CHAPTER - 8

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Bharati Mukherjee has long been recognized not only of her elegant evocative prose but also for her characters. Her characters are influenced by ancient customs and traditions but also very much fixed in modern times. Tara Chatterjee, the narrator of the story is a modern literary archetype, a twenty first century pioneer routed in today’s America of internet connections and popular culture and rooted in the India of her ancestry, with its ghosts, visions and rituals that inform her future as much as they have shaped her past.

Tara Chatterjee, the central character of Bharati Mukherjee’s The Tree Bride, tells about the emotional dislocation and loss she has suffered by emigrating from India to the United States, but, at the same time, does not see absorption into North American culture and community as a solution. Even though she knows that she can’t go home again, the west is just not quite good enough.

Tara Chatterjee, a Brahmin, very beautiful and intelligent, lived a good life in Calcutta. Unlike those forced to flee their homeland due to persecution or disaster, she and her husband, Bish, choose freely to move to
California, with a purpose of attending Stanford University. Immigration for self-betterment is psychologically very tricky always. Unless life becomes demonstrably better in the alien home and the world left behind deteriorates measurably, these immigrants live with perpetual doubt and ambivalence. Unfortunately, life often has a way of interwining benefits and deficits, so inextricably that it becomes difficult to conclude that one place is better than the other. Tara Chatterjee’s tale is the story both of her divided and ambivalent state as a semi-Americanized, semi-nostalgic Indian and of her way coping with that state by putting her dilemma into words.

The author’s aim presumably is to show the effect that history can have individuals, to show the patterns of love and betrayal and redemptions that are repeated from generation to generation. The point Ms. Mukherjee wants to make reverses the points she has made in her earlier novels. This time she suggests that the freedom to begin a new life, offered by America, will always be circumscribed by familial imperatives, by religious and cultural tropes and by more, primeval subterranean forces that her characters like to think of as fate. Plot has never been one of Ms. Mukherjee’s stronger gifts and the story line of this novel is particularly preposterous. It begins with, Tara and Bish standing on the porch of their house in upper height on a warm, November, California night, praying that they never meet Abbas.
Sattar Hai again. Mean time their fifteen old son Rabi came running and told them that he had heard some voices. And that’s all Tara could remember, until she found herself in the back-yard under a shower of glowing splinters and balls of flaming tar that had been her home. Her hair was singed off, her face and arms pitted by embers. Poor Bish lay beside her, his cotton pajamas burned into his skin and his feet transformed into blackened blocks from having carried her over the coals and flames that had been the back stairs and the lower deck. Rabi, the first one down, had leaped over the deck and railing. He was unhurt, but he was moaning and shivering in the heat. They came to know that their lives will not be safe until Abbas Sattar Hai was apprehended.

The novel opens with the fire-bombing of Tara’s house in San Francisco by a mysterious man named Abbas Sattar Hai, who may be a member of the Mafia in India, or who may have more complicated links to Tara’s family back in India. Tara’s ex husband Bish - the former Silicon Valley genius – is horribly injured by the bombing and the pregnant Tara determines to nurse him back to health.

Tara, being pregnant, is in search of a gynecologist and finally she traces one, a woman named Victoria Khanna. The name Khanna interests as it is very Indian since the names give away everything about indigenous
people, Bharathi Mukherjee brings out the Indianness the very root of our identity. While talking about identity, Bharati Mukherjee acknowledges:

I was still an Indian-graduate-student-wife. Wife of Bish-Chatterjee was my full identity. If I had plans for the future, they would be to follow my husband wherever he went, probably back to India. Shobana wherever she was (and in my mind, she’s been on that coffee break for the past dozen years), was constructing a different immigrant life. I suffered a twinge of envy for her. I wondered if “wife” was the only role permitted to me, if there was a way of being in this country with my own identity [1].

The very first time when she went back to India on her own, it wasn’t just to see her relatives. She took Rabi her son with her in her own American style searching roots, into the East Bengal, which is now in Bangladesh. Her friends and her sisters thought she had gone crazy, or very American. In particular she wanted to see a place called Mishtigunj that everyone in the family had talked about, but no one had visited in sixty years.

Until she had seen Mishtigunj, she thought she was a total Calcuttan. But when she walked through the alleys of the old town, she felt she knew

the streets. Nothing really surprised her as it conformed to a mental image that she was carrying since her childhood, from the stories she had been raised on. In this context she compares her family’s Calcutta’s identity was as compared with Rabi’s in California.

Being pregnant at the age of thirty-six, she suspects that the pregnancy is going to be tangled up with history. She had been writing a book about her sisters, Padma and Parvati and their growing up in Calcutta, and then started on something new and strange. It was about a distant relative who they called the Tree Bride, her great-great-aunt.

Surprisingly in one of her visits to her gynecologist Victoria Khanna, she comes to know that Virgil Treadwell was Mrs. Khanna’s grand father. Virgil Ernest Reginald Treadwell was in the Indian civil service. He was a district commissioner in Bengal from 1930 up through independence. Mrs. Khanna also reveals that she had a box, a white banker’s box, which was lying with her from many years. The box belonged to her grand father Virtie a nickname for Virgil Treadwell, when they opened the box, all identifiable odors of India roar from that box. The box brimmed with old ledgers, silk tied letters, and loose papers, which were kept under saris. Mrs. Khanna was very happy to hand over these letters to Tara as she was researching her Indian root:
These papers from my grandfather have been traveling for nearly a century, across half the world, and they've settled on me like a forty-year pregnancy. If you don't take them away today, I swear I'll burn them. I have a feeling that you might be the perfect person for them, Mrs. Chatterjee.

"Tara Please".

They are a history of a place you know very well, I think. They'll be like a RAM upgrade [2].

*The Tree Bride* had been little more than her grandmother's and mother's bedtime fable. When she realized that Tara Lata had been an actual little girl who grew up surrounded by other little girl servants and had taught herself to read Bengali, English, and Persian, it really surprised her. The fact that she then taught the languages to the girls and boys of the village made her an Annie Sullivan, and that she had fought against the colonial authorities on the side of the Indian nationalists, a Joan of Arc. Tara thinks that it was her dharma, her duty, to set *Tree Bride*'s story down.

The story dates back to a place called Mishtigunj. Victoria Treadwells grandfather must have known the Tree Bride. All stories of Mishtigunj touch, eventually, on Tara Lata Gangooly. She was like the Ganges, draining all tributaries. Tara Latha Gangooly was named Tree Bride because when

[2] Ibid., p.26
her groom died on the day of her intended marriage ceremony, disaster was averted by marrying her to a tree and burying her substantial dowry at its base. Tree Bride was Tara’s mother’s collateral great aunt, meaning that she was one of many dozen children from at least ten wives kept by the ninth-great-grandfather, Jai Krishna Gangooly. Not until the ninth wife did he get the son he acknowledged. But Tara Lata, the Tree Bride was his third born daughter from his first wife, born during his early years as a nationalist attorney. Tree Bride was of the same age that of Vertie Treadwell and he was born in 1874. When Vertie was a sailor-suited preschooler; Tara Lata was waiting to get married. Her husband was twelve year old from a nearby village. On his way to the ceremony he was bitten by a cobra and died. This incident was an impediment to marriage, perhaps, but it did not affect her auspicious horoscope. The marriage rights had to be performed, because in India marriage is bigger than the participants of the ceremony. And so, rather to die a sinister, 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 proxy-husband a straight, tall Sundari tree. Other girls’ similar fates were married to rocks or crocodiles.

Tara Lata Gangooly was freed from family obligations, she spent the next years inside her father’s compound learning to read and write Bengali.
and English, then teaching and finally organizing and protesting. Every manner of protester and activist came to visit her. Mahatma Gandhi, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, American friends of India, Sikh separatists from California, Vegetarians and theosophists, Sufis and free thinkers, authors and photographers among these Vertie Treadwell also visited. “It would give me great pleasure if you addressed me as Vertie. And if I call you Tara Lata” [3]. Eventually Vertie was in love with the Tree Bride. Bharati Mukherjee as she sets the story in the colonial era, she eventually puts forward the British rule in India upholding Indian customs and tradition.

It has taken her twenty years to realize that Muslims had nothing to do with our “relocation”. It was the British, always the British. And it wasn’t the 1947 Partition. It started in 1833. It was easy for an English-educated, middle-class Indian (or Pakistani or Bangladeshi) to fall in line with colonial prejudice. Thirty thousand British bureaucrats and “factors” were able to rule ten thousand times more Indians by dividing Muslims from Hindus, Persian Zoroastrians from Muslims, Sikhs from Hindus, and nearly everyone, including Hindus, from castes like lazy Brahmins and money-grubbing banias. Sikhs and Muslims were declared “martial races” and rewarded appropriately with army and police positions. Muslims and

[3] Ibid., p.27
Jews and Anglo-Indians were traditional, Western-style monotheists in the way that Hindus were not seen to be, and were rewarded appropriately. Parsis were fairer-skinned, leaving dark-skinned Hindus to be treated with contempt and labeled potbellied vegetarians and sensualists, deceitful and cowardly. But behind gymkhana doors, all of the people, martial races or not, fair-skinned or dark, were referred to as niggers.

Since Calcutta was the headquarters of the East India Company and seat of Empire, Bengal had the longest exposure, among Indians, to the British and to the English language. Bengali Brahmins in particular were targets of British ridicule, since their priestly functions demanded certain degree of literacy. Brahmins were naturally drawn to education. It was our caste dharma to test ourselves spiritually and intellectually, which put us in direct competition with the British. In any discussion about the future of India, Bengali Brahmins were seen as the potential winners. Keep the Bengalis in their place, especially their disputatious Brahmins, ridicule their pretensions, defame their character, mock their religion, and the Empire will rule forever.

It was the wealth of India that underwrote the industrial and commercial prosperity of England. Britain started its India trade by purchasing Indian textiles. A hundred years later, to keep English mills
operating, Indian textiles were banned, Indian weavers were killed, and India was forced to buy inferior British cottons. In the nineteenth century, twenty-five million Indians were allowed to starve because India’s “excess” harvests were shipped to England. Commodity brokers were encouraged to hoard and speculate. The “invisible hand” of the market became the supreme adjunct of imperial authority. Intervention by government, in the form of emergency relief, would merely sap the self-respect of the Indian peasant and make him even less capable of feeding himself in the future. Undue generosity would send all the wrong messages. Recurrent starvation was blamed on Indian laziness, on their beastly, fatalistic religion, their money-lending banias and their corrupt brahmins, and it served as the ultimate colonial sanction.

It all began in 1833: the seeds of the Brahmo-Arya split, the active encouragement of English, and the creation of a native, English-speaking intellectual aristocracy. It is the year that created her hybrid family of orthodox Hindu, Bengali-speaking, cricket-loving, Shakespeare-acting, Gilbert and Sullivan-singing, adaptable-anywhere brahmins. That was the year the brilliant young parliamentary orator, Thomas Babington Macauly, only thirty-three at the time, delivered his famous “Minute on Educations”. When we say “famous” but of course it was known only to scholars of India,
even if it was part of the cultural baggage of every "Westernized" Indian with an English-language education. Bengalis were its target, and potential beneficiaries. Macaulay set out to define a range of British attitudes towards India that began with liberal, enlightened self-interest, and ended in sheer contempt.

The history of the British in India is a story of adventure. The British were the most reliable source of knowledge about ourselves, because they had lifted us from the deep slumber of decadence, they had injected us with the spirit of inquiry and reverence for art and culture.

The mood of British Raj during 1833 had figured in Tara Lata's story. Vertie Treadwell a well-trained colonial administrator had a vague knowledge of Thomas Balington Macaulay. The book ends of Macaulay's arguments uplift the natives to make them better subjects, uplift India to make it more profitable, ridicule India for its superstitious ways which had applied nearly to all, except John Mist and the Tree Bride. John Mist was an English orphan who, after a series of harrowing adventures at sea, ended up in India, where he murdered two men, spent 38 years on the run, passed as an Indian and eventually founded a utopian village called Mishtigunj from which all Christians were barred. Mistigunj was named after John Mist; confronted with the choice between English language, British law to that of
Sanskrit and the Shastras, Jai Krishna Gangooly hung up his lawyers wig and robes, abandoning English altogether. left Dhaka and drifted down to Mistigunj on a river boat.

You perhaps have heard the story of my marriage when I was five years old. Yes, it was to a tree, for which I am grateful. My father was a visionary and marriage saved me from a life of widowhood. You probably have heard that I never left Mist Mahal until the night your Sergeant Mackenize came calling, but that is not true [4].

When Tara Latha Gangooly was a married woman of six years, the British marched into Maishtigunj and took immediate possession of the compound. On that night, her father and she, and Mr. Mist and Mr. Hai, were seated on a mat. They were drinking tea. Musicians had been called in. It was to be a regular mela for the entire town. But the soldiers arrived with their rifles out and bayonets drawn and proceeded to tie up Mr. Mist and Mr. Hai, the two most noble gentlemen she had ever known, and march them out the gates onto a waiting bullock cart. They were thrown into the cart like bundles of trash. The guests had just started to arrive. Her father had been a famous pleader in Dhaka, so he was not to be silenced.

He immediately began an oration outside the collector’s bungalow where the poor men had been thrown onto the ground and dragged into their cells. A very young British officer slapped her father across the face and told him he would be shot on the spot for leading an insurrection should he open his mouth for another word. He was a very young, very junior soldier, with pink cheeks and bright blue eyes.

A week later she was witness to the twin hangings of Mr. Hai and Mr. Mist. She was six years and five months old and stood with her father eight hours at the base of the gallows. She could still hear him crying out. Chalo. Kajey hat lagao. And then her father started the chant Ram, Ram, Ram and it was picked up by the entire village, even the Muslim brothers. She could hear that louder and clearer than any words of Mr. Gandhi or Nehru or even of Sergeant Mackenzie during his attempted interrogation. Every one worshipped John Mist. He was father as well as mother to all the people of the village. After his death, the people named the village after his name.

Though British notion towards Indian people was absurd, as Miss Gangooly was referred to, as God and they could not tolerate the people who were prone to excessive form of idolatry. A God was needed for everyone and everything. Inspite of all these, the Bengali people were exceedingly
supportive of British rule. The average Bengali was prepared to wait
hundred years if it was necessary for a peaceful transfer of power.

In the years following her marriage, Tara, Lata Gangooly took a tree
as characteristic of herself. She was rooted to her father’s house. She was
silent as a tree. The grave little girl became a beautiful young lady. She
communed with Uvaria trees, with their dense foliage, which were imported
from Orissa to shade the mansion for the next sixty years. She was bold and
courageous. Nothing distorted her from the dream of an independent India.
All that she dreamed as a little girl was a Hindus and Musalmans living
harmoniously in a free and prosperous India. Like her father’s friend John
Mist, Mist Jethu, paternal older Uncle John as she called him and with
Sameena, the cook’s daughter. Britain would leave behind its works, its
investments and infrastructure very small compensation for the fortunes it
had extracted. She also dreamt that she would be in the first generation of
liberated Indians. Her father promising her that she would see India taking
its deserved place among the great nations of the world and a glorious future
for her.

What is European history, compared to India? He would ask.
At most, four hundred years of derivative science and tedious
paintings paid for by imperial plunder. Indian science in the
Vedic period had already invented airplanes, telephones,
radios, and chariots faster than the newest cars. Hindu science had solved every known question of the universe while Europeans still lived in caves. What are China and Japan but upstarts? Malaya and Siam and the Dutch East Indies, Burma and Ceylon, but offshoots of the greater Hindutva? When India emerges in its full glory, the confused Buddhists and Muslims of once-Hindu lands will shed their false identities and cling to their Mother India [5].

Like Queen Victoria, Tara Lata was prodigally fertile, but as the missionaries taught, virginity had never precluded motherhood. Her father had brought shoots from the forest and planted them. They were her children, which took roots. They stood in a regimental row forming a wall within the back of the compound, shielding the main house from a view of the river. Tara Lata was fond of sitting on a bench in her arboretum and she called it as sacred forest and she was fond of reading and talking with the trees.

As little girl, Tara, had played with Sameena, the cook's daughter was now her servant. Tara's father with his newfound orthodoxy had banished Sameena's father from the brahmin's kitchen. Tara Lata had taught her to

[5] Ibid., p.253-254
read and write the oppressor’s tongue as well as their own. Sameena then
was aware of the evil British Raj and in this way very few little girls in India
had ever been so well prepared to face the future.

Her life changed when she was fifty-four years old and for the first
time even discovered human love. Because she was a virtuous married
woman; or widow, no man in Misthtigunj had dared to treat her as or even
consider her as a possible object of desire. Everyone respected her and she
was always approached with reverence. She was the Virgin recluse of Mist
Mahal, teacher of literacy, distributor of grains and fought for Indian
freedom and communal harmony. Her house was open to all. She had many
visitors from abroad also. She was familiarly called as Tara-Ma, who
dwelled on a higher spiritual plane. She had also donated her gold to
Gandhi’s salt march, with this reverence turned to veneration. Years later in
the eyes of many, she had become a goddess, frayed to by unmarried woman
needing husbands and by wives seeking sons.

In 1880, when she was six years old, her childhood friends and chief
house servant, Sameena, was married to Shafiq Mohammed Hai, a student in
the local school who was destined, according to his father, Rafeeq Hai, for a
career in medicine in Dhaka or Calcutta. When this boy was nine, his father
Rafeeq Hai was hanged and denied proper burial. Shafeeq Hai and Sameena
and the crowd led by Jai Krishna had clamored with the authorities to release the bodies, but Shafiq had been struck across the face by a British truncheon. Somehow, with a lot of difficulties Shafiq made it through secondary school and gained admission to the medical faculty in Dhaka, while Sameena stayed back in Mist Mahal, serving the needs of Tara Lata.

He returned as a doctor seven years later, becoming Tara Lata’s personal physician. By this time, he and Sameena were living as husband and wife, and many pregnancies terminated in failure. When she was nearly forty, she gave birth to a son, who they called Gul Mohammed. In gratitude, Shafiq went off to Mecca and became Hajji. In 1932, he completed his Persian translation of the Mist-nama, he was honoured with the title “Chowdhury” by the newly installed district commissioner Virgil Treadwell.

Apart from the reader coming to know the connection between Sameena and the Hai’s, the story continued further. Sameena’s father, the cook Abdulhaq, after having been fired by newly orthodox Hindu Jai Krishna for being too unclean to cook or serve his food, was installed as gatekeeper, or chowkidar.

By this time, Tara Lata had an enemy, some one who had fed her name to the British authorities in Calcutta. Jai Krishna, in his quest for spiritual purity, had fired Abdulhaq and the fact that Sameena, a cook turned
chowkidar’s daughter, would be able to marry the son of the towns leading Muslim at that time was improbable. In Muslim majority area there were many more suitable bride candidates than little Sameena. Abdulhaq was not able to afford the dowry expected by an educated doctor from a well to do family. He had promised a delayed dowry. Dowry was in the form of a house, which they never owned.

Sameena and her husband, Tara Lata’s personal physician, plotted to take possession of Mist Mahal. The political movement of Tara Lata in the war years of famine and the Indian National Army and the pending Japanese invasion and the increasingly desperate British hold on its empire emboldened nearly every component of Bengali society to stake its claim on an uncertain future. Sameena and her husband’s future was definitely uncertain, they inform the police about Tara Lata’s involvement in the freedom movement.

In 1943 Tara Lata was arrested and while in police custody, she died. Her death was a mystery to people of MishtiGunj. The police said to people that Tara Lata had died in jail of a heart attack and the district commissioner had said that it was a suicide by fasting. District Commissioner also ordered that her body would be cremated by the police, because they were afraid that nationalist minded villagers, especially those few members of the Congress
party whom he hadn’t yet found a way to jail would turn her funeral procession into an anti-Raj, pro-netaji Subhas Bose protest rally. Police wanted Tree Bride to be dead, and her body to be vanished.

The British Raj was very cruel and they had hanged Tara Ma in the jail cell. They tossed her body over the prison wall into the sewage ditch. Her body was submerged in filth; vultures ripped chunks off with their beaks. Starving dogs chewed her bones.

After her death, her house was passed to Begum Sameena chowdhury, widow of the late Dr. Hajji Shafiq Mohammed Chowdhury. She was the mother of the Gul Mohammed Chowdhury. Sameena’s great-grandson was Abbas Sattar Hai.

Tara Chatterjee had met Abbas Sattar Hai, the main culprit who had blasted her house in San Francisco. Reason behind the blast was to eliminate all siblings of Tara Lata Gangooly because the house the Mist Mahal was occupied by the ninety seven year old widow, Sameena Chowdhury, and the families of her son and grandson, their wives and children and assorted other relatives. Although no will or bill of sale had ever been presented, it was thought that the original owners, the Gangooolys would have favoured the present outcome effectively, until challenged, the house belongs to the Hai Chowdhurys.
The house had played a major role in the murder of Dr. Victoria Khanna, and Tara Chaterjee's would be assassin and the crippler of her husband. The indiscriminate killer in India and America was born and possibly brought up in the Mist Mahal, the family house of Tara Chatterjee. The house itself might have killed John Mist, Rafeeq Hai and eventually, the Tree Bride. The magic of Mishtigunj is black indeed.

Tara Chatterjee feels that the Tree Bride often haunts her in the rented house on Beulah Street; she also feels her presence and hears her urgent whispers:

*I am trapped in your world of Mortals, she pleads. Perform the rites. Set me free, Tara. I have waited half a century to be liberated. Your son is there, he can perform my rites. Please! He can send me on my way to the Abode of Ancestors. I am ready for the journey*[6].

It wasn’t vengeance that she seeked nor wasn’t even justice. All that Tree Bride prayed was her soul’s release. Bish and Tara decide to give Tree Bride her last right. They just wanted to free the tormented spirit of Tree Bride. First they thought of doing the ceremony in San Francisco itself. But it was not just the passing of a loved one on alien soil. Bish and Tara were aliens there. Definitely the Tree Bride would not permit burial outside of

*[6] Ibid., p.279-281.*
India because they were trying to bury a phase of history itself. They decide to go to Kashi for the cremation because in Kashi, death would not have signaled the end of life, but the souls return to the Abode of Ancestors, in realms invisible to mortals, to be judged and returned in time to a new existence. The Ganga River in Varanasi flows from south to north, away from the Domain of Death toward the realm of rebirth.

Only condition that Bish puts to Tara Chatterjee is that he would fly to Kashi only as a married man, as he remembers a story told by his great-grandfather about god Shiva showing Kashi to his bride, Parvathi, Kashi, the luminous city, where death holds no terror and no finality. Bharati reinforces the myth into the present.

Bish and Tara get married in a fifteen minute ceremony in a lawyer's office above a bar on Haight Street exactly seven days and twenty one minutes before Victoria Kalli, their daughter was born.

In Kashi, as there was no corpse of the Tree Bride, they arranged for the raffia figure for the cremation. Wood bearers had erected the pyre. The logs and kindlings were drenched with oils and ghee. Prayers were chanted, the raffia body of the Tree Bride was placed on the pyre, ghee drizzled on it and all the prelighting rites were completed. Then there came the question of who would touch flaming torch to skull? Rabi was proud to do it, as he was
the only living male blood relative present, the Tree Bride being a mother’s side connection. The raffia sizzles as more ghee is added and in the hiss of the burning raffia and wood Tara Chatterjee hears a whispered exclamation ‘Ram! Ram!’.

The novel strains to draw tangential connections between Tara and an assortment of historical figures she never knew. There are long, stifled descriptions of life in India under the Raj, and even longer, more stifled descriptions of the imperial sins committed by the British.