CHAPTER V

THE LATEST PHASE

Tree Bride

Bharati Mukherjee

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Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction reflects her preoccupation with cultural conflicts, with the results of change, and with the influence of the past on the present. Typically, her protagonists are Indian women raised in a society where life is governed by tradition, as interpreted and enforced by the older members of large extended families. When such women find themselves in the very different environment of the New World, the result can be disastrous: In Mukherjee’s novel *Wife* (1975), an immigrant brought to the United States after an arranged marriage feels so lost that she descends into madness and finally murders her husband. For others of Mukherjee’s women protagonists, moving to a new country is liberating. In *Jasmine* (1989), a young Hindu widow who had intended to submit herself to a ritual immolation ends up on the road to California, optimistic about a future that will not be dictated either by custom or by her relatives.

Although in writing these novels, Mukherjee drew on her own experiences as an immigrant, *Desirable Daughters* (2002) was the first of her works that approached autobiography. The title characters of that novel are three sisters born into a family of Bengali Hindu Brahmins living in Calcutta. Like Mukherjee’s sisters, one of the young women in the novel becomes a traditional Indian wife, while another moves to the United States and assumes the life of a thoroughly Westernized professional woman. The third sister, Tara Bhattacharjee, who alone of the three has the habit of reflective thought, becomes a writer. More than
either of her sisters, Tara is torn between her place in the present and her ties to the past.

Ironically, it is Tara, the real intellectual whose marriage is arranged by her parents in keeping with ancient tradition. Tara is impressed by the brilliant Bishwapriya (“Bish”) Chatterjee, a Silicon Valley multimillionaire. She realizes that she could hardly do better. In upper-class American society, however, Tara discovers that the behavior of a wife and mother is governed by conventions just as rigid as those she left behind. Eventually she obtains a divorce from Bish, taking their son, Rabindranath or “Rabi”, with her. Living in the Haight section of San Francisco with a Zen Buddhist carpenter, she thinks that at last she has attained her freedom, though in fact her new life is also something of a stereotype. In any case, the idyll does not last long. Tara’s lover moves on, and Bish comes back into her life. On one of his frequent visits, Tara’s house is fire-bombed. In saving Tara, Bish is badly burned. The arsonist escapes, but the police do discover his identity: his name is Abbas Sattar Hai. The obvious assumption is that Bish’s status in the international community somehow made him the target of a criminal conspiracy.

Desirable Daughters was written as the first volume in a projected trilogy and, as one might expect, The Tree Bride begins where the first book ended. However, while Desirable Daughters focused on the options young women are offered and the choices they make, The Tree Bride deals more broadly with two Hindu concepts: karma, or fate, over which human beings have no control, and dharma, or right conduct, the only area in which they have a real choice. Significantly, the epigraph to The Tree Bride is a passage from the Mahabharata beginning, “All kings must see hell at least once.” This emphasis on the inevitability of
suffering, which dominates the book, is emphasized in the brief prologue with which the novel begins. In it, Tara relives the fire-bombing that took place several months before and comes to terms with the fact that, for the first time in her life, she feels vulnerable. Bish cannot protect her; he is incapacitated and she is responsible for his case. Nor can she protect Rabi. Moreover, she is pregnant with Bish’s child, conceived on the very day of the bombing.

Tara’s first person narrative now proceeds to her first encounter with her new obstetrician, “V. Khanna”, who, to her surprise, turns out to be not the Indian doctor she had expected but a Canadian woman whose maiden name was Victoria Treadwell. The doctor’s husband, Yash Khanna is Indian. In fact, he was one of Bish’s favourite professors at Stanford University, and, Victoria comments, Bish was her husband’s most impressive student. The two couples soon begin to socialize, often at the Khannas’ weekend home in Sausalito, which is called Easy Come.

_The Tree Bride_ (2004) is about the nostalgic reminiscences of an American based Indian woman desperate to unearth the mystery of her ancestors. Familiar with the feeling of alienation on a foreign land, Bharati Mukherjee has successfully incorporated the same feeling in her protagonist, Tara Chatterjee. “The Tree Bride is supposed to be the second in a trilogy; it is going to take Mukherjee a lot of work to bring the storyline back to the promising track that Desirable Daughters displayed.” Tara’s life takes a U turn when her house is bombed by unknown suspects in San Francisco leaving her computer wizard x-husband, Bish, crippled who presently is leading a vegetable like existence, dependent on Tara and confined to a wheel chair. Believing the theory of her husband that there are no co-incidences, only convergences, she succeeds in finding the mysterious link between death of her great-
great aunt, Tara Lata Gangooly, in Mishtigunj and attack on her family in America.

Tara was always nostalgic about her childhood spent with her grandparents who told her many mythical stories including the story of Tree Bride alias Tara Lata Gangooly. Tara was fascinated by the story to the extent that she wished to write a book on Tree Bride. Tara Lata Gangooly was a spirited activist who was widowed at the age of five on her wedding day and therefore forced to marry a tree in the jungle of Mishtigunj. Thereafter referred as Tree Bride, she devoted her life to the Indian freedom struggle and fought wholeheartedly till her last breath. Her heroic life unexpectedly comes to an end when after her arrest, she dubiously dies of heart attack in the jail. The circumstances of her death are not clearly stated by the British government thereby suggesting a cold blooded murder of a freedom fighter. Tara’s life is unknowingly weaved into the story of Tree Bride and this marks her urges to visit India. Bharati Mukherjee has amalgated and fused history and mysticism in an amazing manner. *The Tree Bride* is a sequel to her earlier novel *Desirable Daughters*. “To understand Tara’s rich experience of revelations, *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* are meant to be read in succession. Together they prove that Mukherjee is a master at creating magical, mysterious stories that resound with spiritual healing for both the dead and the living.”

There is intrigue and treachery and all engulfing love unearthing secrets of past. Tara Lata’s death unravels the hatred and racial discrimination of some British rulers who were contemptuous about Indians and tried to cover up their atrocities on them by showing that they were civilizing them. Tara Lata has laid bare cruelty of the British and the double faced policy towards the Indians. It circumlocutes throughout the
story and there hangs an air of suspense that carries on for generations. Bharati Mukherjee’s novel is alive and vibrant and unfolds the historical events of freedom fighting. According to a critic, “A key theme in The Tree Bride is Tara’s attempt to reconcile the part of her tied to her Indian heritage with her life as an assimilated American.” Tara is well settled in America but is nostalgic about her ancestral home in Calcutta. She remembers her crisp convent upbringing in a typical Brahmin household. But she knows the effect western culture had on the orthodox families like hers. Her ancestral family was, “… a hybrid family of orthodox Hindu, Bengali-speaking, cricket-loving, Shakespeare-acting, Gilbert and Sullivan-singing, adaptable – anywhere Brahmins.” Her father who, “… drank scotch and read English mysteries and positively, idolized Doris Day …” ended up his life in prayer in Rishikesh. Tara, unlike the Victorians who lay dreaming of future, dreamt of the past. Out of her curiosity to know about her ancestral home and Tara Lata, The Tree Bride, she visits India three times and directs her search in Mishtigunj. When she goes there for the second time she dresses herself in a sari. But the American ways had seeped into her system and though she tried to look as Indian as she could, her gait was, “… far too American” (58). She ends up in shaking hand with Hajji Gul Mohammed Choudhary, shocking him. Since she had no sign of vermillion on her forehead and had no wedding ring, he called her, “mysteriously unmarried lady from Calcutta” (58). Mukherjee has contrasted the two system of culture that shaped the personality of a person. Changing outward appearance from Western to Indian could not help Tara and she looked stranger in her own ancestral village. Living in America for a period of time had distorted her traditional outlook. But Tara at heart is Indian to the very core and she is obsessed with the idea of knowing her roots. Her nostalgic reminiscences of her house, school, childhood friends
and the myth of Tree Bride that she heard only in stories colored her imagination even in a foreign atmosphere.

The history of Tree Bride is intricate web woven along with the Indian freedom struggle, Hindu Muslim unity, racial discrimination and social evils such as child marriage etc. On Tara’s visit to Mishtigunj she learns that Tara Lata, “had been dead for fifty five years” (59) and she left no written record of her life except a little pamphlet containing parables and moral stories. Tara is disappointed yet there are, “… three or four memories of her early childhood” (68). Tara Lata had recorded the day when she became a widow and her marriage with a tree at the tender age of five. In the years following her marriage, Tara Lata Gangooly took on the tree like characteristics herself. She was rooted to her father’s house. She was silent like a tree and the grave little girl became a somber young lady. The second incident is when she was six year old and British troops and their Indian conscripts arrested the chowkidar and then broke through the gate of her house. There was a feast to honor Rafeek Hai and his family attended by John Mist and Tara’s great grandfather Jai Krishan Gangooly. It was Ramzaan and in 1880, Tara was surprised to know that the Brahmins were not racial at all. The troops arrested Mist and Rafeek Hai and later they were hanged in the ‘Town Square’. Tara Lata witnessed the incident sitting on her father’s shoulders. There is also the mention of Tara’s childhood friend Sameena who inherits the Mist Mahal after the death of Tree Bride. Tara Lata left her father’s house on three occasions only. The first time was to go to the forest on a cold winter night in 1879, to marry a tree. Second time it was to witness the hanging of John Mist and Rafeek Hai. The third time she left her house in 1943 when the British prodded her with rifles. It was reported that she died of
heart attack in the jail but her body was never found nor cremated properly. The document that Tara found, revealed the pathetic condition of females under the British rule. She had lucid records of the burning of a nineteen year old housewife called Habeeba Shah and her three infant daughters who had been scorched alive in their hut because Habeeba’s husband joined the Indian National Army. Then there was the story of Kananbala Devi who had been raped and tortured in front of her parents because her brother who was a fugitive had bombed a police station. Tara purchases another document of importance from Hajji called Mist Nama. John Mist the founder of Mishtigunj tried to create a ‘Utopian’ village by involving people from Calcutta and Dhaka. He was an orphan named Jack Snow who was drifted to the sea of Bengal and settled there and earned fortune by jute business. Mist ordered the Christians to be barred from Mishtigunj. Mist himself wore dhoti like Gandhi and led a life of a simple villager in a village comprising of both Hindu and Muslims. He had his own views on the religion and he appointed two doctors, one Hindu and one Muslim, two kinds of teachers, two kinds of journalists and built two kinds of schools in Mishtigunj. Apart from being the founder of the place called Mishtigunj, he also influenced the family of the Gangooly. Tara Lata along with her father lived in Mist Mahal along with a Muslim family that served them. After the death of Mist, the possession of the house causes many mysterious murders in the house including the attacks on Tara in America, first attack leaving her husband injured and in the second attacks her doctor Victoria Treadwell dead. Victoria Treadwell is also connected to the story of Tree Bride. She is Tara’s doctor and treating her in her second pregnancy. Apart from this, she is from the blood of Vertie Treadwell, the ICS British officer who hated India and signed the official Death report of Tree Bride in the jail.
He too left written records of his life in India in Bengal that Victoria handed to Tara before her death.

In Vertie’s autobiography, Tara discovered many facts about the Tree Bride. Vertie penned down in his autobiography, “I had a proper English childhood and do not regret any element of it” (189). Vertie was born on the same year 1874, Nov 30 as Winston Churchill and he, “was given to oracular pronouncements”(200). He told Churchill that he knew, “… a woman married to a tree”(205). Vertrie spoke of the woman who was a heartened case in many ways: I have never met an Indian woman more obdurate than Miss Gangooly. We knew she had been financing Gandhi and then she broke with him and started supporting Subash Bose. She seemed to have abandoned the rational and, I might say, containable, course of non-violence for some sort of alliance with the devil himself. (206-207) He further describes that Tara lata’s house was a veritable printing press and munitions factory for sedition elements. Her house was known as Mist Mahal. She was most gracious Like Brahmins of good families. At fifty three, she wore her hair short in a bob that was cut for practical purposes. She had grey hair but she was quite masculine and attractive in her own ways. She had read the works of George Orwell when in 1931 many well read men had not heard the author’s name. Treadwell believed that she was organizing an infamous attack on him. She was well connected to the people of higher rank than Treadwell. When the warrant for Tara Lata was issued, she had the following pieces of literature- a magazine called ‘A Hanging’ and a novel called ‘Burmese Days’. People revered her as God and she was referred as ‘Tara-ma’ by the people of Mishtigunj. Treadwell told Churchill, “She’d managed to take the curse of virginity- the worst thing a woman can be in that country- and elevate it into something worthy of a Catholic saint” (211).
Vertie refused to believe that she was a virgin as she was always surrounded by a virtual army of men. Tara Lata was sharp and in her youth she trained all her servants to read and write. Then she sends them out into the villages to teach five other people thereby spreading literacy.

After gaining all the details of Tara Lata and the Mist Mahal, Tara comes to few conclusions. One of them was that Tara Lata had few enemies, someone who fed her name to the British authorities in Calcutta. Sameena and her father must have been indignant by the way they were treated by the new Jai Krishan Gangooly whose quest for spiritual purity had summarily fired Abdulhaq for a condition he could not rectify. He was installed as a gatekeeper which might have been interpreted by Abdulhaq, “as demeaning” (276). One of the British official Coughlin also concluded that, “Sameena and her husband, Tara Lata’s personal physician, plotted to take possession of Mist Mahal, sooner or later” (277).

When Tara Lata died in 1943, in the police custody, her house passes to Begum Sameena Chowdhry, widow of late (Dr) Hajji Shafeeq Mohammad Chowdhary who was the mother of Gul Mohammad Chowdhary, the old Hajji whom Tara met in Mishtigunj on her second visit. She had also met Hajji’s son, on leave from New York restaurant while he pillaged her father’s holdings on her third visit. She also recalls her meeting with Sameena’s great grandson Abbas Sattar Hai in San Francisco.

Before Coughlin died in 1971, he had written in a Dhaka newspaper that Mist Mahal was still legally owned and occupied by a ninety seven years old widow Sameena Chowdhary and her family of her son that included a grandson and wives as well, along with relative. Since
there was no will or sale, it was presumed that the Gangooly’s had the right to inherit the house. This Coughlin saw as a part of the “inevitable ‘Muslimisation’ of East Bengal”(278). Tara realized that Victoria’s murder, her ‘would be’ assassin, the crippler of her husband an indiscriminate killer in India and America was born and bred in her Family’s house, “The house itself, …might have killed John Mist, Rafeek Hai, and, eventually the Tree Bride”(278). The story turned to show a new face of greed hiding under the veil of Hindu Muslim disputes.

Tara is so mesmerized by the experiences of the Tree Bride that she decides to visit back India. At Bengal Street, Tara feels the presence of Tree Bride and she also hears her urgent whispers, “I am trapped in your world of mortals, she pledges. Perform the rites. Set me free Tara” (279). The Tree Bride sneers and tells Tara, “Ah, distracted from duty to me by patiseva. … The selfless Hindu wife dedicates herself to her husband’s welfare. Even divorced one. Even in America”(279-280).

Tara switches on the lights of her house as she remembers the stories her grandmother used to tell her about ghost appearing at twilight. “.twilight was the time when evil spirits were most potent and unhappy ghost most eager to take over living bodies. Most ghosts were unhappy, she said caught between worlds. Some were dangerous”(208). Tara Lata’s presence could be felt over the house and mysteriously she reveals the truth of her death to Tara. She tells that she was hanged by Mackenzie in a jail cell and that to avoid a rebellion by the natives; Treadwell had ordered her body to be cremated by the police. She told Tara that her body had been tossed over the prison wall and it had been ripped off by vultures and her bones had been chewed up by the dogs. Tara also learned that Tara Lata does not want vengeance nor justice but her soul’s release. Bish does not mock at Tara for listening to ghosts and tells her that they
must go to Kashi when they are fit enough. He proposes that Tara Lata must be given proper cremation so that she can attain the status of ‘pitr’, ancestor. In Kashi, the soul would return to the “Abode of Ancestors” (281) in realms invisible to the mortal. Using the element of mysticism, Mukherjee has connected the past and the present. Tara’s inquisitiveness for the Tree Bride and her association even with her ghost seems to proclaim the strength of roots that binds generation after generations. Tara who is always crazy for her Bengali tradition since marriage could not overcome the obsession of her own country where she spent her childhood. Tara, like many Bengalis had crossed the black Waters and felt she had lost her caste as the myth went and had mingled with the casteless, eaten red and white meat. She had divorced, had lovers and even tasted wine. She conceded with Bish to go to Kashi who agreed to go as a married man. This was her new beginning as she remarried to the same man again and a week later gave birth to her daughter named Victoria. The family returns to Kashi and the Tree bride is cremated and the soul is set free.

One of Tara’s most nostalgic experiences is sitting on a relative of her great grand uncle. “He was a sundari-shoondari-tree” (251) and the only piece of furniture Bish and she had taken from her original dowry from her parents’ house. Tara reminisced about Tara Lata and aptly said, “When we dream or perhaps I should limit such a broad declaration only to myself, I dream of the past” (252). Through her nostalgic experiences and reminiscences, Bharati Mukherjee portrays her protagonist Tara Lata and her experience. Rich in Bengali tradition and culture, the novel also portrays different shades of human relations.

Tara smoothly assimilates into the culture of the new world, but she constantly looks back and retrospects over her family history in India.
It is deeply rooted in her soul. Tara’s family story unfolds in *Desirable Daughters*, unravels its riveting mysteries in *The Tree Bride*. The sequestered fabric has so many characters uncovering the story of nineteenth century, aligning the two cultures of India in the nineteenth century and San Francisco of the twenty-first century. Bharati Mukherjee deftly handles the plot, which moves back and forth between cultures and across continents, unfurling enchanting tales. Bharati Mukherjee quotes Yeats and Eliot to delve deep into the complex story of Indian freedom struggle. The basic notion that prevailed was to free the bonded souls from the British Raj. It is the intermingling culture of two nations – England and India, the conquerors and the conquered, the masters and the servile –– that is projected in the novel. Simultaneously, Bharati Mukherjee analyses Tara’s life and activities in the United States of America.

*The Tree Bride* exhibits a myriad of characters – contemporary or nearly contemporary to the Tree Bride. The readers are whisked into the medieval era of Indian history to London orphanage to seek John Mist alias B’tard Snow. He is made to dig and scavenge. One day while digging, he digs out his mentor Tom Crabbe. John survives in the orphanage by following a simple rule of opening his eyes and ears but being mute.

Tom Crabbe survives through sheer cleverness and art of speech. The basic fact is the survival of the fittest. A significant discovery of Darwinian theory, which coincidentally happened in the Victorian era. Science and progress was the basis of Victorian era, but there was hardly any effect on the colonies.
Science and progress would be served and heroes would emerge, but the proud and vain Diligence Partridge would not be a pillar of the new establishment. In the next twenty-five years, the political ambitions of the British Empire and the commercial interests of the Honorable East India Company would be found incompatible. After the mutiny and the humiliation of British soldiers and civilians at the hands of sepoys in the Black Hole in the distant year of 1857, Viceroy Canning could dissolve the company and absorb it into the Raj. (p.107)

The freedom fighters were sent to face severe conditions in the Black Hole or “Kala Paani” in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located far away from mainland India (roughly 1,200 km from Chennai). The island was named after a British General. Bharati Mukherjee’s novel unravels its story through journals and documents, flaunts the names of the characters, which belong to the period – Canning, Havelock and many more. John Mist floats rootless through different situations in order to survive. He learns the ways of the world under the tutelage of Tom Crabbe and Capt. Partridge. John Mist is the male version of all the female protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee who re-invent and re-fashion their lives to adapt and reincarnate. Tom Crabbe is the new persona of Gabriel Legge of The Holder of the World. He knows how to deal with the sharks of the world and this one-eyed pirate leads John to his destiny:

Crabble had worked slavers, he’d survived the cannibalizing of his mates and delivered prisoners and orphan girls to Van Diemen’s Land. He’d seen the Indies and travelled up the Amazon, he’d made four sailings on thousand-ton Indiamen around the Cape to Calcutta and China. He’d tapped sperm
whales for casks of oil, and salted cod till all the juices in his body lay caked upon his shriveled fingertips. He’d seen wild half-men, kangaroos, and thylacines …. And, he reckoned, Jack Snow had the makings of a mate. (p.79)

How a man can exist without speaking is a wonder. Mist sails through his life from being a bastard to becoming the Emperor of his Empire in Shoonder Bon. There is never a situation of conflict in Mist’s mind. He seems to adapt to every situation, forging forward like Jasmine and Debbie di Martino. The only conflict that invades his peaceful world is his denial of identity to Olivia and he compensates by sending money to her. The ambition to drag Todd Nugent’s name in dirt is not fulfilled as John snatches away his hand from Olivia’s stretched arms calling for help. His guilt is with him throughout his life and he compensates it by giving financial support, liberating Olivia’s soul from drudgery.

It is his silence, which saves him from the cataclysmic situations that confront him from time to time. It is his silence that saves his life and makes him learn the intricacies of being in genteel company and learn the secrets of sailing from the Captain on the Ship, Indiaman. He finds his ‘voice’ when he faces the trial, and that also to save his friends from death. He is sent to juvenile jail where he is given the task of making rope out of hemp. He bleeds handling hemp but it does not deter him from his task. This same handling later on helps him. He exports hemp and things made out of it to London and earns money, which is used for the welfare of Mishtigunj and its people. Mist accompanies Olivia Todd on the ship. He listens to her but does not speak. Olivia plays harpsichord every now and then and he is enchanted by her beauty. Olivia is apprehensive about her visit to Calcutta and wants to know more about the place that she is going to reside in. She is like the ladies who were sent to India to marry
the officers deputed on duty in India, as the officers did not marry the Indian girls. The Indian girls could be taken as Black bibis, the concubines, but the bride had to be imported from England. We get a similar picture of the company and its lifestyle in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*. Olivia, unfortunately, is carried away by the robbers to be dumped in some dirty, dingy bar where her beauty is displayed in front of the barbaric uncouth natives. She is beyond recognition and John Mist, who is assigned by Todd Nugent to identify his fiancée, denies her the identity that could have saved her. Mist’s words impress the judge and the jury releases the ship crew. Instead of death sentence, they are sent to Hazaribagh to serve sentence. This is public humiliation for Todd, and Mist is informed by his lawyer that Todd might get him murdered. Rafeek Hai helps Mist to escape but before escaping he goes to Todd’s residence slaughtering him and his assistant. Mist escapes to Shoonder Bon with his two accomplices, lays the foundation of Mishtigunj, building Mist Mahal. Mist Mahal, later on, is passed on to the Gangoolys where the Tree Bride resides with her husband’s children --- the “shoots” that her father had brought from the Shoonder Bon and planted in the courtyard had now grown into trees protecting their mother, giving her peace and solace. The Tree Bride was a young girl when her uncle John Mist and Rafeek Hai had been hanged to death by the British and their bodies were never handed over to the relatives. Obviously, the British felt that in this way they were preventing riots. The callous attitude of the colonizers has been projected through characters like Vertie Treadwell. The muck and treachery of English conventions deals a death blow to Jack Snow alias John O’ the Mist alias John Mist, a persona who has more to his character than he wishes to reveal. He has the grit, the passion to carve a niche for himself. He serves Mishtigunj selflessly, but he refuses to relent and make it easy for the English. He is the one whose
sheer grit builds an empire and prevents the empire to penetrate the impregnable walls of his Empire. Is it Mist who is the tiger or is it Vertie Treadwell, who professes to be a tiger and shows his strength by hunting and killing the tigers? It is the fear of being conquered that makes him kill and prove himself superior, whereas John Mist’s acceptance of life, shows more character. His way of retaliation is severing all ties from his past culture. Both Mist and Treadwell are treated unfairly by their past culture. Ironically, Mist’s transition is smooth whereas egoistic attitude of Treadwell leads to his downfall. Treadwell was born in India and claims India to be his country but then, he is marginalized because he, like Mist, is illegitimate and is of British origin. He is not accepted by the nation where he is born and he refuses to have any concern with the Queen’s Empire. Incidentally, an admirer of Winston Churchill, he also shares the date of birth with his idol.

Tara Lata’s ghost haunts Tara Bhattacharjee in San Francisco. Is it a symptom of pregnancy and the trauma that she undergoes, or is it really the ghost of Tara Lata who sits on her kitchen table, requesting to be released from this mortal world? Is it because they share the same name or is it that Rabi is her great-great-grandson, or is it the fact that she is the one who is rummaging the closet to pull out dead souls? Mother, referred as Tara Ma, the perpetrator of freedom struggle was hanged in jail on orders of Mackenzie and her body thrown in the pit with thousand other bodies. After decades, she haunts Tara in San Francisco, and Tara switches on each and every light in her house in the evening to ward off evil, while Tara Lata’s ghost floats above and around her. Her gluttonized body still makes the soul of Tara Lata hanker after her release. After lots of speculation and Bish’s insistence, they plan to go to Kashi. Bish refuses to go to Kashi without marrying Tara and Tara gets married to
Bish before going to Varanasi, the place which is mentioned in the Prologue. Kashi is situated on Lord Shiva's trident and when everything dies and the world comes to an end, Kashi survives. Bish's wish to get married before the visit to Varanasi emphatically points to the difference in culture. Varanasi, the centre of spirituality and the base of Hindu belief, is a place of confluence and convergence of so many creeds, the holy place where one has to be pure in mind, body and soul to visit. Bish's staunch belief, though he is not religious, in his culture makes him flounder and he refuses to visit Kashi while living in sin (by Indian standards). Tara herself believes that she is already a “mleccha”, crossing the backwaters, pregnant out of wedlock, though the baby is of her ex-husband, a divorcee, having had affairs and a live-in partner, feels that she is not a deserving person who can take in responsibility of performing the Hindu rites. This is against the Hindu Dharma. In India “Dharma” means the right way of living and death which is a universal truth. This includes being honest and truthful and kind. The roots of Hinduism go back more than 5000 years. “Brahman” is the one supreme power. The Hindu law of Karma says that what a person does in one’s life affects his or her future life. In Hinduism, the purpose of life is to do good things in order to free oneself from the cycle of rebirth. How does Tara’s Karma relate her to Tara Lata? What ties connect Tara to her stalker? Abbas Sattar Hai is related to Rafeek Hai and his kin Sameena Hai. “Abbas Sattar Hai attached himself to our son as a way of burrowing into our family and destroying an Indian foothold in America.”(p.235)

The letter of Nigel Coughlin reveals few more facts about Sameena’s relation to the criminal who wants to kill Tara. Tara Lata lived all her life in Mist Mahal, which was transferred to Tara Lata after her Mist-Jethu was killed. The enmity in Sameena Hai’s mind must have
carried down to generations making an impact on Abbas Sattar Hai. The three bloodlines intermingle and cross path – the Gangooly, Hai and Treadwell. The weapon used to bomb Tara and Victoria’s house was a technological device, the medium of communication, something that refashioned her husband’s life unmatched, making him the king of Silicon Valley – his discovery ‘Chatty’.

The fairy-dust world of Chatty, the billions of dollars that flowed from the application of that Sunday morning idea, the empire it built, the importance attached to every pronouncement from the Sage of Atherton, are gone. The Bay Area Bachelor to Die for came too close to death, as did the Rani of Rivoli. (p.165)

The novel is rich with characters, all intertwined into each other and their lives interlocked together. The author has ingeniously handled the criss-crossing. The writers are on a journey that rollicks from the 21st century of medieval colonial India and back. The atrocities of the colonial rulers changed hands with the modern colonial terrorists, which infest and hound the whole world. The marauders of yesteryears who ruled all over the world, and it is believed that the sun never set for the Empire, the globalization innervated terrorism in the world, the new colonial masters.

Going to Kashi is the Karmic destiny that Tara Bhattacharjee is faced with. She is not so inclined with her pregnancy entering the last phase, but destiny cannot be discarded like a coat or identity. Performing the last rites after decades, would bring peace to Tara Lata’s soul and to Tara Bhattacharjee who sticks to her “Dharma” of being a dutiful great-granddaughter and a responsible citizen. Varanasi, known to the Britishers as Benaras, is the place of resurrection for both Taras. The river
Ganga flows from south to north making it more holy. “It flows away from the Domain of Death toward the Realm of Rebirth.”(p.269) Tara Lata who is described as handsome and not beautiful finally, meets her end as a married lady (she is married to immortal tree).

Thus, we see that The Tree Bride is an attempt to assess the past history of one culture to sort out the present, living in another culture. The plot of the novel moves smoothly without any disjointed hiccups. The plot moves back and forth in time and one is reminded of Emily Bronte’s ingenious style in Wuthering Heights. Bharati Mukherjee has used this technique of narrative and style in The Holder of the World also. A Time-Traveller has been used in the novel to move back and forth in time. The narrator of the novel has used the time-traveller to move from modern age to Mughal era in India and back to Massachusetts looking for “Kohinoor”. This “Kohinoor” is a precious coveted stone which was carried by the colonizers. “Kohinoor” also signifies the inner knowledge, which helps to empower one’s life. The plot of The Tree Bride moves back and forth from colonial India of pre-Independence times to San Francisco and back. Readers are confronted with the spangle of characters and their sequestered life in the new world and the old world co-instantaneously.

Mujherjee’s latest novel Miss New India (2011) is a great puzzled piece of fiction with reference to diasporic consciousness. Mukherjee achieves global attention writing about Indian immigrants and the transformation, they undergo in America. Like the theme of Jasmine, as jyoti becomes Jasmine, becomes Jazzy and finally Jane, similarly, Miss New India is also about the brutal yet liberating transformation that outcomes from immigration, except it is from Gauripur to Bangalore. The story of the novel is actually about the amazing struggle between Anjali
and Angie but, unlike Jasmine, each personality is never quite free of the other.

Anjali Bose, born of a traditional lower middle class family, lives in a backwater town, Gauripur with an arranged marriage on the horizon. Anjali’s standpoints do not look great but her inner ambition and fluency in speaking English language does not go unconsidered by her teacher, Peter Champion. Peter motivates Anjali, stirring in her a desire of taking charge of her own destiny, saying that “Bombay is yesterday. It is a hustler’s city. Bangalore’s the place for a young woman like you.”

Keeping the same target in her focus, Anjali sets off from the constricted culture of small town Gauripur in Bihar, one of India’s most backward states to the promise of Bangalore, one of the country’s fastest growing cities. Quickly, she mixes herself with an audacious and ambitious crowd of youngsters who have learned how to sound American by watching shows like ‘Seinfeld’ in order to get placements as call center service agents where they are easily able to out earn their elders and older. Anjali Bose, there, gets a job in call centre, falls in love, meets dynamic young entrepreneurs and marvels and as the result fortune is made all around her. She, later, encounters her share of hardships—police brutality, real estate sharks— but ultimately at last succeeds in reformulating herself.

Mukherjee sometimes stumbles in striking the exact balance between small town girl, Anjali who has never ever seen woman smoking and the westernized world, she starts her journey for. Though Americanism flies routinely over Anjali’s head but even she tries her best to understand the things. It is not easy to inhabit the mind of a small town girl like Anjali I her 20’s standing up to her new world- it is even more
inexplicable than America must have been to an Indian immigrant in the 60’s. At least that was a foreign country. This is still n will always be India, just where young people in coffee shops say things like “HP’s a little loosey-goosey”, “Motorola’s a little uptight” etc. Thus the novel does not claim to be a definitive story of the change of which Anjali is a part of. As a piece of contemporary fiction, it fails to capture India’s zeitgeist or authentically voice of emerging small town girl.

Thus, Miss New India is a withdrawal from Mukherjee’s previous novels in which the diasporic relations explored remain within India rather than traversing North America. Mukherjee herself is an embodiment of such diasporic developments. Born into a Hindu family, Mukherjee first immigrated to the United States to complete an MFA Programme at the University of Iowa then moved to Canada with her husband, Blaise where she lived for over a decade that was a very panic duration of her life. She then moved to the USA and came into a huge public view as an Indo-American writer of diaspora.

To be sure, Miss new India will offer much new material for academics to consider and wrangle over and finally the result is the novel is likely to be an enduring work among intellectual circles. The common readers might enjoy the novel’s certain as the fairy tale that contains largely optimistic views of India’s coming future. But others may find the novel to be a slow read, too ambitious about exploring various aspects of modern India while faltering to do so in its complete depth. Thus, Miss New India does not show so deep diasporic consciousness as her other major novels of Mukherjee had done so.
References


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