

Tradition and Ecological Identity: Rural and Urban Dichotomies in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride*

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Abstract

Indian American author Bharati Mukherjee is celebrated as one of the foremost literary voices exploring the intricate cross-cultural experiences of the South Asian diaspora through a distinct feminist perspective. She, a versatile diasporic novelist of Indian origin, authored a number of novels on post-colonial, autobiographical and multicultural themes. Among her novels, there is a trilogy of fiction— *The Desirable Daughters*, *The Tree Bride*, and *Miss New India*. This trilogy deals with the theme of tradition, modernity, cultural conflict, myth and immigration.

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride* delves into the intersections of tradition, ecological identity, and the rural-urban divide, focusing on how these tensions manifest within individual and collective consciousness. This paper explores how Mukherjee portrays the dichotomy between rural and urban environments, drawing connections to ecological identity and tradition through her protagonist's journey. The novel intricately weaves these themes into its narrative, particularly examining the protagonist's ancestral village, community identity, and the evolving relationship with the environment. By investigating Mukherjee's portrayal of ecological and cultural identity, this paper sheds light on the importance of tradition in shaping the characters' connections to both nature and place. Employing an ecocritical framework, the paper seeks to understand how Mukherjee uses rural and urban landscapes as metaphors for the complexity of ecological and cultural identity in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Post-Colonial, multi-cultural, tradition, tree, rural, urban, cultural identity, myth, customs and gender issues.

Introduction

In the context of postcolonial Indian literature, the exploration of tradition, identity, and environmental consciousness takes on a unique form, often intersecting in ways that reveal the complexities of cultural heritage and modernity. Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride* offers a nuanced portrayal of the tensions between rural and urban environments, particularly through its exploration of the protagonist's ancestral legacy. This paper examines how Mukherjee juxtaposes rural and urban spaces to highlight the evolution of ecological identity, particularly in relation to tradition. By employing an ecocritical lens, this research will analyze how Mukherjee uses these environments to reflect broader social, political, and cultural dilemmas concerning heritage, identity, and belonging.

Ecological Identity and Tradition in *The Tree Bride*

Mukherjee's protagonist, Tara Chatterjee, embarks on a journey that reconnects her to her ancestral past in rural India, leading to the rediscovery of her forebear, the legendary Tree Bride. This narrative thread links ecological identity directly to tradition, as the village of Mishtigunj, where the Tree Bride lived, serves as a symbol of ecological harmony and a deep-rooted connection to the land. The protagonist's exploration of her cultural heritage is intertwined with the ecological identity of the village, suggesting that tradition is not merely a cultural inheritance but also an environmental one. It is believed that nobody has a control over fate and destiny but it itself governs the people in the universe. A general acceptance, to some extent, is about the divine role of person's karma that sometimes, reshapes the fate of someone. The father of Tara manages to survive his life and also the lives of other members of his family especially his daughter with the mystical and mythological conception of Hinduism so that he may destroy the curse of widowhood on his daughter. And that's why he gets his daughter married with a tree named 'Sundari'. Thus, on one hand, his daughter spiritually remains in marital bond with nature, symbol of spiritual deity. And on the other hand, she remains virgin throughout her life. Being a true follower of Hinduism and its mythological conception, she has established the ideals and identity of being traditional and mythical cultural beliefs. Tara is identified as Tree Bride of Mishtigunj, after being mystically married with a tree. Her father marries her with a tree when her would be husband is died due to a poisonous snake bite. It was only the role of fate, as his father and other members of her family believed in, that plays an important role in shaping her unprecedented future of mystic marriage. The marriage between a human and a tree is supposed to be infused with the supernatural influences in the life of a human. Such a marriage presents the metaphoric expression of deity's influence in the life of the concerned person. In the presented novel, groom's father is introduced as a greedy man who demands a lot of dowries but

father of the bride refuses to bless his son with money, precious gifts of gold and other luxurious items.

The rural landscape of Mishtigunj is portrayed as a place where tradition is still closely tied to the land. The Tree Bride herself becomes a symbol of this connection, representing a blend of ecological and cultural identity that transcends time. Mukherjee writes:

“Mishtigunj was not just a village, but a living, breathing organism that held the memories of its people, its trees, its animals, and its soil.”

This passage underscores the idea that rural spaces in the novel are depicted as reservoirs of ecological wisdom and cultural memory. The protagonist’s rediscovery of her ancestor is also a rediscovery of this ecological identity, which Mukherjee suggests has been lost or eroded in the urbanized, modern world.

In this novel, one character is Bish , Bish and others want to make a trip to Kashi. They want to see the Manikarnika Ghat of Kashi. Kashi is the historical city and known as the land of Lord Shiva. The most famous and the holiest cremation of India, Manikarnika Ghat is on the holiest river Ganga, It is the navel of Kashi. Many corpses are burn on the Manikarnika Ghat through the Indian tradition and culture. The corpses are on the bamboo biers, bathed from the Ganga water, drenched in ghee and oil on the whole body and chanted mantras. In Kashi, death is not the sign of life’s end but the souls to the abode of ancestors and new birth. The restless soul is known as the Preta, because suffer a bad death, as suicide or killed. Who gets the natural death is known as pitra, an ancestor.

“Tara Lata’s spirit is restless because she suffered a bad death..... she is doomed to remain a Preta, a ghost, instead of a Pitr, an ancestor.” (page number 282, *The Tree Bride*)

Rural-Urban Dichotomies in the Novel

Mukherjee contrasts the rural setting of Mishtigunj with the urban environments of colonial and postcolonial India. The urban spaces in *The Tree Bride* are portrayed as sites of alienation, disconnection, and ecological destruction. In contrast to the organic harmony of rural Mishtigunj, the cities in the novel symbolize modernization's impact on both cultural and ecological identities. Urban spaces are depicted as places where tradition is forgotten, and environmental degradation is rampant.

Tara's return to India after living in the United States reflects this contrast. Her urban, Westernized life is distant from the ecological and cultural realities of rural India. The novel critiques urban modernity by highlighting the disconnect between urbanized individuals and the natural world. Mukherjee uses the figure of the Tree Bride to argue for a reclamation of traditional ecological wisdom, which is rooted in the rural landscape.

Urbanization in *The Tree Bride* is also linked to colonialism. Mukherjee critiques how British colonialism not only disrupted Indian cultural traditions but also contributed to ecological devastation. The Tree Bride's resistance to British rule is thus framed as not only a fight for cultural identity but also for ecological preservation. The novel suggests that colonialism accelerated urbanization and industrialization, further severing the ties between people and their environment.

“She loved her village and she loved the Sundarbans and the Bengali language and of Course she was a Hindu and she could not imagine the world outside of her religion” (Page number 268, *The Tree Bride*)

Ecocriticism and Postcolonial Identity

The novel's exploration of ecological identity is intricately connected to postcolonial themes of displacement, exile, and return. Mukherjee, herself a diasporic writer, often explores the complexities of identity for those living between worlds. In *The Tree Bride*, Tara's journey back to her ancestral village becomes a metaphor for the postcolonial subject's search for roots and belonging. The rural-urban dichotomy reflects the protagonist's internal struggle with her own fragmented identity.

Ecocriticism allows for an examination of how the novel portrays the relationship between people and their environment in the context of colonial and postcolonial history. The destruction of the rural landscape in the novel is paralleled with the destruction of cultural traditions under colonial rule. Mukherjee suggests that reclaiming ecological identity is crucial for postcolonial subjects seeking to reconnect with their cultural heritage.

The novel's focus on trees, particularly the banyan tree under which the Tree Bride was married, is symbolic of this ecological and cultural identity. The banyan tree, with its deep roots and expansive canopy, represents the interconnectedness of all life, both human and non-human. Mukherjee uses the image of the tree to suggest that ecological and cultural identity are inseparable.

“Mukherjee introduced the Tree Bride in her last spellbinding novel, Desirable Daughter. (She) is a virtuoso in the crafting of shrewd, hilarious, suspenseful, and significant cross-cultural dramas.” (blurb) — Donna Seaman, Booklist

Conclusion

Bharati Mukherjee's one of the best novels *The Tree Bride*, deals with the theme of cross culture, history, myth, identity, tradition, modernity and gender issues. In the novel, *The Tree Bride*, Bharati Mukherjee make to show the significance of Nature, especially tree. In *The Tree Bride*, Bharati Mukherjee presents a complex exploration of the relationship between tradition, ecological identity, and the rural-urban divide. By contrasting the ecological harmony of rural Mishtigunj with the alienation of urban spaces, Mukherjee critiques modernity and colonialism's impact on both cultural and environmental identities. Through the protagonist's journey, the novel suggests that reclaiming ecological identity is essential for postcolonial subjects seeking to reconnect with their heritage. Mukherjee's use of ecocriticism highlights the importance of tradition in shaping both individual and collective ecological consciousness, offering a powerful commentary on the need to preserve cultural and environmental legacies in the face of modernization. The tree Sundari, is not only a tree and also not only a symbol of a groom, but also it shows a new hope, new thought and the new life.

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