

## Retro Walk to the Eternal Abode of Ancestors in *The Tree Bride* of Bharati Mukherjee

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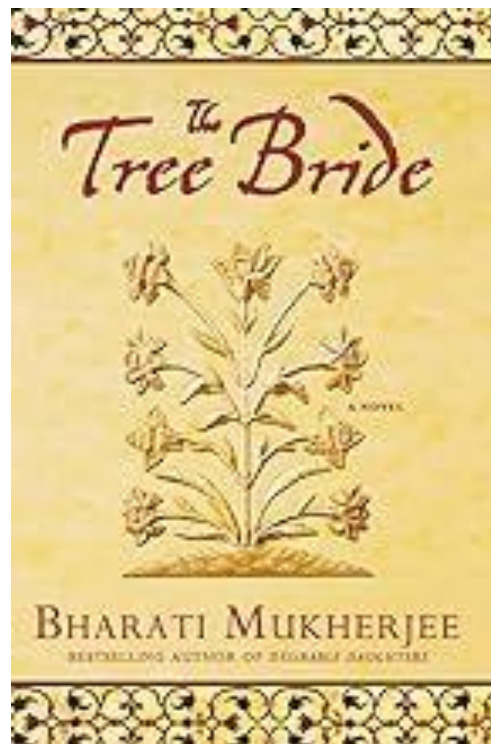
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### Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is a popular India born American writer. Her major works are brilliantly based on the diaspora theme and filled with the feeling of alienation, isolation, and duality. The protagonists are from South Asian background especially from India and struggling hard to incorporate into American society unlike Mukherjee herself. *The Tree Bride* is such a prolific

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work of the writer in which the protagonist Tara Chatterjee has fixed her feet in American soil but crazy after a mysterious expedition to unearth her ancestor's death mystery. A nostalgic craving for her traditional home in East Bengal of India and her anxiety about a fairytale ancestor aunt who married a tree; brings her back to India. The theme of soul and death ritual add mysticism and spirituality to the story. As Tara is mad about the death mystery of Tara Lata, the great grand aunt or namesake Tree Bride also restless for her soul's release from the bondage of mundane world and return to the home of Super soul. Besides, the freedom struggle of British India adds the historical authenticity of the novel and a philosophical prospective, that nothing in the world is lost and everything in the world is somehow connected with each other is highlighted.

**Keywords:** Bharati Mukherjee, *The Tree Bride*, Soul, Struggle, Freedom, Marriage, Woman, Ancestors.

Being churned with diasporic dilemma of longing and belonging and immigrant's alienation's sickness, Bharati Mukherjee efficiently incorporated the same temperament in many of her protagonists. In *The Tree Bride* (2004), she has fused history with mysticism in an astonishing manner, besides her immigrant mind has suggested a spiritual inhalation for dead and living people. The novel gives the story of a young woman trying to fit her place in the universe. Simultaneously, there is focus on the role and ultimate downfall of colonial rule in India. By a single person narrative style Mukherjee gives us a broad picture of British people who came India to rule as the representative of their government.

*The Tree Bride* is one part of Bharati Mukherjee's trilogy, in which *Desirable Daughters* is the first part. The ground for *Tree Bride* is created in the preceding *Desirable Daughters* as it ends with the terrorist bomb attack on Tara's house and from this *The Tree Bride* starts. Tara Chatterjee, a thirty-year-old Bengali woman living in a rental on Haight Street in San Francisco with her ex-husband Bishwapriya Ali's Bish. As a Silicon Valley guru, Bish is rich by an integrated communication system called CHATTY. In the beginning of the book the bomb attack crippled him, and he becomes wheelchair and starts working on a book titled, "The natural history of coincidence". Tara says, she is enough of a mystic to believe that there are coincidences, only convergence; nothing in the world is lost, but everything in the world is some have connected. So,

she attempts to reconcile the present as an assimilated American woman with her past Indian heritage. The novel swings between centuries, continents, and cultures of past and present. In press materials for the book, the author admits that she is consciously playing with the American literary tradition of root-retrieval, mixing memory with imagination.

Tara Chatterjee is a cosmopolitan world traveller who is very much satisfied with her Silicon Valley magnet life. Like many other Bengali women of her time, she has crossed the Blackwater, she had taken red and white meat even tested wine. She had crossed the threshold of all taboos to be recognised as a casteless and religion less world individual. She is divorced from husband and living a single mother of her son Rabi and having affairs with other men. When her house is bombed, she starts realising the value of her home, ancestry, tradition and cultural roots in India. Her yearning - led her to India. This strong call of ancestry and their family position in pre-independent India, makes Tara a retro walker in the pages of history. "When we dream or perhaps I should limit such a broad declaration only to myself, I dream of the past" (252). Her encounter with her Victorian ancestor namesake *The Tree Bride*; Tara Lata, who was a victim of social superstition like the archaic custom of child marriage by her father, a university graduate and a lawyer.

The history of *Tree Bride* is intricately woven with the history of India's freedom struggle, social blind beliefs like child marriage, widow condemnation, communal understandings, and racial discrimination. At the beginning, Tara is pregnant, while doing research on a novel, she is in search of a gynecologist. Her search for an Indian doctor leads her to Victoria Khanna, who is married to an Indian professor at Stanford who once taught her husband. Tara's encounter with Victoria opens many rays of hope for her ancestral exploration about a great-great grand aunt. Tara Lata Ganguly or namesake Tree Bride. Tara has her nostalgic reminiscences about her childhood and her grandparents and the story about *The Tree Bride* in Kolkata. The character of *The Tree Bride* remained in her mind as a mystic but enchanting figure from childhood: "when Victorians dream, they dreamed of the future. I dreamed of the past (51). Although Tara is a successful woman in a foreign land, acquires sufficient knowledge in her wide exposure to modern world, still the

story of three bride from her childhood days remains point of light from the remotest, darkest galaxy of her life.

Dr Victoria Khanna has a very sensitive link with Tara as exposed when both are united. Doctor Victoria Treadwell as she was before her marriage is a descendant of Vertie Treadwell, the ICS British officer who had disgusting feelings for pre-independent Indians and also signed the official report of *The Tree Bride* in the jail. Tara now gets a key to open her past. She collected all the documents from Victoria, mouldering papers in a duffel bag which say the history of Treadwell family in India and the story of Tara Lata Ganguly, *The Tree Bride*. The documents are the autobiography of Vertie Treadwell as he told to Winston Churchill that he knew, ... a woman married to a tree. As he admitted, he had never seen an Indian woman more obdurate than that lady. This information signals the authenticity of tree bride. She recollects her three trips to India:

"The first time I went back to India on my own, it wasn't just see relatives. I took Rabi with me on my own American-style root search, into the East Bengal Bangladesh of my grandparents and a hundred generations of Gangulys and Bhattacharjee" (20).

During these trips Tara learns about Mishtinguj about which she had heard a lot from her family members, but never visited for sixty years. She memorises her childhood in that town street, her house, school, friends, especially her fairytale character tree bride. Her ancestral family was, "... a hybrid family of orthodox Hindu, Bengali-speaking, cricket-loving, Shakespeare-acting, Gilbert and Sullivan- singing, adaptable-anywhere Brahmins" (45). Overall, Tara's family was a well-balanced family between two cultures: an orthodox Bengali Brahmin culture and Christian convent cultures. Her father, who "...drank scotch and read English mysteries and positively idolised Doris Day" (48). The more the family advanced in thoughts and habits, the more they were concerned in conserving the traditional archaic customs like child marriage. The story of tree bride starts from this child marriage tradition. On Tara's visit to Mishtingunj she comes to know that her great grand aunt Tara Lata, "has been dead for fifty-five years" (59) and she left no written record of her life except a few pamphlets with parables and moral stories.

It was in 1879, Tara Lata's wedding day when she was at the tender age of five, who knew nothing about what marriage means, misfortune endowed upon her fate. Her marriage had been fixed in a nearby village to a small boy. The marriage procession reached the door of her adolescent bridegroom; people started scolding and cursing the little bride instead of welcoming them. It was because the boy to marry had been bitten by snake and died consequently. Widowhood at that society was the synonym of curse, death was better than the condemned life of a widow. No body asks when a male becomes widower rather, he marries many women one after another unlike Lata's father Jay Krishna Ganguly, who had married at least ten times until he got the only son. But he decided to marry the little girl with a tree to save her from the ashamed life and the whole family from social humiliation, and so, rather than die as a spinster-second only to widowhood as a personal tragedy. On a cold, foggy December night in 1879, deep in the forest, she had been married to a poxy husband, a straight, tall, Sundari tree. Other girls facing similar fates were married to rocks or crocodiles.

Mukherjee has planned the background for *The Tree Bride* in her preceding work *Desirable Daughters*. The novel *Desirable Daughters* opens with detailed description of proposed marriage, widowhood and the marriage of Tara with a tree. This description of the story of Tara in *Desirable Daughters* connects both these novels as portion of the sequel.

However, after marriage, Tara Lata became the legendary tree bride. Marriage with a tree was widespread in India in the remote past, because there were beliefs that trees contain hidden or sacred powers to cure or enhance fertility. Besides, trees contain the souls of ancestors or of the unborn. As per custom, the people who have Manglik problems which affect the longevity of their spouse face problems at the time of marriage. So, to neutralize the negative force in the stars the bride has to marry a non-human like trees. But the pathetic point to note is that the star fault or star problem is always judged with the girl, and she has to become a tree bride like Tara Lata never with any boy. The sole motive of the marriage of Tara is to redeem her from the condemned life of a widow and lead a normal life like a normal woman.

With marriage Tara became a namesake tree bride and acquired the nomenclature as *The Tree Bride* and developed the characteristics of the tree. As a loyal bride she stays rooted in her father's house for her entire life and distributed her shadow and oxygen to society without any expectation. She remained silent throughout her life like a tree. She devoted her entire life to serve the poor and needy People and distributes her dowry property to them and actively participates in the freedom struggle of India. Her house remained open to all. She educated people to bring literacy to common people and became a source of wisdom for women and men in Mishtigunj. As an active and devoted nationalist, she dedicated her life to the freedom fight. Tara became a spirited activist and fought wholeheartedly till her last breath. She lived in Mist Mahal with her father along with a Muslim family that served them. She used all her dowry and parental property to finance the forces fighting for independence. Of course, Tara Lata had recorded very little information about herself, but she wrote e about the day when she became a widow and her marriage with a tree at the early age of five in Mishtigunj. She had written at the age of six, the British troops and their Indian conscripts arrested the chowkidar and broke through the gate of her house. There was a feast arranged to honour Rafeek Hai and his family attended by John Mist and Lata's father Jaya Krishna Ganguly. It was in 1880 Ramzan day the Brahmins, although orthodox, still participated in the festival. There the troops arrested Mist and Rafeek Hai and later both were hanged in the "Town Square". The little girl Tara witnessed the tragic and terrifying incident sitting on her father's shoulders. That incident enlightened her fighting spirit for which she became a nationalist in her later life. Tara also records her childhood friend Sameena who had inherited the Mist Mahal after her death.

Tara Lata is so deeply rooted in her father's house that only on three occasions she has left the house. The first time at the age of five when she has to go to the Mishtigunj forest on a chilly winter night to marry a Sundari tree in 1879. In second time, when she has gone to witness the hanging of Jon Mist and Rafeek Hai in the next year. In 1943 the third time she left her house when the British army hold her with rifles. This is the last time because it is reported that she died of heart attack in the jail but mysteriously her body is never found nor properly cremated with custom. The whole second part of the novel discusses the genealogy from 1820 to 1874 that gives the foundation for the birth of *The Tree Bride*.

*The Tree Bride* dies a dubious death. Her life is as fascinating as mysterious her death is. In her initial phase of rebellion life, she supported and financed Gandhi, but later supported the radical leader Subhash Chandra Bose. She seems to have abandoned the path of peace and nonviolence and starts following radical paths. Her house, Mist Mahal, becomes the centre of movement with a veritable printing press and munitions factory for sedition elements. She is a gracious lady with bob cut hairstyle and quite masculinity in her attitude as the Moulding paper says. Her character is a brilliant balance between rebellious nature and reforming attitude. Her heart is shocked by noticing the torture of woman in that society because it seems to be a curse to be a woman. In that time and the social rules, regulations and restrictions were against the interest of womenkind. The conservative norms and taboo confined women in four walls of home and adding fuel to fire the freedom movement had triggered the sufferings of women. The activist remains absconded from home in fear of arrest by British police but at home the women and children were left behind to be tortured by brutal British police. Tara's documents revealed how a nineteen-year-old housewife named Habeeba Shah and her three little daughters had been scored alive in her hut because her husband had joined in Indian National Army and was fighting for independence. Likewise, another heart rendering story of Kanaka Bala Devi who had been raped and tortured in front of her parents because her brother had bombed a police station. These incidents highlight the emotional aspects of her character. So she fights and calls for justice and equality in society.

Apart from being an active Independence warrior Tara Lata was a progressive lady perhaps relatively smarter and more advanced than Tara Chatterjee, who lived in an advanced age of 21st century. In 1931 when many educated men had not read George Orwell at that time Tara Lata had read many of the author's books. She was reading a piece of literature- a magazine called "A hanging" and a novel called "Burmese Days" when the warrant against her was issued. She had link with high officials in British bureaucratic level than Trade well. People used to respect her as incarnation of God and called her in affection, "Tara -Ma". To spread the light of education she trained her servants to read and write and then sent them to nearby villages teach five other people. She understood that literacy is the only way to bring change in Indian society and bring freedom



to the country. As Treadwell told Churchill, “She’d managed to take the curse of her virginity - the worst thing a woman can be in that country- and elevate it into something worthy of a Catholic saint” (211). Undoubtedly, she was very popular in her society, but she was not enemy less. As one British officer Coughlin had recorded, “Sameena and her husband, Tara Lata’s personal physician plotted to take possession of Mist Mahal sooner or later” (277). So, they plotted the Tree Bride’s death thinking that it might be a conspiracy of any enemy with the British government. In 1943 Tara Lata died in a mysterious circumstance in police station and the possession of Mist Mahal went to Begum Smeena. In 1971 before the death of Coughlin he had written in Dhaka newspapers Mist Mahal was a occupied by a ninety seven years old widow woman named Sameena Chowdhury and her family of grandson and great grandsons. But there was no will or sale; it was illegal that the Gangulys had the right to inherit the Mahal. Now Tara Chatterjee is clear about the reason behind the bombing in her San Francisco house, assassination of Doctor Victoria and all those mishaps upon her. “The house itself...might have killed John Mist, Rafeek Hai and eventually the Tree Bride” (278). Now the story of *The Tree Bride* comes to a complete circle and the past deeds seemed to overshadow the present happenings. The legendary aunt gives the hints of her presence at Bengal Street to Tara, “I am trapped in your world of mortals, she pledges and performs the rites. Set me free Tara” (279).

Mukherjee tries to show towards the end that India is the land of mysticism. Tara remembers the childhood stories she heard from her grandmother,

“...twilight was the time when evil spirits where most potent and unhappy ghost most eager to take our living bodies. Most ghosts were unhappy. She said caught between worlds. Some were dangerous” (208).

In her mystic conversation with her successor Tara Chatterjee the legendary Tree Bride revealed her death mystery. As she narrated, she was hanged by Mackenzie in a cell of the jail till death, and to avoid public fury Treadwell had ordered her body to be cremated by police. Her body had been tossed over the prison wall and then had been ripped off by vultures and bones had been chewed by dogs. Tara gets what she had been searching for years that is the truth behind the




mysterious death of her tree bride aunt. However, Tara Lata doesn't want to avenge for the brutal murder; simply she wants peace and her soul 's release from the mundane world because without funeral rites the soul can't get freedom from this material world as the Hindu cults says. For generations the tree bride had been waiting to return to the "Abode of Ancestors" (281) in the realm invisible to the mortals.

Mukherjee has used the elements of mysticism to connect past Tara Lata with present Tara. Both are daughters of cultured Bengali soil and proved their potentiality in own sphere. Tara makes Bish agree to accompany as a married man to go Kashi to perform proper cremation of Tara Lata so that she can attain status of "Pitt", ancestor. Tara once again realised the real value of Indian marriage and decides to remarry Bish. After all the novel ends with a happy note as Tara gives birth to a daughter after a week of her remarriage and named the baby girl, Victoria, in loving memory of the doctor. The home coming of both the Tara(s)once again emphasised the precious value of home for anyone, maybe a living individual or dissatisfied soul in search of salvation.

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