

# Unite and divide: storytelling in the tiger's wife



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Stories, like the ones experienced by the grandfather in *The Tiger's Wife* and then re-told to Natalia, are part of the aspect that shapes a community, and distressful situations unite groups of people for better or for worse, depending on the community's reaction. In Tea Obreht's novel, Natalia interacts with the stories of her grandfather's past, and the stories she creates with him. In three separate but seemingly connected stories, Natalia learns many things about her grandfather and herself, and realizes that even if her grandfather is no longer with her, the values and morals that he taught her in those stories will assist her in any time of need. Calling to mind the grandfather's keepsake of *The Jungle Book*, Natalia begins to gather her own collection of stories that comfort her when she is faced with adversity. Through the stories in her novel, Obreht shows us that stories can help unify groups of people and help them during times of duress and hardship whether for better or for worse.

For instance, the story of the elephant brings joy to the grandfather and to Natalia in the midst of the beginning of the war. The war has begun to erode their relationship, and put up barriers in between them. Although the city where Natalia and her Grandfather live is essentially isolated from the war, the effects begin to infiltrate their "illusion of normalcy" (35) that they have maintained through their trips to the war and the grandfather's strict schedule. Wars can cause teenagers to mature quicker and Natalia needs to be reminded of what magic feels like. While they are out in the city following the elephant, it is the first time her grandfathers tells her the story of the deathless man. This moment continues to remind Natalia of the magic in life despite anything else going on, and stays with her when her grandfather

dies, as a pleasant memory of him. Natalia continues to learn through the values her grandfather has taught her through the stories they share. The stories are important to Natalia, and this is shown in her emotional connection with the jungle book, which is always present when Natalia is “invited back,” (53). Natalia’s understanding of the magic in her life is shown when she volunteers to bring the “heart” and the offerings to the mysterious mora. Without knowing it, she is being motivated to volunteer for this because of her grandfather; desiring the same magic and to experience one of those moments as she shared with her grandfather when they witnessed the elephant strolling throughout the city. Having the secret of the elephant that only “belongs to [her]”(56) connects Natalia to her grandfather in a time when many parts of her life were wavering and uncertain, and the values her grandfather has taught her through the moments they shared together stay with her long after he passes away.

United under their own special experiences, the people of Brejevina value the presence of Bis and the mora. The mora unifies the town because it serves as a source of comfort. They believe that the “malice extends to the living,”(187). Even though most of the villagers know that the story of the mora is a myth, it is the element of magic associated with Barba Ivan’s actions of taking the money and the aura of Bis’s strange knowledge that carries the town through the deaths associated with the war, and after the war. When the war came, they stopped believing, Barba Ivan wanted his wife to have some faith again, so he created the story of the mora again because if they can be confident that their loved ones will be taken care of, in turn they will remain healthy and be watched over by the dead. Barba Ivan takes

his role as the mora very seriously, showing his dedication to preserving the town's superstition, but also to give emotional support to his own wife in her time of despair. Barba Ivan knows that " someone must know by now. Not that its [him], perhaps- but they must know.",(332) he understands, as does Natalia and her grandfather that some stories are not to be shared. This story holds a great importance in Brejevina as it is a source of hope and comfort for the individuals left behind by their loved ones. The town unifies in maintaining their beliefs and using the story of a mora as a coping mechanism to the harsh reality of the deaths as a result of war.

However, unification doesn't always reflect our best qualities, it sometimes brings out our worst. The residents of Galina are unified by the fear they had of the tiger. Apprehensions surrounding the tiger and their interactions with it foreshadow the encroaching fear of the war, the soldiers that they prayed would not stop in Galina that night. They believed that with the death of the tiger's wife, they had fought off the evil from infiltrating their town and " after her death, their time with her became the unifying memory that carried them into the spring," (337). The people of Galina rallied around the defeat of the harmless tiger and his impaired companion because they were unfamiliar to them. The threat of unfamiliarity was more present than ever because of the war, and the tiger pushed the villagers over the wall. They tried hard, yet could not pretend that the danger of the war, or in this case the tiger, would enter their town. The actions of the villagers toward the tiger and deaf-mute girl were appalling and misguided by their own " anxious grief" but looked over in lieu of " what was coming,"(337) for them. Now even those who would never tell the story of the tiger, still have it " in their

movements, in their speech, in their preventive gestures” and “ the tiger is always there,”(337) And their supposed defeat of the tiger and the tiger’s wife brought them the pride that they carried on while soldiers disrupted their town and hung people in the trees of Galina.

Stories indeed have the power to unite people, build trust, understanding, and connections in a community. The stories that unite us are the ones that we are proud to tell and find connection too. Nonetheless, there also stories that divide us. These make us uncertain and suspicious, and those involved in those stories are reflected on as weak and this is disturbing to us. The people in Galina who never share the story of the tiger are the ones who would be the weak ones. It is up to the individual is they will be the ones to tell the dividing stories, the stories that brought out the worst in people. As disturbing as the stories seem, they are necessary to tell because without the dividing stories, the unifying stories that answer them would not exist.

Obreht, Téa. *The Tiger’s Wife*. New York: Random House, 2011, print.