



# Ecological Gaze: An Exploration of Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride*

Dr. Patil Sangita Sharnappa

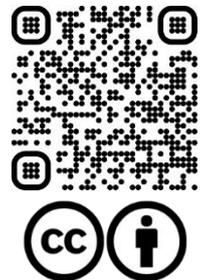
LBS Govt First Grade College, RT Nagar, Bengaluru, India

Received: 01 May 2023; Received in revised form: 02 Jun 2023; Accepted: 10 Jun 2023; Available online: 19 Jun 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— Bharathi Mukherjee is a diasporic writer. Most of her novels focus on assimilation as well as encounter with the East and the West. *The Tree Bride* also goes in the same line of thought through an amalgamation of historical portrayal which represents the East whereas the colonial narration highlights the West. A per contra account, the article departs from this wider theme and attempts to explore from the perspective of ecological narration. It depicts the picture of the exploitation of nature for the sake of the greed of human beings. To this end, the article attempts to spotlight on the anthropocentric attitude towards nature through a few aspects such as the advancement in science and technology—in the form of bombs—leads to self-destruction, the colonial attitude, and the climate change because of the onslaught on nature which leads to ecological degradation. These are the theoretical underpinnings to analyse the novel.



**Keywords**— Historical portrayal, colonial narration, anthropocentric attitude, climate change

To understand the function of a hand it is necessary to understand the whole body and consider the former in an organic relation to the latter. Similarly, a human is both a member as well as the home of which (s)he is a member.

(Leopold 1949:204)

## I. INTRODUCTION

Bharathi Mukherjee is a diasporic writer. Most of her novels focus on assimilation as well as encounter with the East and the West. *The Tree Bride* also goes in the same line of thought through an amalgamation of historical portrayal which represents the East whereas the colonial narration highlights the West. A per contra account, the article departs from this wider theme and attempts to explore from the perspective of ecological narration. It depicts the picture of the exploitation of nature for the sake of the greed of human beings. To this end, the article attempts to spotlight on the anthropocentric attitude towards nature through a few aspects such as the advancement in science and technology—in the form of bombs—leads to self-destruction, the colonial attitude, and the climate change because of the onslaught on

nature. These are the theoretical underpinnings to analyse the novel.

## II. IMPACT OF THE BOMB BLAST

Bharati Mukherjee, a winner of a National Book Critics Circles award, is the author of seven novels and two non-fiction. She is working as a Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tree Bride* (2004) is a fusion of historical narration, especially British Raj, treachery, and mythological perception. This article departs from all these aspects and explores the ecological facets—certain features are focused on. The major focus is how the impact of anthropocentric actions on all living beings.

The ensuing prologue of the novel gives a broader perspective of the consequences of an inhuman attitude and the advancement in science and technology. The novel opens with the adverse impact of a bomb blast on a family settled in America. It gives many dimensions. Bish, the computer genius, is a representation of advancement whereas Tara pockets the traditional life of Indians through her own pragmatic experiences. The protagonist, Tara,

being pregnant along with her husband struggled to survive in terms of the proximity of an unexpected bomb blow, “The fire-borne sparks and ashes had freckled my face with a myriad of tiny black pits; some will never heal. Even on Haight Street, when I’m pushing Bish in his wheelchair. I’m the one they stare at” (Mukherjee 8). Mukherjee had espoused the horary effect of a bomb blast on a family, overall, on a pregnant woman and the foetus which is growing in her womb. Tara was not only worried about the forthcoming baby but also her handicapped husband, Bish. On the other hand, the article exhibits the impact of air pollution with reference to climate change and second-hand smoke exposure, which causes diseases such as cystic fibrosis, “I interrupted to say that sixteen years ago I conceived a child with the same man. Rabi’s got issues, maybe even genetic issues, but no cystic fibrosis” (Mukherjee 10). The major focus is how the impact of modernization and advancement in science and technology on human lives and all living beings as well. Chief Seattle, a Duwamish Chief, proposes, “This we know—the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth” (Shiva, *Staying* 19). This indirectly poses a question to humanity: Are we really developing or is it an Anthropocene attitude?

### III. THE COLONISED ATTITUDE TOWARDS NATURE

The colonisers such as Jack Snow, Tom Crabbe, Captain Partridge, and soon entered the land of Sunder Ban West Bengal. The East India Company and British Navy started the rapture of the forest which is a treasure of Sundari trees—straight and tall trees. They started exporting the logs of the tree, “A dense, tiger-and-timber-rich jungle that separates the sea from the fragile interior. The treasure and the terror of East Bengal is its limitless fresh water for rice and fish and the ‘blue devil’ indigo and the forests of Sundari trees, straight and tall with a purplish density more resistant than iron” (Mukherjee 52). During the British Raj, the business of trading was rampant. They exported metal and trees, mining and deforestation, a rape of the earth ultimately affects human lives and other living beings, “The basic design of an East Indianman, British, Dutch, or Danish, had not changed in two hundred years. They’d been sleek and beautiful at three masts and five hundred tons, then at six and seven hundred, but the companies’ trade kept expanding and their ships grew heavier and more luxurious. Masts towered higher than the tallest tree, topped with a second mast subject to easy snapping” (Mukherjee 86). In such a way the Indian natural wealth exhorted utmost. The climate of India was changing by men’s attitudes. It was an indirect

message to the British Raj and their trade of timber and metal which affect the natural cycle leads to a change in climate to uncertainty, “The slide of winter into spring had been imperceptible, sleety gray to rainy gray, the buds retarded, no color anywhere, but today held, just briefly, a touch of magic” (Mukherjee 170).

It was not stopped with the trade of timber. It further went on hunting and poaching. Vertie Treadwell, a coloniser, had shown manly virtue by hunting, poaching, and killing the animals, “He hunted alone. No herds of prey paraded in front of him. He was an absolute master of his territory, tolerating no other males, and he could personally manage any leopards and hyenas that impinged. He could climb, he could swim, and he could hide in broad daylight, standing tall in the play of light and shadow” (Mukherjee 181). He killed plenty of tigers. It was unimaginable to be an inhuman human being. Therefore, very aptly Mukherjee narrated what he was doing with the tiger. There were many questions about whether he sleeps on the skin of the tiger like the Mughal emperors or rubs his back against tiger-covered walls or cover his toes with tiger plush. It is a mockery of man’s futile domination and leaves answered questions: Where are we going? Are we dominating nature and showing our power? Or is Nature ready to take revenge for each action? Placed in this context, it is very apropos to meditate on, “The humans of the future will surely understand, knowing what they presumably know about the history of their forebears on the earth, that only in one, very brief era, lasting less than three centuries, did a significant number of their kind believe that planets and asteroids are inert” (Ghosh 1).

### IV. BEFORE AND AFTER: A JUXTAPOSITION PANAROMA

The view of Calcutta with natural beauty, particularly the river Hooghly, which was once alive gradually became lifeless. It was drastically transitioned due to an anthropocentric attitude in the name of the British Raj. Once the place was, “Trees lined every road and were not confined to a few locked parks and private gardens. He had never seen so many parks, as though it were a divine mission to preserve greenery in such heat and dust. Monkeys chatted on the branches and begged for food, then snatched it” (Mukherjee 111). Apart from the city, the land was full of a bounty of flora and fauna. It was rich with forests, lakes, rivers, and animals. The most important is tigers. It is the land of tigers. John Mist, along with other colonisers, encroached on the forest by not only the trade of Sundari trees but also teak and Mahogany. This encroachment is an onslaught on the lives of animals and birds. The novel also juxtaposed then Calcutta and now

Calcutta. How drastically the city and the land had changed. It also throws light on the comparison of Calcutta and London from the perspective of closer to organic lives and the other epitome of modernisation respectively, "Public buildings were gray and soot streaked, the winter air foul and bilious. Calcutta streets, on the other hand, were wide and the pace was, set by ox cars and camels. A small army of bent-over women and children swept the roadways. Even the cow and camel dung was quickly picked up and piled into baskets." (Mukherjee 110). Moreover, it also deteriorated the agrarian culture which is passed from ages together. The new form of agriculture is introduced by the West and becomes a symbol of fashion and everyone praises it whereas the Indian traditional agriculture is considered a mean way of cultivation, "In the Hickey Home he was obliged to think of jute twelve hours a day, but jute could have been another Calcutta joke, like at the trial when he'd come in expecting praise and a little money, and came out an orphan with three years' probation. Jute was a slave trade. People talked of indigo and tea and timber, but no one ever spoke of jute" (Mukherjee 124-125). Everything had exploited at its extreme level, the city, the forest, the agriculture, and the rivers.

## V. CONCLUSION

The novel is a saga of the degradation of nature. The bomb blast is a metaphor for the adverse advancement of science and technology which had not only harmed Tara, Rabi, and Bish but also the foetus-growing in the womb. It hampered the lives of these three as well as pollutes the environment at maximum impacts the other living beings. Further, the British Raj, the colonisers on the colonised, lacerates all lives of living being, in the same way, ruptured organic culture and the age-old tradition of Indian nature love. This ecological invasion gradually led to climate change which espouses through the picturesque narration of than Calcutta and now Calcutta along with the glimpses of the Sundar Ban Forest. The novel instrumented the contemporary burning issue through the historical aspect—the British Raj—a novice equipment to the ecological problem.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change Unthinkable*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2018.
- [2] Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Oxford University Press, 1949.
- [3] Mukherjee, Bharati. *The Tree Bride*. Rupa Publication India Pvt. Ltd, 2004.
- [4] Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. Women Unlimited, 2010.