

**The Myths, the Legends, the folding and the unfolding of Tara's personality and psyche
in *Desirable Daughters* by Bharati Mukherjee**

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Every human society possesses a mythology which is inherited, transmitted and diversified by literature. (Northrop Frye)

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee had inclinations for the myths, the mythologies and for the mythical figures in mostly all her novels but we will find the large number of such images occurs and re-occurs at various places in the novel *Desirable Daughters*. She had mentioned the names of Goddess Mansha, worshipped throughout rural Bengal, the goddess who causes or prevents snakebites, the Hindu deity who caused death to Tara Lata's boy husband –to- be in the novel. We also find the name of Goddess Shitala, the goddess associated with the smallpox and her name is embedded in Hindu myths and folktales. And most importantly the snake or the serpent – which is also worshipped by the people of Hindu religion and she had mentioned the story of snake biting in this novel as a curse to the five year old girl, Tara Lata who was about to be married and unfortunately she becomes a widow before marriage. Certainly, Bharati Mukherjee had a clear vision of all the existing myths in the Indian culture and in the present novel we find the culmination of those beliefs and visions.

Keywords: Myths, Spirituality, Re-discovery, Astrology, Symbols

Bharati Mukherjee showed us the real picture of the typical Bengali culture and rural set up prevalent in the area of Mishtigonj in Bengal before Independence. Additionally, she wrote about the green and the dark forest area in which the marriage of Tara Lata takes place. In the dark forest Tara Lata's wedding ceremony was arranged to a tree and now the Tree is her bridegroom. A tree becomes a God like figure from Shoondar Bon who has come down to earth to save the little Tara from a life time disgrace and misery. Tara Lata who is shown

whispering the “Tush Tushi Brata,” a hymn to the sacredness of marriage, a petition for a kind and generous marriage. (*Desirable Daughters* 4) So, Tara Lata becomes the Tree- Bride. In the present novel the narrator Tara has been shown to dwell into the past life of her great grand aunt as she is trying to recreate her own consciousness which she has lost in California after her separation from Bish.

As the novel progresses we find that Mukherjee had connected many events, myths, rituals and religion so well that these become the very core of the novel till the last page. Bharati Mukherjee had taken directly from Hindu myths with religious and spiritual undertones. Bharati Mukherjee had certainly tried to recreate all the childhood tales she had heard or read about Indian myths and mythologies in her life. Through these aspects she had weaved various patterns in the life and circumstances of the narrator Tara Chatterjee and her life in India and in America.

As, Mukherjee had mentioned Goddess Tara, and as we are familiar too with the name of the deity which means a Star in Sanskrit, who brings forth life and is embodiment of Wisdom, and the Great Protectress. Tara in other words in the Buddhist Tradition is a female Buddha, an enlightened one who has attained the highest wisdom, capability and compassion. The ancient Tara may have many virtues to share with the women of the twentieth and twenty first century. Since, she personifies feminine strengths and sustenance. Furthermore, Goddess Tara is also an archetype of every woman's consciousness and inner wisdom. She helps women to transform and remain centred at the same time. I feel that the myth of Goddess Tara or Mansha remind us of our oneness with all the creation and shows the significance of the protecting or nurturing element present in the universe. Tara Chatterjee, the heroine of the novel has certain shades in her personality given by the novelist which clearly shows relevance and spiritual undertones which plays a vital role in *Desirable Daughters*.

As the novel revolves around the character of Tara Chatterjee and her early life in India before her marriage and in later part her frustrating married life with her ever busy husband who could provide her wealth but not marital peace and which finally leads to divorce. Though Tara suffers mental agony and series of obstacles in her life after her separation she learnt to endure the testing moments. True to her name, Tara tried to protect her family by dwelling deep into the roots of her family history when she encounters the fake Chris Dey who called her Tara Maasi. Bharati Mukherjee had tried to give all the virtues to her heroine so that she would control the crisis or any mishappening in her entire family.

Tara Chatterjee saves her sister Padma's family from the intruder Chris who threatened their family lives. Tara tried to discover the truth but later she realizes that Chris was a fake and had associations with goons like Abbas Sattai Hai. In discovering the reality of Chris Dey Tara comes across many facts about her sister Padma which she never knew. She visited Padma's house and realized that her sister was leading a superficial life in New Jersey.

In order to find the reality of Chris Dey and his connection with Padma , Tara even sacrifices his relationship with Andy, the Buddhist with whom Tara was in romantic relationship. Bharati Mukherjee had given us a detailed picture of even Andy, his Buddhist leanings and not to mention his exotic nature. Tara fell in love with him because he made her feel fun in love. Nobody had treated Tara like that till then. Tara defines Andy's personality in a way which makes us feel his exotic nature, his spiritual temperament and his power to detach himself from the feelings which he had for Tara. For Tara, Andy and his spiritual leanings were beyond her imagination and understanding then. She felt a deep and higher level of intelligence Andy had for Zen Buddhism.

Furthermore, Tara compares Hinduism with Buddhism and the numerous myths which are present in the Hindu mythology and she mocks also to some extent at the myth of snake biting if some ritual is missed during the wedding. Here she refers to the unfortunate marriage ceremony of Tara Lata, the Tree Bride. One thing which strikes us very effectively is the level of understanding of different religions and the deep knowledge Mukherjee had of the myths and culture of various religions is unsurpassable.

Additionally, Tara describes the crux of Buddhist religion through Andy that suffering is as normal as the falling of leaves or the wilting of flowers. At many places in the novel while narrating the events we find countless numbers of such references which makes us feel that the present novel has so many philosophical, spiritual comparisons and notions in which we find a place like India where Goddesses are worshipped and saviours of mankind existed while on the other hand she threw a light on the Buddhist culture and on the simplified version of the Buddhist worshipping.

As a reader of the twentieth century we know to connect the present and the past and Mukherjee had tried to make her readers realize this through her zig-zag narration. As the novel progresses Andy leaves Tara for going against him as he told her not to indulge in the police investigation regarding Chris Dey. Here, we find the undertones of the Buddhist religion which signifies the renunciation and the detachment. As Andy, the carpenter- lover leaves Tara forever and as a result he made her strong also to accept the challenges and the uncertainties which we find later in the novel when Tara enters the phase of the spiritual quest and she reunites with her husband but unfortunately the picture would be different for the Chatterjee family.

In the later part of the novel, we find Tara's parents had shifted to Rishikesh , a place known for spirituality and ashrams. Tara visits her parents and she finds that they had been ill for very long. Over the telephone she could never understand their illness. Now she felt the gap of so many years since she had not met them. Tara has also given us the details of the ethnic culture of Paharis or hill people in Rishikesh where her parents lived. She likes the Garhwali maid and her way of taking care of her parents. She talks of the devotion which the

maid and her parents had for her parents. Through Tara, Mukherjee has shown the transformation in the lives of her parents who sacrificed comforts of high class business people of Calcutta to the ordinary living middle class family type of people living in the hilly area of Uttarakhand in Rishikesh. And we know that in the search of spirituality Tara parents had left their luxurious life style and home for Rishikesh. As a reader we can sense that Tara too had taken inspiration from her parents though in a different way. Tara repeatedly mentioned the pilgrims' buses and the holy temples of Rishikesh.

Through the narrator or Tara we get to know the psychology of Bharati Mukherjee and her knowledge and understanding of each and every aspect of Hindu religion. Mukherjee had given us a complete picture of a cultured Bengali household and the importance of faith in God and discipline in it. The presence of the Thakur Ghar or the God's room in Tara's house in Rishikesh, the books by or about the Hindu Saints like Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekanada, Yogananda, Anandmayi Ma etc shows us the hold of Bharati Mukherjee in Indian philosophy.

Furthermore, as the novel proceeds we find Tara discussing with her father and son Rabindra about the higher goals which one should have in life and all the religions in the world show us the right path to achieve the salvation. The religion only teaches us the path of salvation. It is noticeable that Tara had not come to India just for the sake of her parents but for achieving the high level of mental salvation and to re-connect with her roots in India and seeing her parent's lives in Rishikesh she felt more elevated in thoughts than ever she could in her life.

One thing we find very interesting in the end of the novel especially when Tara is found discussing about the higher goals in life with his father about the astrology and the birth-chart or horoscope. Mukherjee had included each and every aspect of Indian culture and the ancient practices prevalent in the Indian society. The Vedic Astrology is based on the belief that the stars and the planets have a powerful influence on individuals' life. As claimed by Hindu teachings, life is meant for spiritual growth. So is the case in the life of Tara. She has come back to India and visits her parents in Rishikesh for her own spiritual growth as she felt disconnected with her roots from India in America.

Tara already had longing for re-connecting with everything she had seen in India including all the real stories of Tara Lata and Mishtigunj in Bengal. All her vague retrospection and introspection got conformity in Rishikesh at her parents place. Even her father who all his life worked for money, created an empire of pharmaceutical company left it all for Rishikesh and hence for his spiritual journey. Meanwhile, we find that Rabindra conforms that he never found such details of horoscope and the Vedic Astrology in America. So, here we find the sharp contrast existing in two different countries. Though Tara and mostly all the female characters of Bharati Mukherjee understands this fact. These points show Mukherjee's hold in Indian system of Astrology.

Besides, we find in the last section of the novel when Tara visits Rishikesh and here she speculates about Yama, the deity of Dharma or Death. Next we find Tara muses about the Swami who had appeared out of the fog and mist in Mussorie she felt he had reappeared in Rishikesh again. Tara goes to pick flowers to offer to Goddess Kali as she did every day but she could not find a single blue Aparajito, so she picked as many hibiscus and handful of marigolds to offer to Goddess Kali and she in a state of trance felt the same Swami held three aparajito flowers of the deepest blue and handed them to Tara and symbolically she took, three flowers as it would take three years for Tara to fulfil her mission on the earth. The mission which Tara had on her mind can be interpreted in the terms of self-discovery for Tara's personality which haunted her in America.

So, she visits Rishikesh and her visit can be interpreted in terms of celebration of Indian mysticism bound to delight a western reader as the Swami who appears and disappears, the dying mother who refuses any help or medication. Tara's father is shown as a Yogi by Mukherjee in the last section of the novel after shifting from Calcutta to Rishikesh. He had left all the worldly connection. Tara's mother chose Rishikesh because since her girlhood she wanted to make a pilgrimage to the four Char Dham temples for which Rishikesh was a convenient base. But unfortunately her body did not allow her to visit temples anymore.

The novel ends with Tara's visit to Mishtigunj with Rabi to her ancestral place perhaps to strike a connection with this old age connection which her family has with Tara-Lata –the Tree Bride's place who is almost her namesake. The Indo- American ambiguity is very much visible at the end of the novel. While Rabi is an all American tourist bent on capturing the Indian scene with his new camera while Tara can be said to be making a kind of pilgrimage as she muses:

Each generation of women in my family has discovered
in her something new. Even in far- flung California,
the Tree- Bride speaks again.
I've come back to India this time for something
more than rest and shopping and these gin-and-lime filled
evenings with my mirror self. I'm like a pilgrim following the course of the
Ganges all the way to its source. (*Desirable Daughters* 289)

Feminist critics like Mary Daly and Gloria Anzaldua say that women use myths to psychically escape domination of the Western Culture. Similarly, Tara has used the personal one of her ancestry of Tara Lata –the Tree Bride. Perhaps, this is her unconscious way of expressing her claustrophobia which brings her to Mishtigunj for re-discovery of her own self. After she had suffered the bombing of her house and post-divorce sufferings and finally re-uniting with Bish leaves her with nothing but to turn back to her family history. Possibly not only to draw courage from Didi Ma's place at Mishtigunj but to have a healing effect on her

personality both from within and outside. Perhaps Tara knows very well that she could connect with her consciousness only by visiting Mishtigunj like a devotee crossing the River Ganges.

According to the Hindu mythology the river Ganga is worshipped by Hindus as the Goddess whose purity cleanses the sins of the devoted people and aids the dead on their path towards Heaven. Thus, we find that Tara Chatterjee has cleansed herself of the deeds which she felt was weighing her down since her separation from the husband Bish. We can say that the feeling of guilt lingered in her mind due to her multiple affairs which she ran after the divorce. This can be one way of looking at the disturbed personality of Tara Chatterjee.

When Tara reached Mishtigunj she discovers that the Tree- Bride was a freedom fighter too. When she entered the Tree- Bride's old house she found the placards scattered all over the desk. On the placards freedom slogans were written. The house itself showed Tara Lata silently the painful yet the brave story of the Tree-Bride, not only the freedom fighter but the martyr as well. Tara Chatterjee felt inspired and with peaceful mind she takes her journey back with her son and felt as if some miracle had happened in her life for which she was waiting all her life!

The novel ends on the note of ecstatic bliss for Tara Chatterjee when she commences her journey back from Mishtigunj like a devotee who feels light at heart after finishing the pilgrimage. We can say that in the end the novel completes a kind of circular narrative- it ends where it began in a dusty little town in Bangladesh, a place where begins the story of the Tree- Bride and the narration of the novel.

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