CHAPTER 2

(Re)Writing, (Re)Worlding History in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee

"When Victorians dreamed, they dreamed of the future. I dream of the past." (The Tree Bride, 51)

"How much fun we're having, playing with history and turning scraps of paper into stories..." (The Tree Bride, 232)

Bharati Mukherjee, one of the earlier generation of women writers of the Indian Diaspora has a different perspective of India as a homeland. While Raja Rao, a male writer of Indian Diaspora, portrays the Indian freedom struggle in a realistic manner in his novel *Kanthapura*. Bharati Mukherjee uses the postmodern technique of historiographic metafiction to weave the story of the Indian freedom struggle. Tara, the protagonist of the novel *Desirable Daughters* and its sequel *The Tree Bride*, an Indian immigrant living in America, narrates the history of the Indian freedom struggle through the story of the Tree Bride, one of her ancestors, who had been a part of the freedom struggle. Certain events in Tara's life inspire her to write the story of the Tree Bride. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is an imaginary place like Bharati Mukherjee's Mishtigunj, but the events which unfold in Kanthapura are a metaphorical representation of what was actually happening in the rest of India during those years. Mukherjee's narration of history is a part of the narration of Tara's life in America as an immigrant, and her desire to write. As Tara carries out her research on the history of her ancestor, she comes across stories about the Tree Bride, narrated by her grandmother, her mother and the hajji. Apart from this, as the novel *The Tree Bride* opens, Tara acquires a box full of old documents from her gynaecologist Victoria Treadwell Khanna and later the *Mist-nama* from the hajji in Mishtigunj. She tries to construct the history of the Tree Bride through all these sources. As Linda

Hutcheon points out in her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, "The narrativization of the past events is not hidden; the events no longer seem to speak for themselves, but are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative whose constructed-not found-order is imposed upon them, often overtly by the narrating figure. The process of making stories out of chronicles, of construction plots out of sequences, is what postmodernist fiction underlines. This does not in any way deny the existence of the past real but it focuses attention on the act of imposing order on that past, of encoding strategies of meaning – making through representation" (66-67). As Tara's past and present unravel, we find she is trying to 'impose an order' on her search for her own identity and roots.

Tara calls Calcutta 'home', with nostalgia, which she left behind after her marriage, to move to America with her husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee.

> The city I knew was (and remains) the magnet of hope for the world's third-largest population, the target of all their ambition. To be a native-born Calcuttan was (and is) to be a Londoner, a Parisian, a New Yorker, at the zenith... To be Calcutta *bhadra lok*, as we Bhattacharjees were, was to share a tradition of leadership, of sensitivity, of achievement, refinement, and beauty that was the envy of the world. That is the legacy of the last generation of Calcutta high society, a world into which we three sisters were born, and from which we have made our separate exits." (DD, 22)

Like the Tree Bride, Tara had two sisters, all well-educated, brought up within the secure gates of the 'bhadra lok', as Tara points out, "The narrow world of the house and city felt as secure to me as it must have to Tara Lata in Mishtigunj" (DD, 23).

Tara was an ambitious nineteen-year old girl, 'holder of BA Honours' and a first class in MA from the University of Calcutta. She wished to study further and had received many 'graduate school offers' from Paris, London and New York. However, her father decides to marry her off to a boy of his choice, as Tara points out, "The "boy" (there are always "boys" when father choose them for their daughters) who was selected to jumpstart my life, to be worshipped as god according to scripture, a first

son from an outstanding family" (DD, 23). After marriage, Tara immigrated to America with her husband. She lived in a large house in Atherton, which was one of the first developments to come up along with Silicon Valley. Bishwapriya was a successful and prosperous business man. He along with his friend Chester Yee had given the world a system called 'CHATTY' without which nothing in the modern world could work. However, Tara is not very happy with her role as a housewife, she felt caged in a huge house and her only job was entertaining her husband's business colleagues. As the novel opens, we find Tara living in a part of San Francisco called Upper Haight with her son Rabi, after separating from Bishwapriya. She works as a volunteer in a preschool. Tara feels more at home in her new surroundings and in her house than she was in Atherton with Bish. Tara had a live-in boyfriend, Andy. According to Tara, her live-in relationship was inexplicable according to the Indian culture, as her marrying a man of her father's choice was to her American friends. A man she had never met and this was 'amusing and appalling' for her American friends. The differences in culture are apparent and contradictory as she points out:

> And they look at me now, familiar old Tara, thirty-six-year divorced kindergarten teacher – and ask, how could any woman, even a nineteen-year-old, submit to someone else's choice, even a loving parent's? Obviously a recipe for disaster. And we're thrown into the middle of a modern enigma. My enigma and yours. How can any girl with a certain amount of confidence and a sense of style surrender them both to the whims of fate and the manipulations of the marital marketplace? ... your parents, Tara, get a grip! What do they know of the needs of a modern woman? The simple answer could never satisfy them: I wasn't perhaps I'll never be, a modern woman. (DD, 26-27)

Tara's American friends consider all Indian's to be the same. Tara is tired of explaining to them the cultural diversity of India. "I am tired of explaining India to Americans. I am sick of feeling an alien" (DD, 87).

Following traditions and cultural values is a part of the indoctrination given from childhood to the girls. Tara was not very different from the other Indian girls when it came to following the traditions. Though being rebellious sounded exciting, there was

nothing she could rebel against as she was bound by the patriarchal norms. “Where would it get you? My life was one long childhood until I was thrown into marriage. The qualities we associated with our father and with god were not notably divergent from the respect we accorded...[to] the boys our fathers would eventually select for us to marry” (DD, 28). Tara and her sisters had grown-up in the rigid cultural norms of the Calcutta Bhadralok. They were convent educated and they were meant to be chaste till they were married. They were not allowed to go out alone or talk to boys. Even the car had window shades, and they had a driver and guard to accompany wherever they went. However, Padma, Tara’s eldest sister proves to be the trend setter in the family. Her affair with Ronald Dey, a Christian and therefore an alliance unacceptable in their orthodox family, comes as a shocking piece of news for Tara. Tara had believed that there was no scope of such passion in their rigid orthodox family. Tara celebrates Padma’s guts to break through the rigid patriarchal codes, as she points out, “She is our true American, our improviser, although I am the only one to hold the passport. In the way of sisters who are socially and psychologically and in every definable Indian way (caste, desh, language, shared history) so very much alike, I always knew that something marked Didi as different...” (DD, 31).

The way relations are addressed in the Bengali culture as Tara explains, reflects the ‘performative’ aspect of the Indian culture. Every family friend is addressed as ‘uncle’ or ‘auntie’ by the children that is ‘mashi’ or ‘mesho’, on the mother’s side and ‘pishi’ and ‘pishe-mashai’ or ‘kaki’ and ‘kaku’ on the father’s side. Talking about the Indian way of life, Tara draws comparisons with the American family system. “In India, we didn’t have outside influences like the media, or lax schooling or cars and dating and drugs. We didn’t know family breakdown. Our families existed inside an impenetrable bubble. Anyone entering or exiting was carefully monitored. We honoured the proprieties. There was no rebellion, no seeking after individual identity” (DD, 43-44).

Bharati Mukherjee celebrates the Indian genius and cultural values; through Tara, who describes the achievements of Bishwapriya Chatterjee. According to Tara the Indians did their work on time and to the best of their efforts, as a result of which they were given well-deserved honours. As she points out, “During the twenty-years I’ve

been in California, an immigrant fog of South Asians has crept into America. Quiet, prosperous, hardworking, professional – in India they would have been blocked by social convention and family duties. There are Indians in every town, every hospital, every high school and college, in banks, motels, 7-elevens and taxis" (TB, 19). For Bish, duty and obedience not only at school but home too was considered *dharma*. Bish was not only the best student who got the best grades but also a very dutiful and obedient son. When he expressed a desire to marry, Tara's father and Bish's father 'cut the deal'. "Best boy, best girl. Why waste money or time and energy on dating or getting to know each other. Questions of trust and vulnerability and how far to go on what date? Such foolishness. Devastating breakups were distant entertainment, graduate school soap opera. We could always read about them, or hear about them second hand" (DD, 44). Following the family traditions was an integral part of the Indian culture. Tara's second sister, Parvati, had found an alliance for herself, which was against the custom. Grooms were selected by the girl's father and apart from this Parvati had 'jumped the queue', as Padma, the oldest sister was yet to be married. Parvati's marriage would have sent a wrong signal to the families in Calcutta that Dr. Bhattacharjee could not 'control' his daughters and that may be one or two of them had 'stepped out of line'.

Bish never had many expectations from Tara. He just wanted her to work in the Stanford University library, where he was studying and later on join him in the student pub along with his friends and their girlfriends or wives. None of the women were Indian, though their brilliance inflamed Tara. "This is the life I've been waiting for, I thought, the liberating promise of marriage and travel and the wider world. Bless Daddy and Mummy, they found me the only man in the world who could transport me from the enchanted garden of Ballygunge to Stanford University in the early 1980s" (DD, 81). However, for Tara, the promise of a life as an "American wife" was not fulfilled. She had wanted to drive but she had nowhere to go. She wanted to work but could not as Bish's reputation would be at stake.

> 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....., 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. (TB, 19)

Bish was a well-known speaker in his field much in demand all over the world and hence travelled a lot, but would not take Tara along as Rabi was an infant. Bish was a dynamic businessman for the world but at home he was more of a 'traditional Indian'. "In India he was even more the Indian husband, showing off for his mother, perhaps, how well-trained this upper-class Ballygunge girl had become, what a good cook, what an attentive wife and daughter-in-law. What a bright and obedient boy she was raising. I wanted to take courses in the local community college, but we had a child at home" (DD, 82). On her wedding night itself, Tara's mother-in-law had made it clear that Tara was expected to be the epitome of wifely duty. In America, Tara started getting offers for film auditions which she could not dare to take up on account of Bish. Later, working in preschool gave Tara a new identity, which she was craving for.

> The rhetoric of modern San Francisco makes me invisible. I am not "Asian" which is reserved for what in outdated textbooks used to be called "Oriental". I am all things. When the little kids climb on my lap to be read to, or just listened to, I don't think they see me as anything different from their parents, the school nurse, or their teachers. I thrive on this invisibility..... Yet I'm still too timid to feed my Ballygunge Park Road identity into the kitchen Garburetor. That dusty identity is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case, confidently labelled by father's religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), sub-caste (Kulin), mother-tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta), formative region of ancestral origin (Mishtigunj, East Bengal), education (postgraduate and professional) and social attitudes (conservative)..... I feel not just invisible but *heroically* invisible, a border-crashing claimant of all people's legacies. (DD, 78-79)

Tara's new hybrid identity as an independent woman and a preschool teacher gives her the freedom to mingle with children and people belonging to different cultures. Though she celebrates the new found identity, she knew that she did not belong there.

Tara is shocked to know about her Padma didi's affair in past with Ronald Dey and her illegitimate son Christopher Dey. Christopher Dey's identity was successfully hidden from the world till a stranger turns up at Tara's doorstep claiming to be her nephew, and demanding Padma's, his mother's address. Padma had married and settled in the US and the family honor was never tainted by the secret. Tara had trusted her elder sister, but now her belief in the family values and the pride she felt for her upbringing was badly shaken.

> Our happy house on Ballygunge Park Road, the protective parents and loving daughters, the Brahmins' pride, the Bengali arrogance, the Calcutta sophistication – seemed now the darkest cave, and we, blind stumbling creatures. How could we have allowed the instinct bred within us over the centuries to draw lines and never cross them, infinity of lines, ever-smaller lines, ever-sharper distinctions? I grieved for Didi's generation of "girls of good family", who put caste duty and family reputation before self-indulgence. (DD, 133)

Tara confesses that she would not have given in to such pressures, had she been in Padma's place as she was more stubborn. "Or maybe I was just lucky that I had been born when fathers had become weaker, society was already in shambles, the nuns in retreat. The fault line ran directly through my family, separating sister from sister, the forward-looking from the traditional and the adaptable from the brittle" (DD, 133). Padma had condemned Tara for her divorce, as according to her, Tara had become American, that is, 'self-engrossed'. According to Tara:

> She had chosen to echo our mother and our aunts – things are never perfect in marriage, a woman must be prepared to accept less than perfection in this lifetime – and to model herself on Sita, Savitri, and Behula, the virtuous wives of Hindu myths..... Her clinging to a version of India and to Indian ways and Indian friends, Indian clothes and food and a "charming" accent had seemed to me a cowardly way of coping with a new country. Change is corruption; she seemed to be saying. Take what America can give, but don't let it tarnish you in any way. (DD, 134)

Though Tara's parents were modern, according to her, their "Westernization" was 'superficial, confined to convent school, Metro cinema, and movie magazines, which overlaid a profound and orthodox Hinduism'. Tara is appalled by the hypocrisy of her eldest sister Padma. Padma was a big TV personality. She had got an offer to act in a Satyajit Ray's movie, back in the 1970s. However, her father had shattered her dreams by not allowing her to take the opportunity, which she remembered for the rest of her life. According to Tara, her family was quite orthodox, despite the occasional peg of scotch that their father had in the evenings and the MGM Musicals. They did not mingle with the Brahmos for the fear of contamination. According to Tara, their father was "trying to construct a traditional family life for his family in a city and a time when the props had all but disappeared" (DD, 180).

In contrast to her elder sister, Tara had chosen to break the orthodox traditions, as she points out, "For some reason, perhaps the six years' difference in our ages and the invisible fault line that ran between us, I loved my family and culture but had walked away from the struggle to preserve them. In San Francisco, I barely knew any Indians. But Didi, whose every utterance was couched in hatred for those times and for the family and for the city, was trying to lead a traditional Bengali life in New Jersey" (DD, 180-181). Tara found herself better in adjusting to the American way of life in comparison to her elder sister Padma. Tara 'prided herself on a vigilant but enthusiastic adjustment to American life in all its perverse temptations'. Tara concedes to herself that the 'messes' in her life were the complications of her own creation. Unlike Padma, she did not blame Bish, their father, Calcutta or the Nuns who did not train her for a life in San Francisco, as that time has gone. She asserts:

> ...that world is gone, we're here, we have to stop living in a place that's changed on us while we've been away. I don't want to be a perfectly preserved bug trapped in amber, Didi. I can't deal with modern India, it's changed too much and too fast, and I don't want to live in a half-India kept on life-support. You think I'm ridiculous, or somehow a disgrace to Indian womankind, a divorcee walking around in my American clothes? It's okay for the Indy Vermas and the girls who were born here and don't know any

> better, but not for us, the last flowering of Calcutta's golden past? Give me a break! (DD, 184)

Unlike Tara, who was slowly adjusting and accepting the American way of life, Padma was still rigid, "a firm identity resisting all change, at least from a distance, on a brief inspection. But under scrutiny, fractured, like cracks under old glaze. Up close, I didn't recognize her. I didn't know who she was" (DD, 196). Padma grooms Tara for the elite Bengali circle to which she belonged. She encourages Tara to look her best for a party where she would meet men who might be interested in her, a divorced woman. Padma treats Tara like a kid, who has no understanding of men and the society. Contrary to Padma's belief Tara knew what the Indian men and society thought about divorced women as she points out, "The divorced Indian lady combines every fantasy about the liberated, wicked western woman with the safety net of basic submissive familiarity" (DD, 188). Padma imagines Tara to be fabulously rich from the post-divorce alimony that she might have got. She could not understand Tara's reasons for separating from Bish. Tara had always supported Bish's work and had shared his excitement. "Then Bish and his "team" started walling me off, he wasn't available, and there was no one in Atherton to take me seriously. I had a car and an unlimited credit line on all my charge cards – what more did I want? I had my girlfriends, the other Indian wives, wasn't that enough? He didn't see that my girlfriends were leaving their husbands. Meena Trivedi died..." (DD, 207).

Tara was not greedy for money, but she craved for Bish's love and attention. He was too busy to care. Therefore, Tara chose to walk away from her unhappy marriage, to seek self-hood and independence. "What I settled for was Rabi's trust fund, my house, and modest support. If I went back to college, he would pay. If I got a job, the support would be reduced. I didn't touch the company, much to my lawyer's despair, but as a result, we were on friendly terms. Rabi still had a father and I got occasional good advice from someone who still looked out for me" (DD, 207). Of all the three sisters Padma, Parvati and Tara; Tara had upheld the honour of her family by marrying Bish, who was the perfect groom chosen for her in the 'old-fashioned, arranged way' by her father. Bish was called the 'Atherton Communications Guru' and other 'exoticizing' vocabulary like 'Guru', 'Rajah', 'Mogul', 'Swami' and 'Yogi' were used

for him. Though Tara had been the dutiful daughter and wife, she started feeling caged in Bish's empire. "By twenty-two I had satisfied all my ancestral duties. I was married; I had a son, material comfort, an admired husband – what else is there? Eight years later, feeling myself a privileged prisoner inside the gated community, I listened to all the voices yammering around me and all the stories on television and in the magazines and did the right California thing and struck out on my own" (TB, 16).

Tara is proud of her culture but time and again she feels that she was losing touch with her culture in the process of assimilating into the American culture. For instance, she found it difficult to distinguish between Hindus and Muslims now, sometimes she is not one hundred percent sure of recognising Bengalis from others. She felt as if she was lost inside a Salman Rushdie novel, 'a once-firm identity smashed by hammer blows, melted down and re-emerging as something wondrous or grotesque'. Tara is nostalgic for the good old days back home, as she points out:

> All the tender frustrations of dealing with unvarying ritual, the sweet sameness of daily life where anything new or unplanned can only bring disaster, and the guilty irritation of ancient bonds between the bhadra lok and chotto lok, the master and servant, fills me both with pride and dread, because I have not passed them on. As far as I've drifted from the path of piety, or even of family, their names suddenly swell by dozens, the hundreds, filling my heart, brain, memory, soul, and if I were to speak at that moment, my words would have come of choked and I couldn't blame the drinks. (DD, 246).

At a party at the Ghoshal's, Tara is taken on a tour of their mansion where she discovers that though the exterior of the house had an appearance of American standards, the interiors were very traditional and Indian, which reminded Tara of her Calcutta days. Mrs. Ghoshal finds Tara 'courageous and a little crazy' for leaving a rich and successful man like Bishwapriya Chatterjee. Bish followed the old Indian tradition of the husband as the provider for the family, even after the divorce. However, Tara was not of the same views. "You married, you had a son, you provided

for the family, and if you provided very well, everyone was happy. Or at least unhappily bottled up. As for me, the traditional Hindu marriage ceremony did not include a prenup" (DD, 260). Bish blamed himself for failing in his 'dharma', his fundamental duty of a householder to 'support and sustain his marriage'. Post divorce Bish had become 'self-lacerating', a 'man in pain', blaming himself for the failure of their marriage, though Tara tries to share the blame for her naivety and loneliness in marriage. Bish refuses to 'permit collective guilt'. For him the orthodox cultural norms were ultimate, which need to be followed by all means. As he points out, "Marriage is man's manifest dharma, his test, his duty, the outer sign of his inner strength and harmony. "My parents are fifty years together. Even our house servants, forty, fifty years. One time you mentioned loneliness inside of marriage and I did not understand what you were saying. Two people are together; they have come from the same place; they share the same values, the same language. Practically speaking, they are two halves of one consciousness. They eat the same food; they have a child; they sleep in the same bed, how can they be lonely?" (DD, 266) Tara wished to tell Bish that what they ate, the language they spoke, where they slept; such details mattered in 'our world' – India, but now they were in America, where 'dharma and duty' don't mean 'a damned thing'. She begins to feel as if "the whole of the nineteenth–century Bengali debate between born-again traditionalists like Jai Krishna Gangooly and westernized progressives like Keshub Mitter was being restaged and replayed and my dear ex-husband was caught in the middle" (DD, 267). However, after the bombing, when Bish was recovering from injuries, one day Tara explains to Bish that "The scale of his achievement made it difficult for a wife to set her own sights" (DD, 280). At the age of thirty-six, Bish had made the CHATTY, 'the operating system for the world'. She concedes that she was not capable of making anything so grand but she had 'stories to tell'. She had already started writing and "the story that had begun to emerge was of the Tree-Bride and of the class of Calcutta girls born a century later both of them witness to dying traditions. Tara Lata Gangooly had turned the tragedy of her husband's death and a lifetime's virginity into a model of selfless saintliness. My story was different, perhaps even an inversion. But I'd been having hot Calcutta flashes, moments of intense recollection, smells so strong I sneezed....If I didn't write their stories I'd explode; there'd be no one to mark their passing" (DD, 280).

Tara feels that there is a connection in the bombing of her house and the suffering that entailed it to the Tree Bride's tragedy as a five-year-old bride. Tara's father reminds her of the mythological story of Goddess Mansha. Folk tales and myths are a part of any culture and the repetition or spread of these tales from generation to generation is also a performative aspect of Nationalism. Mansha was supposed to be an insecure therefore, a demanding goddess. It was the Goddess in her cobra form who had killed the Tree Bride's groom. "It was Mansha, whose father was either Shiva or Kashyapa, one of the seven original sages, and whose mother was Kadru, a mortal who had prayed to either Shiva or Kashyapa for a thousand offspring in the shape of serpents. Daughter of God or holy sage, but not accepted as half-goddess or half-sage, she used her identity as queen of snakes to call our self-protective little lives into question by injecting them with venom and demanding reverence through the infliction of unexpected pain" (DD, 304). For Tara the bombing was some kind of punishment meted out on her by the Goddess.

In Tara's childhood, her grandmother narrated strange and moving stories of 'life-before-death', back in Calcutta. Those stories held for Tara the same 'vibrancy' that the comic books had for the Americans. Through such stories her grandmother taught them the significance of the city Kashi, which was the holiest place on earth for the Hindus. "The cosmos is created, sustained, destroyed, and re-created over and over again, but only one town on earth is spared during the period of cosmic dissolution. She named the town: Kashi.....Kashi, she explained, is both the City of Light and the City of Liberating Cremation. The god Shiva carries Kashi on the prongs of his trident. When the cosmos chars into total blackness, Kashi glows because Shiva created it as a sacred place where to die is to be saved" (TB, 5). Much later, towards the end of the novel *The Tree Bride*, we find Tara, Bish, Rabi and Tara's parents make a journey to Varanasi to complete the final rites of the Tree Bride in order to liberate her soul. It is also a metaphorical liberation for Tara. These stories made death sound like a 'blessed event' to Tara. Tara had also heard about the Tree Bride from her grandmother, whom she called Didima. Didima talked about the Tree Bride's love for reading and writing and her valour against the British. Tara was inspired by the Tree Bride's story.

> She lingered longest on Tara Lata's learning to read and to write, how her reading of nationalist newspapers like *Jugantar* and novels like Bankim Chandra's *Anandmath* inspired her to shelter fugitive freedom fighters. And so, always the dutiful daughter at six or seven, I'd started reading the Bengali classics. This was before English entered our lives.....We lived the Tree Bride's courage. We were child-soldiers in Mother India's army. (DD, 288)

The tales of the Indian freedom struggle Tara had heard from her Didima and Mother, inspired Tara. She was proud of the Bengali Revolutionaries. The women in her family however distant or 'legendary' were their connections, and had been beaten up by the colonial police. Until Tara had visited Mishtigunj, she was unaware of the mysterious death of the Tree Bride. "The Tree Bride, the aged virgin who did not leave her father's house until the British dragged her off to jail, the least known martyr to Indian freedom, is the quiet enter to every story. Each generation of women in my family has discovered in her something new. Even in far-flung California, the Tree Bride speaks again" (DD. 289). Tara visits India this time like a 'pilgrim following the course of the Ganges all the way to its source'. She has decided to write about the history and life of the Tree Bride for which she has to return to her roots. Tara succeeds in finding a few books in her mother's collection, which talk about the Tree Bride's life. She feels that the gods were 'pulling strings', giving her a 'tug of encouragement', as a result of which she feels that the 'years of blackness had begun to life'.

The first time Tara travelled to India alone, she took Rabi on her own 'American-style roots search' to Bangladesh, erstwhile East Bengal, to which her grandparents and ancestors belonged, - 'hundred generations of Gangoolys and Bhattacharjees. Everybody thought that Tara had gone crazy or had become too American to take up the adventure. She had wanted to visit Mishtigunj, which no one in her family had visited in the past sixty years. "We had been trained to think of Mishtigunj as home in ways that our adopted homes, Calcutta and California, must never be. Ancestors come and go, but one's native village, one's desh, is immutable" (TB, 29). As Tara walked

through the streets of Mishtigunj, she felt that she knew the place already, as nothing surprised her. “It conformed to a mental image I’d been carrying since childhood, from the stories I’d been raised on....I felt for the first time how recent my family’s Calcutta identity was, just two generations, how shallow those urban roots were, not much deeper than Rabi’s in California. I saw my life on a broad spectrum, with Calcutta not at the centre, but just another station on the dial” (TB, 20).

As Tara and Rabi wander about the ruins of the Tree Bride’s home, she feels that “Mishtigunj is a place of magic where the hour and date on my wristwatch melt into the hours of the Tree Bride’s last day in her home” (DD, 306). It was the year 1943, when men sneaked into the Tree Bride’s house. The Tree Bride was sixty-eight then, was writing the updates of the massacres that took place in Mishtigunj at the hands of the Britishers. She had been writing the results of the massacre to any ‘sympathetic English Journalist’ who would publish them. As she finished her evening prayers her house was surrounded by police. Even the magistrate comments that the Tree Bride was unlike other women. “There’s something not quite on the up and up with that creature. It’s said she’s not ventured beyond the walls of her compound in over sixty years. Most extraordinary thing. Yet she is behind this insurrection...” (DD, 309).

As Tara moves away from the Tree Bride’s house she realises that, “Many words are flooding in and the trail ahead, as far as I can see, is lighted by kerosene and naptha lamps held by the children of fruit and vegetable vendors sitting on the carts” (DD, 310). The whole atmosphere seemed to inspire Tara to write and she could see her goal clearly. She would be writing about the life history of the Tree Bride. The postmodern characteristics are visible in the narration of the Tree Bride’s story. First, Tara as the narrator is not confident about her knowledge of the history of the Tree Bride. As Linda Hutcheon points out in her polemical book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, that neither in the multiple narratives nor the overtly controlling narrator of Historiographic Metafiction, “do we find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty. This is not a transcending of history, but a problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history” (Hutcheon: 1988, 117). Tara’s knowledge of the history of the Tree Bride is from the documents that she comes

across accidentally from her gynaecologist, Victoria Treadwell Khanna. Victoria is also the wife of Bish's teacher, Dr. Khanna at Stanford. Though Victoria is an American she takes a lot of interest in Tara's Indian origins. Dr. Victoria has a story to tell which is connected to her maiden surname, - Treadwell. Tara begins to feel that her pregnancy was full of adventure, 'tangled up in history'. "I had been writing a book about my sisters, Padma and Parvati and our growing up in Kolkata, and then I'd started on something new and strange. This was about a distant relative we called the Tree Bride, my great-great-aunt, a point of light from the remotest, darkest galaxy of my life" (TB, 22).

Victoria's grandfather Virgil Treadwell had left India in 1947 and had never returned. He was called Vertie, which was a kind of acronym. He was in the India Civil Services and served as the district commissioner in Bengal from 1930 up through independence. Victoria gives Tara a box full of documents and manuscripts related to Vertie Treadwell saying that it contained the history of a place Tara knew very well. "Historiographic metafiction deals not so much with historical events, personages and facts as with the reconstruction of the past from the point of view of the present, often reflecting the insights of modern theories of history – theories focussing on the epistemological and narratological problems that beset historiography" (Herman 216). Victoria's grandfather Vertie Treadwell was posted in East Bengal in a place called Mishtigunj. Tara's ancestor, the Tree Bride belonged to Mishtigunj. Mistigunj was named after a 'foundling' named John Mist, an 'escaped murderer', who came to Calcutta from London. Tara was very pleased to get some information about the Tree Bride and her history, from Victoria as it gave her a lead in her research. Vertie Treadwell must have known the Tree Bride. "All stories of Mishtigung touch, eventually, on Tara Lata Gangooly. She is like the Ganges, draining all tributaries. Hearing the word "Mishtigunj" from unexpected lips closed the circle" (TB, 27).

Tara had visited Mishtigunj three times in the past six years and had been writing about her visits and the Tree Bride ever since. "I lay out the old books, the ledgers and my sheets of papers, knowing that somehow there's a novel behind them that only I can tell" (TB, 28). Tara knew the Tree Bride's story partly. She was 'proxy-married to

a tree' at five years of age. However, Tara had no knowledge of her later years, except for her death at the hands of Britishers in 1943. It was only during her second visit that she could get some details of the later life of the Tree Bride from a Haji. Tara finds out that Vertie Treadwell was born in 1874, which meant that he was of the same age as the Tree Bride. When Vertie was 'sailor-suited pre-schooler', the five-year old Tree Bride was waiting to get married. Her twelve-year old groom is bitten by a cobra and dies. In the night of December in 1879 she is married to a 'proxy-husband', a sundari tree, deep in the forest of Sundar Bans. Once freed from all family obligations, the Tree Bride spent remaining sixty years in her 'father's compound', learning to read and write English and Bengali, which she eventually taught others. She also went about organizing protests against British government. Many revolutionaries came to visit her. "Mahatma Gandhi the Pacifist and Netaji Subhas Bose the militant, American friends of India, Sikh separatists from California, vegetarians and theosophists, Sufis and free thinkers, authors and photographers. One of those visitors could have been Vertie Treadwell" (TB, 33). As Victoria hands over the documented history of Vertie Treadwell to Tara, she assures Tara that she would find Vertie's account of Indians somewhat biased. "I was about to say that history is written by the victors, but in the case of India it's not always clear who won, is it?" (TB, 34) Bish comes across an old newspaper in the box that was given to Tara by Victoria, which announced:

> "*Mishtigunj Mourns Death of Tarama Famed saint and recluse dies of heart attack in police custody. DC Virgil Treadwell denies police involvement"*.....voices began to speak; ghosts took flesh. The Tree Bride had been little more than my grandmother's and mother's bedtime fable. When I 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 seemed to me a miracle on the order of Helen Keller. 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. It became my dharma, my duty, to set her story down. (TB, 37)

Tara's mother was a 'mesmerizing story teller', who told her daughters stories about all kinds of people that she must have come across in the novels or encyclopaedias she read. Tara felt that her mother probably 'embroidered the adventures of historical figures that she'd read about as story-tellers often do'. Of all the stories that her mother narrated, the Tree Bride's story moved Tara the most, "my namesake, Tara Lata, the Tree Bride of Mishtigunj, the five-year old almost widow who was forced to marry a tree as surrogate husband and then expected by villagers to lead a life of resigned self-abasement. Caste tradition forbade remarriage. But destiny works in mysterious ways, my mother said. Who better than a abandoned child, free of wifely duties and fear of consequences, to lead a village into dignity and freedom?" (TB, 38) Tara had suddenly announced to her mother that she had turned into a writer. Tara mentioned to her mother, her interest in the Tree Bride. Tara's mother informed her that there was a 'previously unknown writer' who had entered the 'family history' and that Tara would have to go to Mishtigunj to find more. Tara had never heard of a Gangooly or a Bhattacharjee who was into the literary world before her. Tara knew that the Tree Bride had political and sometimes spiritualist visitors to her house, but an English writer was the surprise element. Tara did not tell her mother about her previous visits to 'ancient Mishtigunj' or 'modern Razakpur', which were now the 'relics' in her life. "The first time, in that innocent time before the bombing, I went with Rabi, just to show him the ancestral homes. The second time, I met that hajji and gained possession of the documents that have taken me this far, at least, in the Tree Bride's story. The third time, I felt myself a vulture, like someone picking through the trash. Everything is gone; nothing remains for me there. Modern-day reality is catching up with myth; the abuses of history have desecrated the corpse" (TB, 40-41).

Tara belonged to a highly religious and orthodox Hindu Brahmin family, however, no one could guess if they saw Tara in California. She had changed a lot. Tara and her sisters had received a typical 'upper-middle-class Calcutta convent school English-language education'. However, they were not of that 'cultural persuasion'. According to Tara, when they left school, they had returned to a 'world of tales, prayers, and a shadow universe of myth and legend'. The family showed external pretences of westernization but were never a part of the truly westernized and progressive traditions. The progressives were reformers, scientists, writers and writers who called

themselves Brahmo-Samaj and those who showed a communal reaction to secularizers were called the Arya-Samaj. Tara's family beginning with the Tree Bride's father, Jai Krishna Gangooly, had become anti-secular and followed the traditions of piety, for which Tara is unapologetic. Tara was however ashamed to have grown up inside a 'group mythology', which blamed the 'beastliness of the Muslim fanatics for the family's expulsion from the 'eastern paradise – modern day Bangladesh'. Another myth with which Tara grew up was the one she was taught to believe in the schools she attended, that the Britishers, with some exceptions, were 'generally decent'. It took twenty years for Tara to realize that the Muslims had nothing to do with the relocation of Tara's family. Britishers were the culprits. They had started dividing the Indian masses on communal lines, especially in Bengal from 1833 itself. The partition of 1947 had nothing to do with it. Ruling the vast Indian population was more manageable for the Britishers, by dividing the masses on communal lines. The Hindus were divided further on the basis of castes, as 'lazy brahmins', 'money-grubbing banias'. Sikhs and Muslims were declared the 'martial races'. However, 'behind gymkhana doors', all the Indians were derogatorily referred to as 'niggers' by the Britishers. Since Calcutta was the headquarters of the East India Company and the seat of the British Empire, Bengal had the longest exposure to the English and English language. The British particularly ridiculed the Bengali Brahmins, since 'their priestly functions demanded a certain degree of literacy'. The Bengalis were naturally drawn to education and no one could win against them in a discussion about the future of India. As a result of which the British felt threatened. In order to keep the Bengalis in place in control; especially the disputatious Brahmins, they ridiculed their pretentions, defamed their characters, mocked their religion, which helped to perpetuate the colonial rule.

The British were attracted to India's wealth. They started trade in India, by purchasing Indian textiles and after a century the Indian textiles and cottage industries were banned for the benefit of the English mills, as a result of which the Indians were forced to buy the expensive cloth from British mills. The Indians were allowed to starve as the "excess" harvests from India were shipped to England. "The "invisible hand" of the market became the supreme adjunct of imperial authority.....Recurrent starvation was blamed on Indian laziness, on their beastly, fatalistic religion, their

money-lending banias and 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" (TB, 45). It was the same year when the famous "Minute on Education" was delivered by Thomas Babington Macaulay. It was also the year of creation of Tara's 'hybrid family of Orthodox Hindu, adaptable anywhere brahmins'. According to Tara, there was a 'collision of values', which the present British structures and East India Company could not withstand. The earlier European's who visited India were 'seduced' by India, enthusiastically adapting India. However, management problems had arisen by the time Macaulay came to the scene. The solution Macaulay suggested in his Minute was to 'turn the natives into surrogate Englishmen', who could be easily controlled. This 'mood of 1833' figures in Tara Lata's story too, as it figures in Tara's. The bookends of Macaulay's argument, "uplift the natives to make it more profitable, ridicule India for its superstitious ways – will apply to nearly all of them" (TB, 47). This was something that did not apply to John Mist and the Tree Bride. For Tara, the history of British India was a 'story that had gone bad'.

Tara was made to feel ashamed of her orthodox Hindu background at school, in Calcutta, while her other friends in the class were 'effortlessly westernized', as some were Armenians, Jew or Indian Christians, while many came from Brahmo families. When confronted with a choice, Tara's 'distant relative', Jai Krishna Gangooly had chosen to return to the traditions, - 'Sanskrit and the shastras'. It was a decision which affects the family till day, for Tara. He had given up English altogether and left Dhaka to settle in Mishtigunj. Tara's father drank scotch, read English mysteries and idolized Doris Day, but he had at heart decided to 'retreat from this world' and spend his old age praying in Rishikesh. Tara's convent education, the Shakespeare society, British council debates and the Gilbert and Sullivan evening had trained them for one certainty: "We could trust English models. Those models might be cranky and blustery, but they embodied a notion of fair play and scholarship we would do well to emulate. 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, and of course manly competition and fair play, and we'd do well to emulate them. I had never doubted their

ancient, bewhiskered authority, like elderly relatives who rarely visited. I am a late defector from their ranks" (TB, 48-49).

As both, Tara and the Tree Bride belonged to Mishtigunj and the Tree Bride's story is inextricably linked with Mishtigunj, the narration of its origin is a must. Tara comes across the details of John Mist, his arrival in India and the creation of the town Mishtigunj in the *Mistnama*, given to her by the hajji. As Mishtigunj is Tara's native place, where her roots lie and also the place where her ancestor, the Tree Bride, lived and died as a martyr, the narration of its history becomes equally important. Therefore Tara goes on to narrate the history of John Mist, the creator of Mishtigunj. He was a legend, a would-be-empire builder', who had mysteriously disappeared from history, like many such men who were attracted to the Shoondar Bon, 'the beautiful forest', dense, infested with tigers but rich in timber. The 'treasure and terror' of East Bengal also consisted of fresh water for growing rice and fish, indigo, which was also called the "blue devil", and the forests of Sundari trees. The wood of these trees were more resistant than iron and anyone who could provide 'reliable wood' to the world and especially the British navy and the East India Company 'owned riches more convertible than gold'. The British Empire could not penetrate the Shoondar Bon, so when a European arrived here, his records were wiped out as a result of which he was free of all 'debts and oppression', free to 'invent past and future', free to 'discard every scrap of inheritance', he can 'seek or surrender to alien codes'. John Mist's history was something similar as Tara points out, - "Not every pioneer pushes westward in a covered wagon or breaks the prairie sod with a wooden plow; some head south into bewildering abundance. Such a man was John Mist, and the village he created is that magical world in my native language, my desh, my unseen home" (TB, 55).

The indigo plantations succeeded in creating a 'British Planter Society' by the first quarter of the 19th century. As a result of the indigo plantations the native farmers were reduced to poorly paid labourers and the paddy fields were transformed to indigo plantations which led to a cycle of starvation. However not all the Europeans, who settled in the Shoondar Bans were criminals. Some like John Mist were the victims of

circumstances. They were ‘the orphaned, the abandoned, and the foundlings’. Tara felt that the foundlings were blessed as they had lives of no regrets, ‘without memory or patrimony’, ‘no legends of lost inheritance’ and having been raised in constraints knew the value of freedom. As they came from nowhere and having the freedom to go everywhere they were ‘free to fashion anything they pleased’. And John Mist was such a man. Mist was uneducated, but a visionary who created Mishtigunj, now known as Razakpur, after a local politician.

Six years before the bombing, Tara had been to Mishtigunj alone. This was her second visit. She had met an old man who identified himself as Hajji Gul Mohammed Chowdhury. Tara had ‘dressed down’ for the occasion, posing as a ‘simple Calcutta woman on an old-fashioned roots search’. She had not worn any jewellery, except for a gold bangle, nor Shindur, as she was divorced. She spoke the local dialect. She knew that people from these parts of India were good at ‘mutual detection’. She tried her best to hide her ‘Americanness’ for the fear of resentment it might engender. The Hajji easily recognizes Tara’s identity as a Calcutta Brahmin, by her name, however, takes note that she had no arrogance or pride of being one. She seemed to the Hajji, very Americanized to be unmarried. According to Tara, divorce was culturally unacceptable and unimaginable still in India, and especially in the remote parts of the country. “So he probably thought, a mysteriously unmarried lady from Calcutta, Brahmin from her name, speaking the local dialect, travelling alone to an isolated place like Mishtigunj? What kind of woman does a thing like that? Only someone with a Mishtigunj desh. A Mishtigunj Brahmin like, say, a distant descendant of Tara Lata Gangooly? Come back to claim ancestral lands, perhaps?” (TB, 58) Tara knew she appeared very awkward in her gait as she was wearing a saree after years, which too was very American. The Hajji seemed to recognise Tara as the ‘wife of world’s richest Bengali’ from the ‘pictures in Indian press’ and ‘juicy Calcutta gossip’ that managed to reach Mishtigunj. “He probably remembered the interviews and my proud claim of a Mishtigunj desh, with a great-great-aunt, Tara Lata Gangooly, the Tree Bride, as a namesake. I’d claimed it all without ever visiting or knowing much about the Tree Bride except the circumstances of her marriage and the rumours surrounding her death” (TB, 58-59).

The Haji takes Tara to Mist Mahal where the Tree Bride had lived. This mansion had a 'hand-lettered plaque' written in English and Bengali, outside the gate: "*Home of Tara Lata Gangooly (1874-1943), Freedom Fighter and Martyr. Known to the world as Tara-Ma*" (TB, 59). The Hajji gives Tara valuable information about the Tree Bride and his association with her. He had first visited the Mist Mahal where the Tree Bride lived, when he was fifteen years old, which was around 1930. It was the year of Gandhi's Salt March, which was part of what is now called the 'Second War of Indian Independence'. The Tree Bride had been the 'Mother' to the villagers in Mishtigunj. She was an inspiration to all. In order to help Gandhji in organizing a march against the British, she had given her wedding jewellery as donation. Her wedding jewellery was a treasure many seeked but could not find. She was married to a tree and her wedding dowry was buried at the foot of the tree she was married to. Many trees were felled in the quest to find the dowry gold. It was according to Tara, 'the stuff of legend, but in that magical place, true'. The Tree Bride drew a map of the place where the Hajji's father Gul Mohammed could find her dowry gold buried, to be used for the noble cause Gandhiji was organizing. This act of the Tree Bride put Mishtigunj on the map. The Congress officials identified it as the 'village in the remotest corner of our country', which contributed more than any of the richest cities in the country for the freedom movement. The news spread to New Delhi, the Imperial capital then. The British viceroy immediately deployed his men to the Sunderbans, which, according to him, had become the 'hotbed of sedition' and to see to it that it did not spread. As the Hajji took Tara on a tour of Mishtigunj, Tara felt "All of it seemed vaguely familiar; either it made sense because of the planning, or because of stories implanted in my childhood, the architecture of dreams" (TB, 62).

Outside the 'police *thana*', in Mishtigunj, was the public square where John Mist and Rafeek Hai were hanged in 1880. Rafeek Hai was a friend and close aide of John Mist, who had helped John Mist escape after he had murdered an English officer. The Tree Bride had died in the same police station. The British had finally marched into Mishtigunj in 1880. Victoria Khanna's box of papers gave detailed description of Vertie Treadwell's life. Tara's ancestors were lured to Mishtigunj by the persuasiveness of John Mist, who promised them a chance to pursue their professions free of the British interference. Jai Krishna Gangooly had given up the 'wig and black

robes' of the High court to become 'little more that a back woods vakil' taking up cases to defend the native before the local judges. His father, who was a doctor 'revelled in the title of chief surgeon'. Both father and son were glad to accept John Mist's offer as they were weary of the western ways. Even after forty years, the locals call the village Mishtigunj and not "Razakpur". The Hajji informs Tara that Mishtigunj was the story of John Mist, 'Tara-Ma' had come much later. The Hajji's grandfather had been the closest friend of John Mist. The Hajji gives Tara 'two thick, leather-bound volumes' saying life was more important than death. One of the books was titled "*Mist-nama*", while the second had no title. "The *Mist-nama* was no less flamboyant; the mini-epic of a poor English boy's life" (TB, 66). The *Mist-nama* was dictated to the hajji's grandfather, while the hajji's father had 'assembled the notes and put them all together into literary Persian'. John Mist and the hajji's grandfather had 'perished' on the same day in 1880. The second volume, which was untitled, was written in Bengali. It was the hajji's rendering of the *Mist-nama* into Bengali.

Tara's first encounter as an adult with the Tree Bride was through the Tree Bride's own writing in a little pamphlet which was stored in Tara's parents' 'Calcutta memorabilia'. As a result of Tara's research of the Tree Bride, Rabi, who is a second generation American Indian, takes interest in his Indian heritage. Tara's mother had collected her own 'trove of Gangooly family memorabilia'. However, all that she could find were parables and moral lessons. Tara was looking for facts and word-pictures. The Tree Bride also mentioned the day of her wedding and the night the British troops marched into the house where a feast was on in the honour of Rafeek Hai. John Mist and Rafeek Hai were dragged away in chains and a week later she witnessed the hanging of her favourite "uncles" at the public square. It was an incident the Tree Bride never forgave nor forgot.

The self-reflexivity of the narrative is quite evident in Tara's efforts to combine and give a logical order to different historical events, in her process of writing the Tree Bride's story. Tara tries to blend all the narratives, - the information the Hajji gives her, the documents and information she got from her mother, from Victoria Khanna, the Hajji and Bish, as she points out, "It is part of a larger story, The Natural History

of Coincidence So far as I know, all the things I'm about to reveal are true" (TB, 69). As Tara goes through the *Mist-nama*, she comes across a Mr. Rafeek Hai, introduced as 'the fastest and most accurate transcriber, English, Persian or Bengalee, in all Calcutta'. Suddenly, Tara realises the coincidence of the name "Hai". "It has been six years since that innocent day in Mishtigunj when I purchased the *Mist-nama* from Hajji, six years of desultory reading and attempts at rendering it into novel form, six eventful years in my life with just an M.A. to show for it, and only a year since everything I owned was wiped out. The name "Hai" now sends shivers up my spine.....Even if the names are coincidental, I knew that the best transcriber in all Bengal, Rafeek Hai, sitting that day in a Calcutta court room, would make his way to Mishtigunj and die on the same day as John Mist after taking down the Persian dictation of his *nama.* My Eureka! was a scholarly thrill. Because of my research and writing, I suddenly knew the future and the past" (TB, 117).

> 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, the Old Mishtigunj, is now named. I should tell Victoria Khanna it's not just a drop of blood that reveals the world. Any scrap of the historical record, the stalagmitic *drip-drip* of old newspapers, old letters, old bills and receipts, can do the same. You wonder sometimes how historians keep their sanity, or how the ironies of history do not sputter into absurd comedy. Hai saved Mist, but they died together. Hai's grandson sold me the *nama*; 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)

Tara begins by reading the *Mist-nama* which she terms as the 'oldest and most exciting material'. The *Mist-nama* traces history upto 1832, when John Mist commits murders and is escaping into an unknown future. He has not yet reached Mishtigunj; it is yet to be created. It is only after hundred years of the formation of Mishtigunj that

Vertie arrives there to investigate "about the Tree Bride's gold and her gift to Gandhi. A hundred years must pass between Mist's murders in Garden Reach and the arrival of Vertie Treadwell in the town he built" (TB, 159). According to Vertie's report to Churchill, Tara Lata Gangooly was a 'hardened case', an 'obdurate woman'. She had been financing Gandhiji, then broke up with him and started supporting Subhas Bose. Her house was a "veritable printing press and munitions factory for seditious elements. Somehow or other every arrest we made throughout the district got reported to her first and if any detainee happened to meet with an unfortunate outcome in colonial custody she'd be the first to announce it. She probably maintained a network of informants in every village and there were over two hundred stations in the district, most of which I had never visited myself. And you must remember, Sir, that she never set foot outside her compound. At least, according to rumours" (TB, 207). Vertie had asked the Tree Bride to support the British government to curb seditious activities. According to Vertie, the Tree Bride's answer was 'most unsatisfactory' because the only government she recognized was the Congress Party of India with Subhas Bose as its chairman. The Tree Bride was revered as a God by the natives.

When Jack Sidhu, the police officer helping Tara, finally traces Abbas Sattar Hai's ancestry and his link to the Tree Bride, he is puzzled. He questions Tara what she had ever done to him. Tara is confused as she was quite sure that she never did any harm to him, yet confessed, "But I know I had. Maybe not this "I" named Tara and living in San Francisco, and not even the distant "I" of Calcutta that seems like a different life from centuries ago.....I know that somewhere in the wire-web of history, our lines have crossed. A Gangooly and a Hai have clashed, and as a result, I am responsible for the killing of Victoria and I nearly killed Bish and Rabi. I grew up insular and protected, indifferent to anything that did not touch me personally. We all did, that was the defensive posture of middle-class Calcutta. I grew up hearing the hundred, the thousand ways an unmarried woman or a straying wife brings unending catastrophe to those nearest to her, knowing they were funny because they could never apply to me" (TB, 246-247). Tara tries hard to think about the reasons, but she is unable to decipher the reason for bombing. Tara finds it unbelievable and crazy that the 'Hais' and 'Gangoolys' have a history in Mishtigunj. The copy of *Mist-nama* Tara had, was lost in the bombing. The original *Mist-nama* was most probably sold to Germans for few

pennies per page. Tara had been working on the earlier history from her memory, while she had papers and documents for the history of Treadwell and the Tree Bride.

In addition to the *Mist-nama* and the bits the Tree Bride had written about herself and the pamphlets about her, which Tara discovered in parents' house, she also got help from Nigel Coughlin's cache. Nigel Coughlin, a writer, was British, but embraced India wholeheartedly. Coughlin left from the 1920s a monograph on "the true crimes and execution of John Mist" and a memoir, which he wrote late in his life, about his friendship with the Tree Bride, - 'the long – forgotten Tara-Ma of Mishtigunj'. The letters that Coughlin, an English journalist, preserved Tara Lata as a tenacious woman never 'shrinking from the task nor capitulation before the threat of sedition'. As Tara finally finishes her book on the Tree Bride, she is haunted by the Tree Bride's ghost. The Tree Bride requests Tara to free her from the 'world of mortals', by performing the 'rites'. Tara ignores the 'urgent whispers' of the Tree Bride and continues to attend to Bish who was badly hurt in the bombing. Tara feels that the Tree Bride sneers at her dedication towards Bish; "*Ah, distracted from duty to me by pati-seva, the Tree Bride sneers. The selfless Hindu wife dedicates herself to her husband's welfare. Even a divorced one. Even in America"* (TB, 279-280). The Tree Bride reveals the mystery and secret of her death. She was hanged in a jail cell. Her body was thrown into a sewage ditch, 'submerged in filth' where the vultures 'ripped chunks off' her body and dogs 'chewed her bones'. She felt ashamed. Now she was waiting to be liberated. Tara has to make a trip to Varanasi, the celestial city of her grandmother's tales, to fulfil the desire of the Tree Bride. "Ours is a special case. It's not the passing of a loved one on alien soil. We're the aliens now. The Tree Bride would not permit burial outside India. We're trying to bury a phase of history itself" (TB, 283).

Tara's visit to Varanasi, at the end of the novel *The Tree Bride*, to liberate the soul of the murdered martyr – Tara Ma, as she was called by the locals of Mishtigunj, is also a liberating event for Tara, the protagonist, metaphorically. The Tree Bride may have dreamed of a 'harmonious future' for herself, a kind of harmony that she experienced with her '*Mist-jethu* – paternal uncle' John Mist. She dreamed of a liberated India, where the Hindus and Muslims would live harmoniously. The

Britishers would leave India, and leave behind the 'investments, infrastructures and their good works' as a small price for wealth they had plundered.

> She would be in the first generation of liberated Indians, her radically reborn father had promised; she would see India take its deserved place among the great nations of the world. What a glorious future awaited 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....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. (253-254)

Tara didn't have exalted ambitions like the Tree Bride. She had wished to liberate herself from the bondage of stereotypical roles that the Indian society delineates for the women. She had hoped to pursue her dreams in the new world of Americ; her dream to be a writer. However, those dreams didn't materialize as the wife of Bish Chatterjee. There was a need to see the world from a new perspective, which was possible only when Tara was liberated from the bondage of stereotypical roles. After her divorce, Tara enjoys the freedom she craved for. However, in her quest for her roots she invites unforeseen troubles. The two bomb blasts and experiences of life make Tara and Bish retrospect about their relation. It broadens the mind of Bish and his attitude towards his wife and son, Rabi, who is gay. This was the kind of freedom and harmony Tara had wanted in life. A secure life with her family, anchored in her roots and cultural values, but with the freedom to create an identity of her own, an identity as a writer of 'stories'. She rewrites the history of the Indian freedom struggle by narrating the story of the Tree Bride. The activities carried out by the Tree Bride, before she became a martyr reflect the Indian nationalistic fervour as portrayed in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. Tara's efforts to trace her roots, educate her son Rabi, an American Indian, about his roots and her efforts to keep up the traditional values inspite of breaking free from some of the stereotypical rules reflect on what Homi K. Bhabha terms as the 'performative aspect' of the nation; defining the Indian cultural nationalism.

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