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The Portrayal Of Colonial Bengal In Bharati Mukherjee's The Tree Bride

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee belongs to the leading group of diasporic writers of Indian origin. She has written novels, novellas, short stories and essays. She has received prestigious literary prizes in America and elsewhere. In her writings, she depicts the predicament of diasporic women of Indian origin. She offers myriad types of female characters, including rebels and docile ones. Though she does not consider herself a post-colonial writer, her writings have a solid post-colonial undercurrent. Her *The Tree Bride* is a sequel to *Desirable Daughters*, her previous novel. *The Tree Bride* deals with the destiny of people (both Indian and British) who lived in colonial Bengal. This society comprised crafty English men, the gullible and corrupt Indian Nawabs, the traditional *bhadralok* and the poor. This article attempts a study of this variegated, complex society of Calcutta in colonial times.

Keywords: diasporic, predicament, myriad, post-colonial, undercurrent.

1. Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee is famed for her feminist outlook, insightful writing of diaspora experience, and keen understanding of the adaptive strategies employed by third-world women to cope with American realities. Her works are firmly rooted in her lived experience as a conscious Bengali in Canada and America. Besides, she is a *bhadralok*, as they call upper castes in Bengal. Though she taught post-colonialism she does not consider her works post-colonial.

Like several prominent Bengali authors like Amitav Ghosh, she too is irreconcilable with the tragic partition of her land into West and East Bengal. She is rightfully rapturous about the beauty and the lure of Sunderbans; its life-giving and robbing nature. Throughout Bengal's history, natives, neighbours, and multiple foreigners have entered India through its treacherous waters and made phenomenal fortunes. Notably, from the very beginning, the East India Company of England traded in timber, jute, cotton, indigo and other agricultural produce and prized pelts of Royal Bengal tigers from Bengal. They converted traditional paddy cultivation to indigo for British mills and later introduced hemp/jute cultivation. Indigo and hemp are cash crops purchased at a high profit for mills in England. They sold the products of British industrial revolution dearly to the natives and profited. The might of

trade inexorably altered the sustainable life style of Bengalis hitherto practiced and impoverished them. *The Tree Bride* narrates the role played by the East India Company and later the Crown in 19th century Bengal history.

A memorable cast of English men like Ernest Virgil Treadwell, John Mist, Nigel Coughlin, David Llewellyn Owens, Olivia Todd, Humphrey Todd- Nugent the ill-fated crew of the ship *Malabar Queen*, and other characters act as the vehicles for Mukherjee to describe different colonial accounts of life in India. Through the character of Tara Lata Gangooly Mukherjee records the freedom struggle of Indians. She professed the Gandhian the creed, "No boy is too young, no Sudra too poor, no woman too weak to fight for the independence of India." (TB 61) Rafeek Hai, his daughter Sameena, and grandson Hajji Gul Mohammed Hai from the past and the present Bangladesh Muslim representation. Hajji's father Dr. Hajji Mohd. Chowdhary and Grandfather Rafeek Hai had compiled in Persian literary style the *Mist Nama* expressing the life history of John Mist who curiously dictated in spoken Persian. Hajji explains to Tara that it is partly in line with the tradition of Mughal kings Babur, Akbar Shah Jagan and Aurangzeb to write their life and events and partly because John Mist had transitioned from a Benthamite orphan in England to a thorough Indian Sahib, even refusing to speak in English. The Hajji also states that *Mist Nama* is as great as the official *Namas* written by the Mughal kings.

The numerous British characters of *The Tree Bride* entered India through the Sundarbans colonial officers and foot soldiers. There were independent fortune seekers such as Crabbe and John Mist. Some successfully landed in the unpredictable port and reached the British stronghold city Calcutta. The sudden violent storms of the shallow Bay of Bengal are known to break their ships and masts. The aftermath of violent storms scatters up the bloated carcasses of travellers for jackals and gharials to feast upon. Apart from the main fictional British characters of *The Tree Bride* historical personalities like Winston Churchill, Thomas Babington Macaulay and the writer George Orwell also appear in the novel. These characters form one thread in the novel that convincingly depicts the severe scholarship of the author to narrate the way East India Company and later British crown ruled the nation. For instance she cites the advent of steam ships that can withstand storms causing a decline in demand for mast wood from Sundarbans.

The second set of memorable characters include Tara, the Calcutta Brahmin girl living in America and searching her roots in India and Bangladesh, her namesake Tara Lata Gangooly, the tree bride, Victoria Khanna the obstetrician and gynecologist for Tara, Bish, the techno-entrepreneur husband of Tara, Rabi their son, Jai Kishan Gangooly Tara Lata's father, and a host of Muslim characters associated with John Mist, and the tree bride.

The Tree Bride is the sequel to the earlier novel *Desirable Daughters*. The original conception of the author is to write a trilogy. Many characters in the first part appear in *The Tree Bride* too. Tara the protagonist is a shining example of the predilection of the author to portray the process of Indian-born women adapting to life in America. Tara is the narrator and main character in the sequel *The Tree Bride*.

Since *The Tree Bride* engages several protagonists of *Desirable Daughters* a brief introduction is in order. Tara and her two sisters live in Calcutta. Her father is a flourishing wealthy tea merchant. Among the sisters, Tara alone opts for arranged marriage. Her husband Bish is an innovative and successful tech entrepreneur of Silicon Valley and works as technology head in a hugely profitable tech business. After marriage, Tara moves to California with her husband Bish. She assimilates the American culture without much ado but is nostalgic about her life and family history in India. Rabi, a boy, is born to the couple. Bish mostly does not spend much time at home owing to the exigencies of his business work worldwide. Tara resents his near total absences and seeks divorce. She relocates to San Francisco with her son and becomes one more single mother working to raise her boy in San Francisco. She values her Indian roots and history. Mukherjee vividly sketches acculturation with all its complexities and introduces an element of mystery enshrouded in the past in Tara's family history.

The novel ends with Tara narrowly escaping a bomb explosion and watching her burning home with her estranged husband Bish.

The second part of the trilogy is *The Tree Bride*. The novel takes off from the incineration of Tara's house and narrates how Bish valiantly saves Tara from the inferno but suffering severe burn injuries necessitating amputation of a leg. Tara is also found to be pregnant. Bish abandons his hectic business travels and spends much time convalescing at home. Tara nurses him with love and attention.

In the novel, Tara decides to write a book about her namesake Tara Lata Gangooly who lived in East Bengal that is contemporary Bangladesh. She initially learnt the Tree Bride Tara Lata story from her mother's bedtime stories. She starts to investigate more and more about the 19th century life of Tara Lata for writing her book. Tara Lata lived at Mishtigunj now called as Razakpur and is an ancestor-great aunt-of Tara of New York. Tara Lata was given in marriage as a five year old to a boy who tragically succumbs to a snake bite before the completion of marriage rites. The deceased boy's father covets the dowry and demands that the girl to be sent to his household as a widow. Her father Jai Krishna Gangooly, a learned pundit, understands the design and cites relevant Vedic provisions to marry her to a tree. Thus the child was married to a tree and remains forever free from widowhood. Her entire dowry in gold and silk saris was buried under the tree. This child widow grows up into a formidable woman espousing the cause of freedom fighters and Indian nationalism. She also acquires the characteristics of a tree, rooted at her residence. Throughout her life she moves out of Mist Mahal only on three occasions. She ventured out once for the ill-fated marriage, next for witnessing the hanging of John Mist and Rafeek Hai and the finally after her arrest to the police station never to return. She lives in Mishtigunj created by John Mist as *George's Bight* and is fondly called the tree bride Tara-Ma by all residents. Tara Lata does not treat Muslims as less than her equals even though she hails from an orthodox Brahmin family. She engages in the nationalist movement and supports the activities of freedom fighters. She recovers the gold she buried five decades ago to donate to the nationalist movement. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose himself visits her at home and gives a stirring speech to the inhabitants of Mishtigunj about the need to liberate India.

We are introduced to a 19th century English Benthamite charity house orphan boy Jack Snow who joins the crew of a ship *Malabar Queen* bound to Calcutta as a cabin boy. He becomes a weatherman taking sea water sample at various depths and registers the temperature for the captain Diligence Partridge. The captain is educated in marine science in a naval academy. He does not subscribe to the old seafarer's ideology of winds dictating the time taken for a voyage. He argues that saltier water improves buoyancy and is favorable but colder water is heavy and offers more drag. Hence Master Snow was assigned to check temperature and salinity. Snow spends more time with the captain as his assistant and other officers above decks. The sailors are jealous about his preferential treatment. Olivia Todd, an Irish woman travels to India to meet her future husband and colonial officer Humphrey Todd-Nugent. The lady and the cabin boy share a cordial relationship. The ship after three months had rounded the cape and heads northward again. Amidst the fog, two pirate ships with Danish flag and a motley crew assault the Indiaman and kills all officers. Olivia saves the boy by hiding him in a chest under her bed. However, she is taken along with the loot as a prize. The crew engages in a parley with the captors and pleads against scuttling the ship. They manage to steer the ship to India hoping they will be rewarded for saving the crown's property. The sailors viciously ill-treat the boy throughout the course. He silently bears all the cruelty and nearly loses his power of speech. The sailors claim that Olivia, the lone passenger was drowned during the altercation. Humphrey Todd Nugent accuses the sailors of mutiny and killing of all officers and his betrothed. They are incarcerated at infamous Black Hole pending trial. In view of his youth and inability to speak Snow is let off. Wandering the streets of Calcutta, Snow finds that Nugent is a coward and outwardly sports wounded pride of having lost his betrothed Olivia to the treachery of the sailors.

In one of the alternate versions of India differing entirely from colonial accounts as a land of misery and disease Mukherjee uses Snow to describe Calcutta in 1831. She compares London and Calcutta:

“For the ex-cabin boy who had sailed past the Houses of Parliament on his way out to India some eight months earlier, who’d had it beaten into him at Betterment Trust that London was the center of the world, and the glory of the civilization, the dazzling white buildings of the Temple Square were finer by far. London streets were horse-clogged and squalid, festering with vermin. There was not an alleyway in London not infested with crime and disease, no footpath not cluttered with whores and drunks, beggars, madmen, and thieves. Public buildings were gray, and soot-streaked, the winter air foul and bilious”. (TB 110)

The description of Calcutta by Mukherjee is not one-sided or borne out of pretentious national pride. The Irish girl Olivia Todd too details her future husband's use of native construction techniques:

“He’d adopted native building practices. Marble exteriors to cool the air even before it passed inside, windows placed in shaded alcoves to circulate the air that had been previously cooled. He would hang strips of wet muslin, not merely to exploit the benefits of evaporation but also to trap the particles of dust were unfortunately everywhere in the non-monsoonal months. Broad overhangs, marble floors, a lawn and a fountain, and of course the cunning use of angles to catch the river breeze: the genius of tropical design.” (TB 94)

However, Jack Snow hailed from the dregs of London society and had a personal experience of the underbelly of the metropolis. He could not help contrasting London and Calcutta. Mukherjee paints an idyllic Calcutta as seen by the English boy from a charity house and unemployed after his ship was confiscated. He was not an East India Company recruit. Therefore he was not obliged to reproduce tropes about conditions in India.

“Calcutta streets, on the other hand, were wide and the pace was slow, set by ox carts and camels. A small army of bent-over women and children swept the roadways...Monkeys chattered on the branches and begged for food, then snatched it. As in London dogs ran free; unlike London so did cows. One could see open sky between each blinding white structure, and every house was blessed with garden spaces, river access and a small forest of well-tended flowers and fruit trees.” (TB 111)

Olivia Todd was the only person who was kind to Jack Snow and he was infatuated with her. For him she was a fantasy mother. He hated Humphrey Todd-Nugent even before seeing him because marriage with him would deprive John the soothing company of Olivia. Todd-Nugent, a director in the East India Company was a powerful man. He had never met Olivia and in the time he spent as a Company official he kept bibis-Indian mistresses- and had children. Like several British men of that time he did not find it necessary to act as a father to his illegitimate children. They spent their lives in the outhouses with their mothers. Olivia was supposed to be his official wife.

Her story was well-known across the Indian Ocean ports in the seafaring route. A ballad “*Ollytodd in the Mascarene/ a rightproper Irish lass/ left from Armagh on a day so green/in a soft wool dress and a hat of blue/and buckled shoes of velveteen*” was sung in taverns with bawdy variations. Todd Nugent felt he was cuckolded and as revenge wanted everyone in the ship’s crew punished. It also became a routine for drifters of mixed-blood claiming to be the Irish woman to arrive at Kidderpore docks seeking financial assistance from Todd-Nugent. He unceremoniously spurned them all because he had never seen her in person. John Snow who was sent to an orphanage by the court, and the crew consigned to Hazaribagh prison for ten years rigorous imprisonment for dereliction of duty were the only people to have seen her in person.

John Mist as he was called at the orphanage was often asked to identify whether some woman claiming that she is Olivia Todd is her. John Mist on one occasion was taken to look at a woman at Kidderpore at the behest of Todd-Nugent. He was shown a deranged, much ravaged woman with matted hair shrieking like an Amazon monkey. When he approached her she cries out pathetically "My bright, bright lad, how have you grown!" Mist recognized that the Olivia Todd he knew had been "disembarked in the Cape and sold to pirates and after they had used her up, they sold her to Arabs and then to the Chinaman." The poor woman had suffered the pox and all her teeth had gone. Clearly, she was no longer in a state to enter respectable society. Todd-Nugent is not sincere either to locate her or give her due. Incensed by the tragedy, and the callousness of Todd-Nugent Mist refuses to identify her as Olivia. He tries to commit suicide but fails.

Later, he kills Nugent and escapes with Rafeek Hai to go East where the indigo plantations are switching to hemp cultivation. Hai's family lived in the Sundarbans and together they flourish and found Mishtigunj. Mist ceases to talk in English and uses Bengali and Persian. In Mist Mahal, the mansion of John Mist, tree bride and her father Jai Kishan Gangooly cohabited with Rafeek Hai's family. Mukherjee concludes the end of Mishtigunj and the birth of Razakpur with this familiar tale of the profligate Indian nawabs getting indebted to the British and surrender their territory to wipe out debts. A small amount of history threaded with the story is told in an inimitable manner of Mukherjee:

"Ghani Rehman Razak died in 1902. His son Abdul Mohammed Razak was born in 1882 and died in 1949. Sometime in the 1930s, he was allied with the independence movement in East Bengal; he is the Razak for whom Razakpur, ...but perhaps it was his great-great-grandson who tracked me to San Francisco and nearly killed us all. Mist and Hai were hanged by the British, who had been invited to enter because of Razak's debts; Razak's son, rich from British bribes, became history's darling, the man with his name on the map." (TB 150-151)

2. Conclusion

Thus, *The Tree Bride* offers a complex picture of Bengal in colonial times. There are rich and poor, rulers and the ruled, the pretentious middle class and the have-nots, the cunning White Masters and the gullible Indian rulers. Ironically, at least some of the British who came to rule India got assimilated with the Indian way of life. . . . Mukherjee reflects on other characters who are British immigrants in India and how they have completely assimilated into the Indian culture. The *Tree Bride* is a narration of colonial rule (Sharma and Gupta, Web).

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