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Exercise of History, Myth and Culture in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride*

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Abstract

The oeuvre of Bharati Mukherjee is packed with various sorts of identity crises like immigrant identity, cultural identity and religious identity etc. *The Tree Bride*, a sequel to *Desirable Daughters*, is an amalgamation of history, myth mysticism and cultural investigation. Tara Lata Gangooly is the tree bride of the novel. She is betrothed to a tree when the groom, on the day of the wedding, dies of snakebite. Tara, in the form of an innocent bride, bears the brunt of aspersions and reproaches for the death of the groom. Her family is also damned for performing something wrong in customary rituals of worshipping in the course of the wedding. The story oscillates between past and present, and it is an attempt to explore the real identity of Tara Lata. A terror incident also leads the tale towards the investigation of the secret bombing and its causes. Exploration and expedition of history, myth and culture are the dominant themes of the novel.

My paper illustrates the purpose and exercise of the historical, mythical and cultural aspects of the novel *The Tree Bride*.

Keywords: immigrant, identity crisis, culture, myth, diaspora, ethnicity

Bharati Mukherjee, born in India, married to a Canadian and settled in America, is a significant author dealing with immigrant identity, identity crisis, cultural clash, diasporic issues and ethnicity. Bharati Mukherjee left India for the United States in 1961, where she experienced and observed the troubles of immigrants. After a “lunch-break wedding” when she went to Canada—the home country of her husband Clark Blaise—she felt racial discrimination that had an abysmal impact on her mind and later found its way in her creative writings.

It was quite natural for the thin-skinned Bharati Mukherjee to feel at home in the States because in Canada, she had grappled with racial discrimination at its highest level and was poorly treated in the name of a “dark-skinned Eurasion” (Nagendra 64) creature. America— an immigrant country of immigrants, a world

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(at a level) free from cultural collisions, dilemmas and separation proved to be a sheet anchor for her which accepted her as its own child at that time when she was in hot water.

America is an El Dorado for most Indians and Bharati Mukherjee did not lag behind in giving a concrete shape to her will of residing in America. Teeming with aliens, the United States is a place where there is a seething mass of Indians. The characters of her novels also culled from this en masse, and some of them are close to autobiographical projections of her own personality.

Bharati Mukherjee does not map India as her home in her mind. She writes about India, she visits India, she sells her books in India, but she does not accept India as her own. I am an American, not an Asian-American. My rejection of hyphenation has been called race treachery, but it is really a demand that America deliver the promises of its dream to all its citizens equally.

(Mukherjee “American Dreamer”)

Bharati Mukherjee has defined the words “exile” and “immigrant” differently. “An exile, she explains, is tied to the home country whereas an immigrant looks at the world around oneself. She says she felt herself an exile in Canada but feels

immigrant in the United States.” (Parmeswaran 39).

The migrated people usually have a mental tug-of-war between the home and the host country. At home, they have a royal feeling. Their ears are attuned to familiar audible words and even to the inaudible ones through lips movements. Faces and colour have a great resemblance to them and their ancestors and even to their gods but not the other way round in the host country. There (in the host country) they feel like a subject. They understand the cacophonous words in a haphazard way. Very few faces seem to be their own and this is because they have all lost the inherited attributes of their homeland life.

The characters of Bharati Mukherjee, like herself, always assimilate the cultures where they go to live. They suppress their own cultures in the unconscious world and remain hibernated until they return to their own place of birth. Bharati Mukherjee even if she supposes herself as an American, there is an abundance of Indian history, culture, myth, Puranic tales, rituals, customs and traditions in her writings.

The Tree Bride (2004) is a sequel to her best-selling novel Desirable Daughters (2002). It deals with various complicated themes intermingled and intertwined with one another artistically. The themes of root

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search, terrorism, interracial relationship, disappointing marriage relationship, premarital relationship are finely and exquisitely woven in the novel. The very name of the novel *The Tree Bride* is associated with Indian culture and mythology. The marriage of Tara Lata takes place at the age of five. She is married to a tree—a proxy-husband because the groom dies on the way to the marriage ceremony. In order to prevent being harmed and destroyed with the stigma of widowhood, the young girl is wedded to a tree following the mythological rituals. “Prayer is being offered to the god for getting magnanimous and magnificent husband and children who spread the renown far and wide. But the barge of the thirteen-year groom Satindranath Lahiri, the fifth son of Surendranath Lahiri, reveals that he is no more due to snakebite; however his father increases his demand for dowry.” (Gupta, A. K. *Literary Perspectives*, 80). Indian culture has various instances of dowry—the gifting of ease making life utensils and jewellery that further take a giant form of a brutal dowry system that gobble up innumerable lives of young wives. “Refusing to be cowed into submission, Jai Krishna took his daughter into deep forest and married her to a tree, and thus Tara became known as Tree Bride.” (Agarwal, *World Literature Today*, 86-87).

Tara, the narrator of the novel, desires to seek and search the root of Tara

Lata—the tree bride in the Indian village named Mishtigunj. The village has its own story behind its establishment. John Mist, an orphan, travels from England to India and makes Calcutta as his home and learns Bengali language. He was the founder of the village Mishtigunj. The name of the village was on his name Mist. Mukherjee says, “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). He is not only the founder of the village, but also he has started to manage all the fundamental facilities for the villagers. He arranges doctors, teachers and other professionals of Hindu and Islam religions to disseminate the message of communal rapport and harmony. The Christians are not allowed to reside in the village. In an article “Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Tree Bride: Assimilation of the West in the East*”, Ambika Sharma and Manu Gupta remark about John Mist as thus: “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. (Sharma, 20).

The characters of Bharati Mukherjee are not of parochial views; they have cosmopolitan perspectives. They travel a lot and meet various people from different nations. They do not get affected by nostalgic feelings and homesickness.

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Furthermore, they commence their life in accordance with a new ambience of the recently landed country. They start making themselves accustomed to the surroundings in which they are going to shape their career. According to Ambika Sharma and Dr. Tanu Gupta “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.” (21).

The Tree Bride has played an important role as a freedom fighter. She disseminates the messages of Gandhi Ji with utter enthusiasm and dedication. People call her “our virgin mother”. She advocates flaming the torch of freedom in the heart as thus, “Your name will be praised.” Echoing Gandhi, she said: “No boy is too young, no sudra too poor, no woman too weak, to fight for the freedom of India.” (61) A hajji speaks about the *Tree Bride*, “We know the Hindu rituals. She was an inspiration to all of us. I was honored to serve and protect her. I was in the British prison with her.” (61).

Like a truly traditional and cultural Indian, the narrator Tara nurses her husband after being severely wounded in a bombing

attack. Bish is in need of everyday therapy; she performs her duty consistently. Bish is a helpless bed-ridden patient who needs every minute of care. Bharati Mukherjee writes, “The selfless Hindu wife dedicates herself to her husband’s welfare. Even a divorced one. Even in America.” (280).

The novel also speaks about the Varanasi, the holiness of the river Ganga and spiritual guidance. The whole family of Tara visits Varanasi and her father start advocating the importance of rituals of Indian culture to cure the various diseases of human beings. He also exemplifies and substantiates his statement. They all are gathered in Varanasi to perform the cremation ceremony of the *Tree Bride*. Mukherjee says, “In Varanasi, the Ganga River flows from south to north or, as Father explains to Rabi and me, it flows away from the Domain of Death towards the Realm of Rebirth.” (287).

For Bish, it is incredible to understand the curing of disease by chanting Sanskrit Shlokas. He is not able to perceive Father’s story of getting relieved of hypertension by reciting Sanskrit chants. “Two full hours twice a day,” my father advises my husband. “Morning and evening. Best therapy I know. And I tell you. I have tried many.” (289).

They all reach Manikarnika Ghat to cremate the raffia figure of the *Tree Bride*

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because they have no real corpse of the same. Before reaching the ghat, they all pass through various beggars, guides, pandas, and sadhus. Priests try to allure them for providing better ceremony facilities in less expenditure. They provide a verbal menu of different sorts of ritual ceremonies at different rates. On the way to the ghat, a guide, graduate from BHU, narrates the mythological story of discharging the duty of King Harishchand and his kindness as a king, his duty as a funeral worker and his restoration after a severe ordeal by a sage. The novel ends with the funeral ceremony of the tree bride with Hindu custom. Rabi, the only living blood relative, kindles the pyre of the Tree Bride and the whispered voice is heard all around "Ram! Ram!"

Thus, we get ascertained that Bharati Mukherjee utilizes Indian history, myth and culture beautifully and attractively in her novel *The Tree Bride*. She, tactically with excellent creative skills, combines history and mythology to create a proficient fictional story. It is an uphill task to differentiate history with fictional elements from the world she brings into existence. It might be one of the reasons to allure Indian readers, though she, through her statements, wants to get rid of the leech-like adhering identity of being an India born. She used to visit India to adjoin her relatives, but she had always been in quest of new themes for her novel and stories.

She seemed to be interested more in commercial amplification than establishing an honest relationship with her kiths and kinsun like other Indians.

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