

## A portrayal of male characters in Bharati Mukharjee's *the tiger's daughter*

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### Abstract

Bharti Mukherjee's male characters belong to various ethnic, cultural and religious groups world over. Their life is marked by absence of cultural identity born of racism, sexism and social oppression. They are human beings with those weaknesses and strong points which creatures of flesh and blood are supposed to have. Her male characters are no match to the female ones. They have to be so because they are the creations of a feminist who has to make them a tool of her ideas of man-woman relationship.

**Keywords:** sex, wife, marriage, feudal mentality, cruelty

### Introduction

Most of the Indian English women novelists dwell in their work on women's issues and present their perspective. The importance of their work has been realized inside and outside academic and literary circle so much so that it has become a separate subject of appreciation. Women's studies have come to draw the attention of scholars who have begun to evaluate material and literature dealing with feminine improvement and involvement. It has given a great fillip to the growth of English creative writing and has produced such great feminist novelists as Bharati Mukherjee, Nayantare Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shobha De and many others. Bharati Mukherjee as a novelist is an excellent painter of expatriate experience from the point of view of a staunch feminist. Her feminine characters come not from a particular land; they belong to various ethnic, cultural and religious groups all over the world and they refuse to follow traditional values that have come to them from remote past.

*The Tiger's Daughter*, her first novel, is the mildest expression of her feministic ideas. While the later generation of feminists sought to establish feminism basing it on sexuality, Bharati Mukherjee has not done so. It is to be found that her female characters are dominating that the male ones are generally shadowy. Let us take this novel as an illustration. It is a story of one Tara Banerjee through whose character the novelist tries to expose how it feels for a girl of fifteen to leave a sheltered home in which she has lived till now behind the fences of privilege and wealth. She is the authoress herself. Like Bharati, Tara has gone to America which proves to be a land of strangers. She makes the matters worse for herself by breaking the family tradition and marrying an American, maybe for ensuring for herself security in a foreign land. But it is a disillusioning experience for the simple reason that she has married David Cartwright not so much out of love as out of impulse. She does not 'know' him or his social milieu and is, therefore, always nervous, apprehensive and insecure. She is now either an Indian nor American. She becomes farther from India where being a woman means getting her fate sealed even before being conscious of girlhood; her parents bred her differently from their boy child and she is told repeatedly by male and female elders and even older servants, that she has to go to other home and so she has to be assimilative and submissive.

The story of the novel does not offer much scope for the role of male characters. Thus, David, the husband of Tara Banerjee, appears before us as a shadowy figure; she does not know him and we rather hear about him than have a chance to interact with him. He is an American who has no knowledge of, and respect for India of Indians or whatever is Indian. We are told that he was always trying to educate her. He was a novelist who always had troubles with his novel. It gave his wife the impression that he no longer her. His weak character does not attract his wife who had married him impulsively. Therefore, she decides to visit India which was the land of her roots. Here, in India, she becomes farther and farther from him:

Though David wrote regularly, the David of aerogrammes was unfamiliar to Tara. He seemed like a figure standing in shadows, or a foreigner with an accent on television. 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. It was hard for her to talk about marriage responsibilities in Camac Street; her friends were curious only about the adjustments she had made. (T.D. 62)

She meets may a minor male character who does not seem to have been created with the intention of being projected as strong. Of course, she comes in contact with two politicians – one insidious Joyonto Roy Chowdhury and the other a Marwari, Mr. Tuntunwala. The former has some influence over her and is able to convince her that she should try to interact with people belonging to different classes and understand the situation of Calcutta – in other words they will let her know the pulse of the Metro at that time.

Joyonto Roy Chowdhury was a rich fashionable man whom the novelist imagines to have been "startlingly handsome". (T.D. 39)

Even now he had the deportment of the handsome young. But a habitual and deep distrust gave his face a slightly malicious sheer. It was a face that had known restlessness of failure, the face of a statesman whose country had let him down. (T.D. 39)

The novelist has described how he had spent his years as a respected businessman and had “done all the things expected of him and his class”. Knowledge of personal failure neither hurt nor angered him; it turned his attention to public questions. Besides:

Like his friends in those peaceful times, he had read the Vedas in translation, executed simple lotus positions, consulted astrologers for auspicious occasions and had even fasted on serious provocation. He had suffered no mysteries, and certainly no revelations. (T.D. 39)

Had he been a common old man with means, he could have retired and gone on a world cruise to follow his hobby.

But his assets kept him trapped to know too many people, remember too many details, and see to many things. The novelist likens him to legendary *nawab* “who almost lost his life to the invading British because his valet had fled and there was none left to help him tie his shoelaces”. (T.D. 71)

This assessment of Joyonto is sufficient to suggest that he is not that male character who may try to score over his female counterpart; he does not have intentions to be a winner.

But another important male character with whom she comes across is Mr. P.K. Tuntunwala who is a Marwari and who is always out to be a winner even if winning might require sacrificing scruples. A typical industrialist as he is, he is a staunch opponent of hindrances to industry. His modernism consists in his being a porkeater, “Mr. Tuntunwala was a dangerous man. He could create whatever situation, whatever catastrophe he needed. It was no use criticizing him, Tara thought; the only thing to do was to get out of his stall.” (T.D. 77-78)

Pronob regarded him as money-minded who ran his factories and mills in a way that showed his meanness. He slave – driven his workers. “Of love he knows nothing; I can tell you he is a mistake.” (T.D. 133) This statement of Pronob is borne out by the following conversation between Mr. Tuntunwala and Tara:

The young man’s questions brought out all the ferocity of Tuntunwala’s character. Shadows, deep and fierce, gathered in that fishlike face.  
“What of love, Mr. Tuntunwala?” she asked softly.  
“What of the refugees and loves?” At first the candidate seemed pleased, as if he thought she were playing charming games with him. Then he picked his teeth with a show of arrogance and said, “Heart’s matters,” Mrs. Cartwright, “are for *idiots and woman*\*. I do not knowingly stray into heart’s matters”. (T.D. 135)

Let us see the male attitude to women in the italicized words. Pronob is free to have his view of the Marwari businessman, but the latter’s energy, aggression, brittleness and ferocity made a businessman like the former seem flabby. His reaction to the planting of bombs in the club reveals his “new mastery”. He encourages people and soon two supposed culprits are arrested. One of them was a journalist whom Mr. Tuntunwala slapped. It appears that it was a drama that he has managed. His gesture

making a show of his concern for Tara’s safety is prelude to the forthcoming theatrical performance which was to take place later.

He impressed Tara by his offer of attentions of a national hero who was a Nayapur to plan strategy for the final weeks of his election campaign. He left his advisers there and led her to his Land Rover. He led her on a ride and made her accept the beauty of the surroundings. He is a trickster who tricks her by telling her:

“I want you to do one thing, please. I want you to shut your eyes tightly and remember this scene in your head. This is my favorite scene and I want to give you this memory as a present.”

Tara was amused that a man like Tuntunwala was capable of such imaginative games. She shut her eyes obediently and dismissed and suspicions she had initially entertained about him. She did not know then that Tuntunwala had spoken very literally. (T.D. 193-94)

He plays his cards very carefully and requests her to address him not formally but quite informally as Pintoo, the way his other friends addressed him. He is pleased to note that all her companions have gone to enjoy the place, leaving just a maid with her. He offers to escort her into the dining room to indulge themselves. He also offers her a homeopathic medicine for her sick headache and leads her to his suite for the purpose. The gullible Tara has been taken into confidence so much that she is not able to read between the lines of his offer. He leads her to his air-conditioned suite and goes to the bathroom to mix and bring the medicine. He orders the maid to remain outside to let her mistress take rest:

The man’s tone was so authoritative, it did not occur to the maid to question the proprieties of his suggestion. Tara knew she should protest. Yet she couldn’t. It would be useless to storm out now. She was tired, and sick; she was curious and impatient. If she were a more aggressive young woman, better able to protect herself like Antonia Whitehead, she knew she would have walked out of the suite with the maid. But she was neither forceful nor impulsive. While Tuntunwala held a glass of fetid yellow liquid in front of her Tara thought she loved David desperately. (T.D. 97)

The time had come when Tuntunwala was to prove that he was a dangerous man, a mistake. Therefore, he made up his mind to ignore her tender feelings and offered to rub Vicks VapoRub on her forehead whether she liked it or not:

But Tuntunwala was accustomed only to acquiescence, to disposing of business empires and petty destinies without advice or apology.

“Please, please,” he said, clutching Tara with sticky fingers. “I’m given to unfortunate impulses. You can’t surely break from me now?”

“There’s no time for coy preliminaries. You’re liberated and advanced and I admire you greatly.”

“Admiration is no reason for yielding to what you suggest.”

“I do not think you will leave, Mrs. Cartwright – how will you explain it to your maid?”....

In another Calcutta such a scene would not have happened. Tara would not have walked into the suite of gentleman for medicine, and a gentleman would not have dared to make such improper suggestions to her. With new dreams like Nayapur Tara's Calcutta was disappearing. New dreams occurred with each new bulldozer incision in the green and romantic hills. Slow learners like Tara were merely victims. (T.D. 198-99)

The later feminists were outspoken and uninhibited in the depiction of sexual outrages; they did not bother how critics and readers would react to obscene pictures painted in words. But Bharati Mukherjee believed that art lies in concealing art and that the author could be more effective by leaving a lot unsaid rather than making it a loud organ voice. And she has presented in the following words the helplessness of the victim who cannot express what she has been made to bear and suffer – the powerful politician would not allow her either to run away from his clutches nor let her explain it to others:

The seduction of Tara had been tastefully executed by Tuntunwala, and the maid in the corridor remained ignorant of all untoward details. There were no apologies or recriminations. Tuntunwala assumed that "heart's matters" were unimportant. He invited her to join him for tea, then went to the next room to confer with the serious men in dhoti who were planning his campaign. Tara's first reaction had been to complain to Sanjay and Pronob, to tell them Tuntunwala was a parasite who would survive only at their expense. But the outrage soon subsided, leaving a residue of unforgiving bitterness. She realized she could not share her knowledge of Tuntunwala with any of her friends. In a land where a friendly smile, an accidental brush of the fingers, can ignite rumors – even lawsuits – how is one to speak of Mr. Tuntunwala's violence? The others would have to make their own compromises. (T.D. 199)

Let us now take the case of *Wife* which is a typical feministic work. The female protagonist of the novel appears before us as a confused woman who has been taught through words of mouth that a girl should shape herself as an ideal wife like Sita. But her feminist desire for self-expression which she has acquired from American culture also reigns strong in her. She had hoped to get freedom out of marriages. What happens is that she is made to live the life of servility. "But marriage to Amit Basu turns out to be a nightmarish experience, because instead of freedom she is rebuked by her husband for forgetting her duties". (Vandana,29) It has rightly been suggested by Simone de Beauvoir that marriage is no guarantee of happiness of the husband and the wife:

It is sheer hypocrisy to hold that a union based on convenience has much chance of inducing love; it is pure absurdity to maintain that two married persons bound by ties of practical, social, and moral interest, will provide with sex satisfaction as long as they live. But the proponents of the marriage of reason have no difficulty in showing that the love match, also, is not especially likely to assure the happiness of the couple. (Beauvoir,445)

Pregnancy usually follows marriage and it also does to the heroine of *Wife*. But she had not wanted to be pregnant and, therefore, when her husband decides to go to America, she decides to get rid of her forced pregnancy. She executes her decision with the hope that she will get happiness in the new lands. Her husband's male ego is born and he wants her to act and behave like Sita of the *Ramayana*. He wants to impose ideas on her. He does not support her in the moments of her wanting of self-confidence not because he does not want to help her but because he has no time for her. He has not so much of concern for his wife that he may gather the disintegrating situation of the lady. He thirsts for money and she thirsts for love:

When an Asian man comes to America he comes for economic transformation, and he brings a wife who winds up being psychologically charged. This is one of the tragedies you see being played out in all the New Jersey shopping malls these days. The Indian woman walking around in the malls with nothing to do all day, while the men are out busily making money. The men have a sense of accomplishment. They have no idea of staying here. The idea is saving money and going. But they don't realize the women have been transformed. (Alam,41)

The novelist has projected her female characters strongly so that she is able to project herself as a feminist. She is among the early feminists and therefore hers is a mild feminist voice. But she has portrayed them so vividly and strongly that male characters in her novels are no match to them. We are aware that the feeling of superiority is the basic instinct of males – both in life and literature – in the world in general and India in particular. A realist as she is, she has tried to delineate male characters with this trait in them.

It is also so in *Wife* where Amit seems to have been drawn on the basis of the following observation of Sigmund Freud:

The work of civilization has become increasingly by the business of men, it confronts them with ever more difficult tasks and compels them to carry out instinctual sublimations. Since a man does not have unlimited quantities of psychical energy at his disposal, he has to accomplish his tasks by making an expedient distribution of his libido. His constant association with men, and his dependence on his relations with them, even estrange him from his duties as a husband and father. Thus the woman finds herself forced into the background by the claims of civilization and she adopts a hostile attitude towards it. (Freud, 293)

We see Amit, the male protagonist in *Wife*, revealing his male ego so many times. He has come back home and is annoyed to find that his wife Dimple has not cared to prepare that lime and water drink which he is in the habit of taking just after entering his home. What irritates him more is the situation which makes him feel that she has shown negligence in caring for him:

When Amit came back from the office and found her in bed with letters to the editor, he seemed angry. "Where's my fresh lime and water?" "I forgot to make it. I'm sorry: I was busy reading."

“But you know I like fresh lime and water when I come back. You know this little thing means a lot to me.” (Wife, 28)

Had it been any other cause than the question of his male ego, he could not have changed the stand after she had made him forget he matter; he could never have said at her surrender: “Who said I want fresh lime?” He said roguishly, “You lock the door, Dimple and I promise you some very interesting things.” (Wife, 29)

In fact, a husband in an Indian society has a feudal mentality which does not permit the wife to have her own identity. Feminism generates consciousness of this quest of identity in the feminine gender. The American way of life batters the feudal mentality in both the genders. It is a shocking experience to the male partner who has been ruling the female one on the basis of the stated, laid out, fixed rules for the fair sex not applicable to the male race. He likes his wife’s being interested in freedom but he does not allow her more than a sip of beer; it is good that she is becoming a bit free but is will not be as good if she becomes too free. “I don’t want you to be like Mrs. Mullick and wear pants in the house!” (Wife, 112) Her celebration has to have a limit – she can enjoy “an inch of foam” and not more that that. He always tries to control her life like a master controlling a slave. If he gives her a long rope to a limited extent, he does so not to free her but to feel magnanimous in the presence of social groups who may appreciate his magnanimity. Those who see him expand do not realize that she feels otherwise, “If Amit had not been there she thought she thought she might have permitted herself a sip or two (of a hard drink). But Amit would always be there beside her in his shiny conscience and common sense.” (Wife, 126) This attitude is a clear indication of the male hegemonic point of view which makes a man desirous of ruling the other gender. Some problems in the novel are the result of the change of the place. Had the couple remained in India itself, his behavior – the same type of behaviour – would not have been so unacceptable to his wife who had been bred in this traditional country. Her movement to America brought a fundamental change in her behaviour and it became impossible for her to bring an adjustment between the old and the new. Therefore, she moved, inch by inch, towards stabbing her husband for “Amit had no idea how close she had come to betraying him completely.” (Wife, 211) He had utterly failed to understand his wife for he had come to America not to enjoy life with her but to earn, save and run away to his land for its enjoyment in the years to come. That is why “Amit did not feed her fantasy life; her was merely the provider of small material comforts. In bitter moments she ranked husband, blender, colour T.V., cassette tape recorder, stereo, in their order of convenience.” (Wife, 113) Problems arise in the married life of Amit and Dimple because his attitude dashes her dreams to pieces, “His disapproval was torture; all her life she had been trained to please. He expected her, like Sita, to jump into fire if necessary.” (Wife, 39) But entry into a new country with a new culture turns her towards sensuality and Amit is unable to accept this change in his wife:

His (Amit’s) wishes for her to become Sita becomes a heavy burden on her and it seems to be a new shackle which is trying to bind her down. The continuous reprimands from Amit lead her to the extreme case to neurosis reminding her of the never-ending bondage that

marriage is. Though Amit Basu is trying to behave and act like any American, he is unable to reconcile to the fact that his wife also needs to express herself and needs an outlet to work out her frustrations. He is physically in U.S.A. but he mentally exists in the patriarchal society in India. Breaking the gender differentiation is far-off from Amit’s Indian mentality. For him everything should be perfect, because formality is a part of Indian society, whereas he seems to lose his confidence when faced with the open, informal society in America. He seems to look more self-conscious than self-confident in the company of Indian immigrants in the U.S.A. (Vandana, 86)

We have to bear in our minds that Amit Basu is occupied deeply by a strong desire of becoming successful in America, a land with a new and different cultural milieu. The result is that he remains totally oblivious of the forthcoming violence which is the unavoidable consequence of the seething anger of his wife. He is a true product of a patriarchal tradition and seeks to establish himself as the only provider of his family. He is also oblivious of his wife’s natural and just desire to breathe in the fresh air. The problem in their life is the consequence of the situation which Simone de Beauvoir points out:

The male is called upon for action, his vocation is to produce, fight, create, progress, to transcend himself towards the totality of the universe and the infinity of the future; but traditional marriage does not invite woman to transcend herself with him; it confines her in immanence, shuts her up within the circle of herself. (Beauvoir, 448)

It has been seen how Bharati Mukherjee has interpreted feminism in her major novels, leaving small scope for male characters. They are an inferior breed to their female counterparts. I feel that her feminine characters are not very dominating for though them their creator has tried to represent various cultures. The result is that her male characters have not to be very prominent. Their stature does not match the female world.

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