. The writer does not call it a rape. She calls it a “seduction.” After seducing her, Tuntunwala does not
offer any apologies. He invites her to tea and goes to the next room to confer with his men. Such a thing would not have happened in another Calcutta, the writer tells us:

Tara would not have walked into the suite of a gentleman for medicine, and a gentleman would not have dared to make such improper suggestions to her. But except for Camac Street, Calcutta had changed greatly... With new dreams like Nayapur Tara’s Calcutta was disappearing. New dramas occurred with new bull dozer incisions in the green and romantic hills. Slow learners like Tara were merely victims. (199)

Tara’s first reaction is to complain to Sanjay and Pronob and tell them that Tuntunwala was a parasite who would survive at their expense. But soon her anger subsides leaving a residue of unforgiving bitterness. She realizes she cannot confide in any of her friends: “In a land where a friendly smile, an accidental brush of fingers, can ignite rumours – even law suits – how is one to speak of Tuntunwala’s violence”? (199)

Tara leaves her friends a note saying she has suddenly taken ill and leaves for Camac Street. Back home her parents find her bitterness inexplicable. They are dismayed when she constantly talks of returning to David. To encourage her to stay longer, they arrange pastimes like poetry reading sessions and visits to St.Blaises. At St.Blaises, the nuns are
extremely pleased to see Tara. They ask for a photograph of her husband and are hysterical with pleasure when she produces it. With bitter regret Tara leaves the nuns standing on the school steps. All her early ideas of love, fair play and good manners had come from these women. Now standing on the steps of the school, they seem to her like people in a snap shot, yellow and faded.

David's letters also depress Tara. She decides to leave for the States and gets a seat reserved for herself on a flight leaving at the end of the week. Then, because she is given to serious and sentimental farewells, she telephones Reena, Pronob and Sanjay to meet her at the Catelli. Sanjay comes over to pick her up and Tara's parents hope that her friends might persuade her to delay her departure.

At the Catelli, Pronob tells them about a mob unrest in the city. Tara's friends feel that it is a bad idea to meet at the Catelli on such a day. To Tara the moment seems inappropriate to break the sentimental news. The procession of the revolutionaries approaches the Catelli. The mob beat up the Darwan and try to enter the hotel. The people inside panic and rush towards the elevators. Pronob takes his friends down but at the gate they are pushed back. Sanjay shouts, "Press, Press." The mob gives way. They get into Sanjay's Fiat. But there was no way he could back it out. They sit inside the car with doors locked and windows rolled. The marchers jeer at them, spit on the window glass, and try to open the locked doors. Then
they see Tuntunwala appear at the doorway with a row of constables. The inspector, whom Reena recognizes as her cousin's friend Old Popo, using the megaphone tells the crowd that the hotel is the private property of Mr. Tuntunwala and orders it to fall back. Suddenly Joyonto appears on the steps, snatches the megaphone from Popo, and calls out to Tara, and begins to speak to her in seemingly incoherent phrases. Tuntunwala's guards throw him into the street. The mob seizes the old man and begins to beat him up. Pronob, unable to tolerate it, gets out of the car before his friends could prevent him. The mob seizes Pronob also. A soda bottle bursts on his head. Pronob falls down and they keep punching him. He would never know that his gesture was useless and that Joyonto is saved by Old Popo. Tara, locked inside the car, wonders whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she doesn't, whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely.

The Tiger's Daughter records the protagonist's responses to the happenings around her and the experiences she herself undergoes. Tara, the docile and vulnerable young woman, is in the first phase of the gradual evolution of the female protagonists sketched by Mukherjee in her novels. She is "a perfect instrument for recording the mutations of her time: sensitive, observant and almost sponge-like in relation to experience. She is one of those to whom things happen." At times Tara reacts like a helpless
kid and becomes hysterical and she has "a passive, waiting in the wings attitude." 20

The Boston Herald compliments Tara as a "perfectly realized human being." 21 And News Week Review says, "Tara's familiar: like so many heroines in fiction of feminine and vaguely British orientation, she is bright, elegant, alert and ironic — and with much to learn. Above all, she is vulnerable not because she is stupid or vulgar or imperceptive, but because she finds herself alienated from the naiveté and callousness of those she loves." 22

Tara is a contrast to her father who is strong, decisive, authoritative and exuberant. He is known in his circles as the 'Bengal Tiger.' It is ironic that being the Tiger's daughter, Tara is docile, vulnerable and helpless in a crisis. Tara's father has solutions for every problem, and every body around him looks up to him. Bharati Mukherjee says, "Now in these times of disorder, Calcutta has to admit that Bengal Tiger Banerjee was not like other men. A strong man is a mediator between divine and mortal fates. While the restive city forced weak men to fanatical defiance or dishonesty, the Bengal Tiger remained powerful, just and fearless." (9)

Tara's father — the writer does not give him a name — is obviously modelled after Mukherjee's father. Clark Blaise describes him. He was a man respected by scientists and "admired as a conspicuous Bengali in a
Calcutta business world dominated by hated, non indigenous Marwaris... he is still the furnace, the heat source in any room: booming, proud, imperious, xenogenic. He has the gift of expressing affection, that exaggerated forcefulness of a powerful man in a fragile country." This description perfectly fits Tara's father.

Joyonto Roy Chowdhary is the agent of Tara's education. He decides to protect her the instant he sees her. He appears to be eccentric to Tara and her friends. But it is Joyonto "who imparts her the vision." He tries to make her learn "to free herself from the soft vision of a protected past."

Joyonto takes Tara on an educative tour. He first shows her the funeral pyres, perhaps to say that the old Calcutta is burning and all that is born must die; then he takes her to the bustee and the squatters to enlighten her on the new power equations that were emerging, and in the last scene he gives her a final warning, seizing the megaphone from the police inspector. There is sense in his incoherent phrases, mad chatter to those around. He warns Tara, "The year of the puppy is over ... the age of the snakes is coming ..."(209) But Tara's mind is not receptive enough to take the message.

Tuntunwala, the Marwari national personage, plays a major role in the life of Tara. He too is an indirect agent of Tara's education. He makes
Tara see the worst face of the changed Calcutta. He gives her the most bitter experience which almost drives her from Calcutta. Tuntunwala is picturised as the most callous man. He seduces Tara without much resistance being offered. It shows a helpless Tara that the new Calcutta is a dangerous place. Nobody is secure in the new society, not even the Tiger’s daughter. Her class is not a protection any longer. Joyonto tries to tell her this in the last scene.

Pronob, Reena, Neelima, and Sanjay form a friends’ circle for Tara in Calcutta. She had gone to school with Reena and Neelima. Pronob too is a childhood friend. It is the perspective of these young people that is often projected in the novel. Pronob is a business man now, looking after his father’s business in his absence. Joyonto often watched this group sitting at his table in the Catelli Continental. They reminded him of his younger days and of “trapped gazelles” though they were confident and handsome. They are brashly opinionated and talk of imported gadgets. If they touch on current events, it is mainly to show their familiarity with Time magazine or The Reader’s Digest. Joyonto thinks, “The real Calcutta, the thick laughter of brutal men, open dust bins, warm and dark where carcasses were sometimes discarded, did not exist (for them). He knew Calcutta would not be as kind to them as it had been to him.” (41)

And this group, often referred to as Pronob’s group, irritated Tara with its lack of seriousness. They imagined themselves “successful and
splendid,” smoking and swearing in public to flout conventions. They wanted to listen to stories about America, about television and automobiles, frozen foods and record players. But when Tara mentioned the ghettos and student demonstrations, they protested – “What nonsense! They knew America was lovely, they knew New York was not like Calcutta.”(56)

Reena is Tara’s neighbour. She is always cool and composed; reacts coolly when Tara is agitated, picking up the new English words that Tara uses. When Joyonto takes Tara and Reena to the ‘bustee’, Reena takes out her notebook and writes down the names of the squatters, tactfully extracting them from the children and hands it over to Joyonto, asking him to serve them new eviction notices. Reena is a thoroughly practical and down-to-earth girl quite unlike Tara.

And then there is the unseen presence of David, Tara’s husband, whose presence is felt through his letters which admonish Tara for being passive and callous. In his letters to Tara, David wants her to take a stand against injustice, against unemployment, hunger and bribery. Tara knew “She could never tell David that the misery of the city was too immense and blurred to be listed and assailed one by one. That it was fatal to fight for justice; that it was better to remain passive and absorb all shocks as they come.”(131) In the early months of their marriage, Tara had insisted
that rituals were useful and democracy not always the right answer. But when her arguments exasperated David, she had given in with a smile.

Echoes of this Tara are found in Bharati Mukherjee herself. She says: "... during arguments with Clark I heard myself defending my friends’ faith in authoritarianism as the only prescription for the troubled city. I wanted to show him how thinly spread had been my acquisition of liberal sentiments, and how fast the process of unlearning could become. To defend my friends was to assert my right to differ from him."²⁶

Mukherjee seems to uphold the hegemonic point of view – as she seems to be doing in *The Tiger’s Daughter* – when she says that “She finally felt she was shaking off intellectual imperialism by indulging in purely Indian clichés that conceptual democracy had to be interpreted differently in chaotic, developing nations. My friends were not self-conscious about their support of ‘law and order’... They knew that the city owed them stability and they were not hesitant about demanding that minimal security.”²⁷ This might as well be Tara talking about her friends. Thus a lot of Mukherjee has gone into the making of the character of Tara.

*The Tiger’s Daughter* and Mukherjee’s second novel *Wife* are travels in “the psycho-social country of self.”²⁸ As Tara goes through the experiences documented in the novel, she battles with herself; becomes victim of the circumstances; is frightened by the changed Calcutta and
taunted by the resentment of her relatives and friends, she feels she is alienated from them, has slipped out of their circle and longs to go back to America. The seduction by Tuntunwala is the last straw. Joyonto does try to enlighten her about the changed scenario and dispel her illusions of a peaceful Calcutta of her childhood days, but Tara is not in a condition to receive the message.

Tara is certainly different from her friends. She is liberal-minded and not callous and feudal in thinking like her friends. She reacts to events like an over sensitive immature girl, is repelled by minor physical defects like Joyonto falling sick in her car and the Chela’s skin disease, and dirt, and squalor. She is not cool and composed like Reena, energetic and purposeful like Antonia Whitehead. It might be presumed that these two girls are foils to Tara’s character.

When viewed with reference to her friends, Tara is liberal but when viewed with reference to the ‘other’, symbolized by the rioters and the squatters of Joyonto’s bustee, she is one with her class. While the protagonist is in the process of changing, the process is not yet complete when the novel ends.

Tara, the Tiger’s Daughter moves over to America to lead the life of a middle class American woman after marrying an American. She is troubled by the conflict and returns to India in search of solace. But her
Calcutta is changed beyond recognition. The city is in the process of being taken over by a different class of people like the Marwari Tuntunwala and the revolutionaries. Her Calcutta is no longer peaceful. The experiences she undergoes make her feel more and more alienated from her own friends. Her friends and relatives find no romance in her marriage to a foreigner. She and her parents are taunted again and again about her marriage to a mleccha man. This leaves Tara disgruntled. So when the novel ends with Tara trapped in a car amidst rioting crowds, a disillusioned Tara is ready to go back to America but is left wondering whether she would ever be able to go back.

Mukherjee’s next novel *Wife* deals with a middle class girl who goes to America filled with dreams. But being fragile, she is unable to cope with her life there and is destined to fail. The novel has feminist and psychoanalytical dimensions. The writer delves deep into the workings of the mind of the protagonist of the novel. Dimple, the protagonist, expects to lead a different kind of life in America but is disillusioned to find that she is expected to play the same role of a typical Indian wife even in the advanced society of America. A close experience of both the western and the Indian worlds gives Bharati Mukherjee an authentic and objective perspective with a delicious combination of malice, charm, irony and sympathy. She pushes her heroines to the edges of their worlds and liberates them for a new world order.29
In the Introduction to Darkness, Mukherjee describes her stories as ones of "broken identities" and "discarded languages". If one traces a development from her early novel *The Tiger's Daughter* to *Jasmine*, one finds that there is a growing celebration of the "exuberance of immigration". This 'exuberance' has it's advantages as well as its problems. An advantage is that the immigrant enjoys his transformation and is able to justify his choice of homeland by fitting into the new world. But the problem remains: it is not easy to overcome the "aloofness of expatriation" nor is it painless to sever oneself from one's roots and traditions\(^3\) and re-root oneself. The diasporic identity gives resonant expression to ethnic divisiveness.

While the protagonist of *The Tiger’s Daughter* comes from America to India in search of solace, Dimple of *Wife* goes from India to America in search of a new kind of life. The reverse journey that is portrayed in *Wife* is taken up in the next chapter.
References


