

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride*: Assimilation of the West in the East

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Abstract: Bharati Mukherjee is one of those diasporic writers who have proved themselves to be trendsetters in diasporic literature. Through her writings she has carved a niche for herself in the mainstream American literature. She maintains a perfect balance between her identity as an American and as an Indian. Assimilation into the foreign country is one of the prominent themes depicted in Bharati Mukherjee's novels. She shows assimilation of Indian Immigrants in America and also reverses the situation. In many of her novels she has shown the assimilation of immigrants from the west into Indian culture. *The Tree Bride* published in 2004 is an example of one such novel where Bharati Mukherjee portrays assimilation of Western immigrants into the Indian society. This paper aims to delineate on the different diasporic characters, the British colonizers who came to India to rule but got assimilated in India and became more Indians than being British.

Keywords: Diaspora, Colonization, Displacement, Assimilation.

The Tree Bride (2004) is sequel to *Desirable Daughters*. Tara of *Desirable Daughters* is the narrator of *The Tree Bride* also. Both these novels are part of the proposed trilogy by Bharati Mukherjee. *Desirable Daughters* ends with the terrorist bomb attack on Tara's house, after which Bish is burnt badly and is crippled. Tara and Rabi survives. The main target of this attack is supposed to be Bish who has many business rivals due to his successful communication technology company. Tara reconciles with Bish who is presently her ex-husband to whom she has divorced. In this phase of distress she desires to unearth the mystery of her ancestors. Tara has started writing books and she is working on the story of her ancestor, her namesake, the Tree Bride, Tara Lata. She tries to search her own roots in India through the history of Tara Lata. The titular character of *The Tree Bride* is Tara Lata Gangooly, an East Bengali woman who was married to a tree at the age of five after the sudden death of her bridegroom due to snake bite. Her father married her to a 'sundari' tree to protect her from the curse of widowhood. Bharati Mukherjee has prepared the ground for *The Tree Bride* in the preceding novel, *Desirable Daughters*. The novel, *Desirable Daughters* opens with the detailed descriptive narration of the proposed marriage, widowhood and the marriage of Tara with a tree. This narration of the story of Tara in *Desirable Daughters* connects both these novels as part of the sequel. The story of *The Tree Bride* seems incomprehensive without the reading of *Desirable Daughters*.

After her marriage, Tara Lata becomes the legendary Tree Bride. She not only acquired the nomenclature as the Tree Bride but she also developed the characteristics of a tree. She stayed rooted in her father's house for all her life. She never left it until her death except for three occasions when she stepped out of it. She devoted her entire life to the service of poor and actively participated in the freedom struggle of India. Her house remained open to all. Ultimately she was arrested by the British authorities and was declared dead in police custody. Her death remains a mystery for the people of Mishtigunj where she lived all her life.

The novel is presented as Tara's quest for her roots with reference to her relation with the Tree Bride. In this novel she along with Victoria tries to trace the intricacies of not only the Tree Bride but all other people associated with her and Mishtigunj explicitly or implicitly. As discussed this novel has usually been taken up as Tara's search for her roots. This analysis of *The Tree Bride* tries to differ from the previously done researches. This study aims to reflect on different diasporic characters in the novel. The present observation of *The Tree Bride* will focus on the diasporic concerns of the characters who are basically British colonizers residing in India. This study attempts to highlight on the stay of these characters in India as an alien country and how different characters succeed or fail to assimilate in the Indian culture. As far as question of the narrator Tara is concerned in *The Tree Bride* we don't see her assimilation because her journey of assimilation started in *Desirable Daughters* and eventually completed in *Desirable Daughters* only. *The Tree Bride* is basically her attempt to discover her past in order to relate it with the fire bomb attack on her house. She tries to connect the wires of her present disastrous attack in America to her past roots in India. The emphasis here will be on to the theme of diasporic concerns which Mukherjee reflects in other characters who are British immigrant in India and how they have completely assimilated into the Indian culture. *The Tree Bride* is a narration of colonial rule

over India and also India's freedom from colonial rule. It also narrates many parallel stories and histories of diasporic individuals who are from different culture, religion, and nationality.

John Mist is one such important character in the novel. He is the founder of the small Indian town, Mishtigunj, named after his name. He is not an Indian by birth. He was born in England and was named as Jack Snow. But his journey from London to Calcutta is a tale of his displacement and he desires to make India as his home in which he succeeds eventually. He made Bengal his home and his language changed from English to Bengali, "Such a man was John Mist, and the village he created is that magical word in my native language, my desh, my unseen home" (55). There is reference to many Britishers who came to India in order to do the business of the "Blue devil", the indigo plantations. These intruders from England included criminals, victims, orphans, abandoned persons. John Mist was also an orphan who:

Having come from nowhere, they had everywhere to go. Having been given nothing, they were free to fashion anything they pleased. Such a man was John Mist (56).

Bharati Mukherjee has articulated the concept of inheriting nothing means claim to everything in the case of Debby of *Leave It To Me* also. Like John Mist, she is also an orphan and has the same approach to her life as an orphan. John Mist acts as the author's mouthpiece in presenting the comparison between the social scenario of London and India in the early nineteenth century:

There was not an alleyway in London not infested with crime and disease, no footpath not cluttered with whores and drunks, beggars, madman, and thieves...Calcutta streets, on the other hand, were wide and the pace was slow...(110).

His stay in Bengal made him acquainted with the local tongue and its dialect. He seems to have lost his memory of speaking English:

He felt reborn, all his sins washed away the boy he'd been lay buried under a mound of language he no longer spoke. The sound of English, in fact, sickened and enraged him (137).

Mist has travelled to Ambernath, Himalayan caves, Ganges, and Benares. He has also visited and prayed at many mosques. His substantial stay and assimilation into the Indian culture make him more of an Indian than a foreigner, "He was taken for Indian wherever he went. His origins were never suspected, even when passing the occasional Britisher" (149). He has visited Indian territory to its core:

He had forgotten the English language. In a century when such total transformation was becoming increasingly rare, John Mist stands out as the perfect, and may be the last "British Hindoo" (149).

Mist was a visionary who sought to resolve the opposition between Hindu and Muslims of India of that time period. He created his own village Mishtigunj where he appointed doctors, lawyers, teachers, both Hindu and Muslims to maintain the religious harmony. Mist's hybridity and his assimilation into the Indian culture is observed as:

With his newly acquired hybrid identity in the home that he built in Mishtigunj, John Mist constructed a new life free from his past crimes and guilt. Mishtigunj thus became his utopian vision of a home of hybrid perfection. He died like a hybrid saint, even in death mimicking the person he was but not quite (an Indian), accompanied by his friend Rafeek Hai, a Bengali Muslim lawyer with British education (Hasanat,279).

John Mist's assimilation into the Indian culture is very clearly depicted as:

Along with not speaking the English language, Mist added another vow-never to wear English clothes again. He tossed the borrowed jacket out the window. The seaman's trunk held the entire native wardrobe, Kurtas, Pajamas, Shawls, and turban, which he would need or own for years to come (144).

David Llewellyn Owens is another diasporic individual who have spent his life under the Indian sun. He is a born Indian and brought up in India. He is a second generation of British immigrants. He is known, "as one of the last of the old "British Hindoo"". He has no traces of foreignness in his personality:

He dressed in Indian clothes outside of court and kept four Hindu wives in a block of houses in the native quarter of Sealdah. He was an embarrassment to the British establishment of Chowringee and Garden Reach (118).

Around the time period of 1832, in India, the author has presented Owens as:

In the earlier century, a man like Owens would not have seemed misplaced. Many Britishers came to India and became more Indian than the natives, learning the languages, practicing the religious, eating the food, fathering half-Indian children from a virtual harem of bibis (119).

Victoria's grandfather, Virtie Treadwell presents the other side of the coin. He left India in 1947 and never came back. He was in the Indian Civil Service. He was posted in Bengal. He became the district commissioner in Bengal from 1930 to 1947. He died in England. He justifies his Indian identity and India as his home as:

I am one of the India-born. Fully ninety percent of my life has been spent in India. I have probably spent a greater percentage of my life India than Mr. Nehru has and certainly more than the late Mr. Gandhi has. I have participated in many of India's greatest moments (201).

Nigel Coughlin has been the progeny of the fifth generation of diaspora in India. His parents belonged to England. He is like John Mist, a true Indian in every sense:

To Tara Lata, he was the avatar in manner and sincerity of John Mist himself, he who claimed to have forgotten every word of English (267).

Coughlin considered and declared himself as a Hindu in his heart. He has been given British schooling but after coming to India:

His Persian and Bengali tutorials were the only things that got him through the worst years, until he was free to declare aloud his love of India (268).

Coughlin admits about his Indianness:

"I am of the church of England in India. I am a devotee of goddess Durga. All of my life I have been looking for a suitable faith, and I believe in India I have found it. In religion I am Indian..." (268).

His assimilation into the Indian culture is depicted in not only his wearing Indian clothes but also in her stay in India even after 1947, "Nigel Coughlin had managed to stay on and even to become an Indian citizen, one of the first ex- Britishers to fully Indianize in 1947 (273).

Bharati Mukherjee also refers to many British planters for whom:

Calcutta was the only place in the world that treated them the way they saw themselves, like devoted royalty returning from exile. Their good old days became our good old days. Their nostalgia became ours, their irony and cynicism a mark of our own worldliness (24).

In *The Tree Bride*, Bharati Mukherjee explores that history can change an individual's life. Freedom means to begin a new life. She focuses on the fact our past histories are intertwined and intersect with our present. The diasporic situation creates rich possibilities for comprehending various histories. Dislocation results in changing identities, cultures and traditions. The psychological transformation of the displaced individual is a consciously directed self-fashioning.

References

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