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**HISTORICAL IMPRINTS AND INDIAN AFFINITY IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOVELS:  
THE HOLDER OF THE WORLD AND THE TREE BRIDE**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present study aimed to explore the historical imprints as source material for the expansion and portrayal of characters and to trace the Indian affinity felt by the main characters of the novels, *The Holder of the World* and *The Tree Bride*. In the novel *The Holder of the World* (1993), Bharati Mukherjee has narrated a Puritan woman's experiences as an immigrant in India and to develop the plot of the story, she has chosen the historical Mughal India as the setting of the novel. Here, Mukherjee shows how a foreigner is influenced by the oriental culture and her affinity to the Indian culture transforms her from a Puritan woman to the *bibi* of a Hindu Raja and also changes her personality to a rebel to stand dauntlessly against the restrictions of her society. In *The Tree Bride* (2004), Bharati Mukherjee's purpose is to make an identity of a woman in a diasporic world. To fulfill her purpose she utilizes Tara's family history to analyze the source of female consciousness. In summary, the present study explored the historical imprints and Indian affinity in Bharati Mukherjee's novels *The Holder of the World* and *The Tree Bride*.

Keywords: Immigrant writing; cultural conflicts; imprints of history; Indian affinity.

**Introduction**

Bharati Mukherjee occupies a very prominent place in the Era of immigrant writings in English literature. As an immigrant, she has experienced cross-cultural conflict, racial discrimination and identity crisis which are the most important themes of her writings. She particularly sympathized on giving illustrations of the predicament of those immigrant women who have been surviving in the conflict of traditional values in foreign lands. Some of her creations are related to the sufferings of immigrant women who are struggling hard to assimilate back to their native country. In the present study, the emphasis was given to explore the historical imprints and to trace the Indian affinity felt by the main characters of the novels, *The Holder of the World* and *The Tree Bride*.

The novelist, Bharati Mukherjee, has chosen the last decade of the Seventeenth Century India for the plot of the novel, *The Holder of the World* when the country was undergoing a historical transition of power

from the Mughals to the English. Here, Hannah's awakening from a conservative Puritan woman to an Indian individual comes through her Indian lover Raja Jadav Singh. The novel becomes a melting pot of oral history and imagination for the artful blending of history and autobiographical details including her memory and personal observations. According to Mukherjee, the novel, *The Holder of the World*, is "a major work, historical in nature that nevertheless incorporates a much version" (A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman 26). In this novel, the narrator describes the rude realities of British industrialists in India. The Britishers came in India to loot, to lead a life of ease, lechery, and convenience. They always showed their supremacy over the native people. The fort, the Britishers used to live in India became little England for them. The spontaneous depiction of the luxurious lifestyle of the Company men during the Mughal India makes the novel very lively. In the words of Shakuntala Bharvani: "It is very much a colonial novel at one level, with several details of colonial life woven in" (Bharvani 192). *The Holder of the World* is a masterpiece of the novelist's skill to unify Past and Present, exotic and known, East and West, the Old World and the New World that makes this novel so extraordinary that never seen before in her writing. Besides this, the novel is a saga of expatriation and the writer's hunger to connect her Indian affinity in her journey towards Americanization.

The novel, *The Tree Bride* (2004), is a sequel to Mukherjee's former novel *Desirable Daughters*. Tara Chatterjee is the narrator and protagonist of the novel, *The Tree Bride*. The story of Tara begins in the novel, *Desirable Daughters* and ends in *The Tree Bride*. To make an identity of a woman in a diasporic world, as well as to explore the source of female consciousness and also to show Indian affinity of foreigners, Bharati Mukherjee depends on Tara's family history, Therefore, the aim of the present study is to explore the historical imprints and the Indian affinity in Bharati Mukherjee's novels *The Holder of the World* and *The Tree Bride*.

#### **Historical imprints and Indian affinity in *The Holder of the World***

Hannah Easton, the leading woman character of the novel '*The Holder of the World*, was abandoned in her childhood by her mother for her native Indian-American lover. She brought up in an orthodox Puritan family in Salem by Robert and Susannah Fitch. Hannah married Gabriel Legge, a very irresponsible and undomesticated person who very frequently went to his mission leaving Hannah alone at home. In the absence of her husband, she engaged herself in the duty of a nurse. She came to India from Massachusetts at the age of Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb, as a wife of a junior factor in East India Company. Hannah got a lot of information about the social life of India and also its culture from her husband during their way from Massachusetts to India. She was informed that every people on Coromandel belonged to a specific caste. They may be a right hand or left-hand caste if they are Hindu. In the case of Muslims, they may be either Shia or Sunni. This land increased the curiosity of a Puritan woman whose society is not so varied and not so diverse like Indian society. She was surprised to know that in India people speak different languages, owe fidelity to different masters, and worship different gods even also their ancestors have come from different countries. Everything about Coromandel aroused her wonder and she gradually built her affinity to India. She expressed her wonder thus: "The Coromandel had started something as immense as a Cyclone deep inside her body and mind" (*The Holder of the World* 163). In India, she got little opportunity to assimilate with native people as she was compelled to confine herself in the hierarchical world of East India Company people. She used every opportunity to communicate with the people of 'Black Town' (Native people). She was threatened by a Company Officer: "It is not consistent with our interest... to let the people of the land see our countrywomen yield to self-indulgence" (*The Holder of the World* 100). To maintain their superiority, they always remained isolated from the native people Hannah was highly influenced by the al traditional culture of the Orient.

Like Salem, in India also Hannah's husband neglected her and left her alone in the Company enclave. At her loneliness, she met Bhagmati, an Indian Ayah and friend. Hannah acquired knowledge about the beliefs of native people from Bhagmati. She told her the fragments from the Ramayana, the great Hindu Epic. Sita's Agni pariksha (Trial of Fire) emotionally touched her heart and she realized that in Indian society also a woman is not free from the purity of chastity and she has to always prove her chastity to her husband and also to the society willingly or unwillingly. This trial unrevealed to her that there is no fundamental difference between the orthodox Puritan society and the so-called Indian society.

After the death of Gabriel in a cyclone in the Bay of Bengal, Hannah escaped with Bhagmati to Punpur under the protection of a Hindu Raja, Jadav Singh, who saved them from a bridge collapse. Hannah enjoyed a life of boundless sensual pleasure of her dream with Jadav Singh. She loved the Raja so much. She wanted the Raja and nothing else; she would sacrifice anything for his touch and the love they made. She became pregnant as a result of this affair. Sandhya Rao Mehta gives her opinion about their relationship: "Her courtship with the Raja indicates her relationship based entirely on India, 'Eastern' values and morality with little reference to life left behind" (Mehta 197). Her courtship with the Raja transformed her from a Puritan woman to his white bibi and her unborn child sowed her strong affinity to India. She claimed her kinship with India thus: "I was once a respectable married English lady and look at me now-a bibi in a sari" (*The Holder of the World* 197). But her love affair comes to an end when the Raja involved in a war with Aurangzeb, the Mughal Emperor of India. Jadav Singh was defeated by the vast army of Aurangzeb and seriously wounded. To protect her Indian lover, she put her step into the political history of the Mughal Empire. She killed the general of the emperor and rescued the unconscious Raja. She decided to runaway with Raja but the Raja rejected her. Finding no option to stop the impending battle, she buried all her Puritan past and came out as a real fighter for life and desperately crossed the battle line to plea the Emperor to stop the battle against her lover. Her appeal to the Emperor was based on the Oriental religious belief that proved her close affinity to the Indian religious belief. She said to the emperor: "Mercy before Allah, not mercy before men. Allah judges men, and the Emperor is but a man who must also be judged. The duty of the Emperor is to bring the infidel before the throne of judgment. There is no escaping the judgment of Allah." (*The Holder of the World* 269).

Aurangzeb was impressed by Hannah's religious knowledge but did not move from his point to usurp the kingdom of the Raja as he thought that to punish a foe was his duty to the throne. After his death, Hannah went back to her Puritan Salem with her daughter. In Salem, Hannah again tried to establish her existence in the margins of the Puritan community along with her mother Rebecca Easton and her daughter, Pearl. In Salem, she became a foreigner who transgresses the moral convention of orthodox Puritan society by making an extramarital relationship with a Raja. The love of Jadav Singh and her Indian religious belief provided her tremendous mental strength to face the taunts of the people of the Puritan colony.

#### **Historical imprints and Indian affinity in the novel *The Tree Bride***

The story of *The Tree Bride* begins when Tara's house in San Francisco was firebombed by a man who wanted to kill her. In San Francisco, Tara came to know much information about Tara-Lata, her great-grandmother from the documents of her family which was handed over to her by her gynecologist, Victoria Khanna, the grand-daughter of Vertie Treadwell, the District Magistrate of Mishtigunj. Victoria Khanna's information inspired her to know more about Tara-Lata and she decided to come back to Mishtiganj. In Mishtigunj, Tara met Hajji Gul Mohammed Chowdhury who gave her more information about Tara-Lata's life and accompanied her to the house where the Tree Bride lived.

Tara-Lata was an unfortunate girl who married to a tree at the age of five as her fiance died in snake bite at the night of her marriage and became the Tree Bride. Later, in her life, Tara-Lata was involved in the independence movement of Bengal to achieve independence from England. Tara-Lata took part in the independence movement indirectly. She never took part in any violent incident as a freedom fighter. She was highly influenced by the nonviolence ideology of Gandhiji. In the year 1930, she contributed her gold dowry to support Gandhiji financially for Salt March. But later she broke off with Gandhi to support Subhas Bose. Hajji said: "Her gold put Mishtigunj on the map. Congress officials singled it out: A village in the remotest corner of our country has contributed more to our freedom than some of our richest cities" (*The Tree Bride* 61). He also informed that The Bengal Congress chief himself, Netaji Subhas Bose, came from Calcutta and orated before hundreds outside the school—"Mishtigunj jai hind" (*The Tree Bride* 61). Tara-Lata had opened the door of her house for those young soldiers who fought for their country against the British Raj. She protested against the oppression of British Raj and inspired people by saying: "Nobody is too young, no sudra too poor, no woman too weak, to fight for the freedom of India" (*The Tree Bride* 61). Through her nationalist activates Tara-Lata showed her protest against British Raj. She gained fame and respect from the whole community by taking care and providing medical facilities to the injured of the partition violence at her house in Mishtigunj. For her service to

the community, she becomes 'Tara Ma' from Tara-Lata for all villagers. Her service to the community lifts her to the position of a heroine. She handed over her files about British atrocities in Mishtigunj to a reporter, Nigel Coughlin to publish them in the British newspapers. About her involvement in the independence movement Vertie Treadwell, the District Commissioner of Mishtigunj commented: "We knew 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" (*The Tree Bride* 207). She was arrested, tortured in the police custody and died in jail. The police vanished her body to avoid any agitation of the nationalist-minded villagers through her funeral procession. The preta of Tara-Lata said: "They tossed my body over the prison wall into the sewage ditch. I hovered above my corpse. It lay submerged in filth. Vultures ripped chunks off with their beaks. Starving dogs chewed my bones. I had no body but I felt the pain, and the shame" (*The Tree Bride* 281). From her visit to Mishtigunj, Tara also came to know about the Indian affinity of two foreigners --- John Mist, the founder of Mishtigunj and Vertie Treadwell, the colonial Officer.

In the first section of her novel, Tara described her rage against the evils of British colonialism in India. Tara narrated the life story of Jhon Mist and old Treadwell, and also described their affinity to the beauty and mystery of the Indian subcontinent. John Mist, Vertie Treadwell and Victoria Khanna—all were influenced by the traditional Indian culture and established a strong affinity to this country.

Jack Snow who later emerged as John Mist and the founder of Mishtigunj was a foundling. On his way to India, his ship was overtaken by Danish pirates. This incident coincidentally brought him in an area of East Bengal where he founded the settlement of Mishtigunj. Being a foreigner, Mist was a native Indian at heart. He loved this village and its Bengali language deeply. For this language, he gave up his language too. He confessed in the novel: "I no longer speak English" (*The Tree Bride* 137). The influence of Bengali language on him is expressed here: "He felt reborn, all his sins washed away, the boy he'd been lay buried under a mound of language he no longer spoke. The sound of English, in fact, sickened and enraged him" (*The Tree Bride* 137). Bengal became his home and Bengali his native language. According to the narrator, "Mist found himself a clearer thinker and better negotiator in his adopted language" (*The Tree Bride* 138). Though Mist was a foreigner, he very easily imbibed the culture of the Orient: "He trekked to Ambarnath, the sacred ice-cave in the Himalayas where the Ganges comes to life; he visited Benares and slept in alleyways with the beggars; he prayed in mosques and honored the burial sites of every pir; he tramped the length and breadth of India, surviving on the generosity of strangers. He was taken for Indian wherever he went (*The Tree Bride* 148).

Through his life, John Mist established an example of Homi Bhabha's hybridity and mimicry by becoming "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 266). He was a well-wisher of Mishtigunj and liked to see the progressive peaceful social and cultural harmony amongst the residents of Mishtigunj. He thought, for proper development of any locality, the educated professionals like teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc. play a great role. He had given more importance to making a balanced community during a recruitment drive in his city by recruiting two for each administrative job to resolve the bipolar opposition of Hindu and Muslim. As a result, Mishtigunj had a Hindu and a Muslim doctor. Two Lawyers of Mishtigunj were Jai Krishna Gangooli, the father of legendary Tara-Lata, the tree bride, and Rafeek Hai. In Mist's project- two of everything - there was "a Muslim doctor, and a Hindu, a Hindu lawyer, and a Muslim, two kinds of teachers, two kinds of the journalist, and built two kinds of schools" (*The Tree Bride* 63). In the year 1880, Mist and his Muslim friend Rafeek Hai were executed together by the British. In his death also Mist puts the sign of his project - 'two of everything'. Thus Mist has become a part of Indian tradition and Mishtigunj has become his final home.

Vertie Treadwell's Indian affinity was quite contrasting to Mist. Mist adapted Indian traditions from the core of his heart. Vertie Treadwell was an Indian but from the point of his service; he despised the people as he had come here to govern. Though he was an Anglo- Indian by birth but he was an Indian in the sense: "His parents and grandparents were born, or had died, in India. His mother dies in Anglican Cemetery of Mysore. She was a Canning, does that not count for something? When his father had fallen in Sudan with Gordon Pasha, they

had found his last instructions stitched into his tunic: Do not condemn me to a second English death. Bury me beside my wife in Mysore” (*The Tree Bride* 195).

Vertie Treadwell had an experience of fifty years of living intimately with the Indians. He was appointed as District Commissioner in Mishtigunj in the year 1930. On one hand, he demanded himself as an Indian, on the other, he also felt proud to save the British Empire by his complete supremacy on the enemies in Mishtigunj. Vertie Treadwell told on behalf of his Indian affinity: “I am one of the Indian-born. Fully ninety percent of my life has been spent in India. I have probably spent a greater percentage of my life in India than Mr. Nehru has, and certainly more than the late Mr. Gandhi has. I have participated in many of India’s greatest moments. I have endeavored from love to keep free of modern contaminants” (*The Tree Bride* 201). He was not against Tara-Lata but his sense of duty never permitted him to spare her. So he arrested her. Vertie returned to his home in England when India achieved independence from the British Raj in the year 1947. Victoria Treadwell Khanna, the granddaughter of Vertie Treadwell, is an illegitimate child. She married Yash Khanna to achieve a hybrid identity. Her pride in her Indian affinity was expressed by her words: “I’m Indian, my dear, what do you think of that?” (*The Tree Bride* 242). By marrying an Indian, Yash Khanna, Victoria, established her affinity to India. She had died in a bomb blast. Through her death Victoria confirmed her kinship with India. After her death her husband, Yash Khanna arranged a ritualistic cremation ceremony for her in Freemont as most people of Freemont belonged to the Indian community. Through her funeral ceremony in the Indian traditional norms, Victoria’s soul feels peace forever. Her soul also attained a new identity that was purely Indian in an alien land far distanced from real India.

Tara, the narrator who became more American by divorcing her husband and developing an extramarital relationship with a Hungarian Buddhist, ultimately returned to her former husband, Bish and her own traditional culture, after the bomb blast of her house in San Francisco, proved her affinity to Indian culture. After the bomb blast, she re-established her Indian home and a family with her ex-husband, Bishwapriya Chatterjee, their son, and their unborn child. She also proved her affinity to the Indian Hindu cultural tradition to arrange an honorable funeral to pay her honor and to set free the soul of her ancestor, Tara-Lata at the Manikarnika Ghat of Varanasi. Tara might arrange this ceremony in Freemont but she preferred Varanasi for this occasion as she thought that Tara-Lata never lived here. Tara-Lata lived in Mishtigunj and also died there before independence. Then this Mishtigunj was geographically located in India but now in Bangladesh. So to give her a real home that is in India, Tara had chosen Varanasi, the holy place for Hindu. The novel ends with a ceremonial cremation of Tara-Lata in Varanasi’s Manikarnika’s Ghat by her descendant Tara. Tara has arranged this funeral in purely Hindu traditional manner. Through the life history of Tara-Lata, Tara, the narrator, actually constructed her Indian identity and affinity in a diasporic world.

### Conclusion

The present study explores the historical imprints like lifestyle and superiority maintained by the Britishers in the East Indian Company enclave in India, the war between Hindu Raja Jadav Singh and Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb, British colonialism in India, Tara-Lata’s involvement in the freedom movement in the story-lines of the novels, *The Holder of the World* and *The Tree Bride*. Moreover, it explores the novelist’s creative imagination, urge of tracing the root and the Indian affinity of the narrator and characters’ with the available oral story and the respective historical facts and events that represented in the novels, *The Holder of the World* and *The Tree Bride*.

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