

# Role of superstition in "the tiger's wife"



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Fear is one of the strongest emotions experienced by humans, so much so that it plays a drastic role in influencing the actions of men and women. This concept is one that appears frequently throughout Téa Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife*, a riveting tale of the many odd occurrences that surround what is assumed to be the Balkan war. Fear cultivates superstition, manifesting itself in Obreht's novel through the many characters' fears of the unknown and of death. Throughout *The Tiger's Wife*, superstition plays different roles for each individual, arising from strong emotional reactions that are usually rooted in fear.

Superstition stems from a combination of ignorance and fear, and this amalgamation often invokes a powerful certainty in people regarding things they could not possibly know. Obreht illustrates the ease with which people come to rely on superstition frequently throughout the novel: "When confounded by the extremes of life - whether good or bad - people would turn first to superstition to find meaning, to stitch together unconnected events in order to understand what was happening" (Obreht 312). This phenomenon appears regularly throughout Obreht's tale through parables such as that of the deathless man, rumors of the tiger's wife, and the solution that the family in Barba Ivan's vineyard uses in an attempt to cure their illness. Each of these stories results directly from the characters' strong emotional reactions to their respective situations, which are driven mostly by fear.

One of the most prominent mysteries in *The Tiger's Wife* that fuels the discomfort and gossip of Galina's inhabitants is the relationship between the tiger and the deaf-mute girl, Luka's widow. The girl is already presented to

the townspeople as somewhat of an enigma when she arrives at Galina as Luka's new bride: as a young Muslim girl who suddenly appears with the butcher after his disappearance from the village for a number of years, she is a source of intrigue for the public, especially since she cannot offer any other information about herself due to her lack of communicative abilities. This trait immediately presents the people with cause for speculation, and, as her time there continues, the strange occurrences that follow her only heightens their intrigue and mistrust. They rise toward the peak of their suspicions due to the arrival of the tiger to the woods that neighbor Galina and her husband's inexplicable death: "Isn't it plain? She's made a pact with that tiger, hasn't she? She probably done Luka herself, probably cut his head off in the night, left the body out for the tiger to eat...That devil give her strength to do it, and now she's his wife" (218). The people of the village, already disturbed by the deaf-mute girl and frightened by the presence of the strange, fiery-furred creature, are further alarmed by the tiger's affinity for the smokehouse by which the girl lives, so they place the blame entirely on the tiger's wife. Although the deductions made about her are nearly entirely based on assumption, most of their conclusions are looked upon as fact: "People have seen it... The tiger is her husband. He comes into her house each night and takes off his skin" (259). The definitiveness of the suppositions such as this results from the peoples' desire to clarify the unknown; since they may not obtain the answers to inquiries relating to subjects such as the death of Luka and the relationship between the tiger and his wife, they create their own facts rather than waiting in vain to discover the truth. The superstitions that the villagers have regarding the tiger and his wife are a direct result of the intense fear they have of the

escaped big cat and their desire for answers about the enigmatic, increasingly dangerous deaf-mute girl.

Superstition has arisen in communities for centuries from the psychological craving for the elucidation of things that cannot be explained. Within each community, however, the facets of superstition are practiced in unique ways. Since the qualms that these irrationalities reflect on differ for each person, throughout *The Tiger's Wife* superstition plays varying roles for each of the characters that are highlighted. The elements of superstition sometimes offer definitive solutions for circumstances that may not be resolved, or lend the feeling of safety when no protection is truly there.

The family that slaves away in Barba Ivan's vineyard, digging and searching for the bones of a relative who had not been properly laid to rest, illustrate how boldly some hold on to their superstitions in times of desperation. The patriarch of the sick family says with certainty that the cause of their illness is due to their relative having been buried improperly: " I got a body somewhere under here that needs to come up so my kids can get better" (91) In all likelihood, however, the long days of hard work under the hot sun probably only worsened their conditions, particularly those of the children. The family carries pouches of herbs with supposed medicinal properties as they dig, but in spite of these precautions, the health of the family continues to decline. At one point, Natalia even sees two of the youngest boys sharing a cigarette. The family appears to be using the idea that they can cure themselves through their relative's remnants in lieu of truly knowing how to take care of their own health, telling Natalia that " work has nothing to do with [the children's illness]" (89). This superstition offers the family a false

comfort, an absolute way to fix their current situation when, in reality, their idea of the cause and effect are unlikely to be correlated. The family does not know how to take the proper precautions in order to recover, so they put their faith into an illogical method that provides them with what they believe to be a definitive way to cure their illness. Their fear of an illness they do not understand brings them to form superstitions based on their ignorance.

The rumors accumulated by the inhabitants of Galina regarding the tiger's wife demonstrate a case in which superstition plays a specific role in the lives of those who believe in it. The townspeople grow increasingly uncomfortable with the presence of the tiger and its interaction with the deaf-mute girl. So, to cope, they fashion new ideas that soon make the transition from idle hypotheses to accepted fact. Whether or not these falsehoods are perpetuated as means to distract from the danger they feel about the neighboring carnivore or to have someone to blame for their lack of safety, the superstitions they harbor act as a small comfort to the people of Galina. Once again, the role that superstition plays in the lives of Téa Obreht's characters is specific to their fears and offers a false escape from their own ignorance in times of desperation. Later, when Dariša the Bear arrives and the town is relieved at having someone to kill the tiger, fables of his previous deeds surface, describing several different stories including his being "raised by bears - or, he ate only bears" and that his "tremendous success as a hunter [was] derived from his ability to actually turn into a bear" (239). The people of Galina put so much faith in Dariša and the many falsehoods they tell of him because it makes them feel safe, like they have a protector who appeared just when they needed him. When Dariša is killed by

the tiger, however, their positive superstitions about him are crushed and the negative ones involving the tiger are further strengthened: " Dariša is dead. God has abandoned us" (304). The people of Galina rely on their embellishments to help them feel a false sense of security, using their ideas as temporary panaceas for their anxieties, and the ease with which they were able to jump from superstition to superstition illustrates their willingness to believe what they have to in order to feel safe.

Fear is a powerful emotion, and in times of panic or desperation it may muddle the mind and dominate the decision-making process. This notion precedes a prominent theme throughout Téa Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife*: The origins of superstition are rooted firmly in fear, as manifested through many of Obreht's characters within the separate storylines. Throughout *The Tiger's Wife*, superstition serves different purposes for each highlighted character but is all resolutely based on fear.

### Bibliography

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