

CHAPTER - II

TARA : A MAHRATTA TALE

Meadows Taylor's novel Tara<sup>1</sup> (1863) deals with the rise of Mahratta power under Shivaji and its growth since the Second Battle of Panipat in 1657. According to Misra, Tara is undoubtedly one of the best novels in Anglo-Indian literature.<sup>2</sup> It is a historical romance in which Taylor has given full scope to Indian life, society and manners too. He has tried to idealise the novel by bringing a Hindu widow in matrimonial knot with a Muslim. For it, he was harshly criticised by the orthodox and others alike. While doing so, Taylor has very rarely brought in his own European world. Bhupal Singh rightly observes : "Both as giving the political history of the time and as a picture of the life of the period Tara will long hold a high position among Indian historical romances".<sup>3</sup>

The novel is written on the background of the war between the Mahrattas and the Mughals. The action of the story is placed around 1657. Shivaji the great and his rise in Maharashtra threatens the rule of Adil Shah of Beejapoor. The intrigues and the counter-intrigues add to the deterioration of Adil Shah. It is on this historical background of Hindu-Muslim enmity that the novelist has

created the love-story of Tara, the widowed daughter of Vyas Shastree, an orthodox Brahmin and the Muslim aristocrat Fazil Khan. They undergo several trials and eventually get married. Tara, upon whom Moro Trimmul, a lusty Brahmin has his eye, succeeds in abducting her. After abduction, however, Tara prefers to offer herself as a Suttee and sits on a pyre. But she is saved from being burnt alive by Fazil. Finally they are united. Taylor has thus made use of this love affair in giving a full length account of the life and times of Shivaji and Adil Shahi.

The novel is divided into four parts. The first part gives an intimate description of the upper class Hindu life and of the household of Vyas Shastree. The Shastree, his wife Ananda and their widowed daughter Tara are portrayed as life-like characters. It is essentially a tale of Hindu life presented with sympathy and accuracy. The second part of the novel deals with activities of the free-booters of the period, men like Gopal Singh and Pahar Singh, the intrigues of their cruelty and daring too. The third part gives a wonderfully exhaustive account of the life of the Muslims of the period with Afzool Khan and his aristocratic family at the centre. Much scope and place is devoted to the descriptions of the court of Adil Shah, the courtiers with their intrigues, and counter-intrigues, their attempts to subdue their opponents, Hindu-Muslim enmity and so on. It is in this part of the novel that Taylor has tried to romanticize the Hindu-Muslim rivalry by making use of Fazil

and Bulwant as close friends first and then Fazil and Tara as lovers. He has very effectively drawn the friendship of the Hindu and the Muslim only to show that love and friendship do not have any barriers of caste and religion. A Muslim can be a close friend of a Hindu and vice versa. This seems to be the ultimate message of the novelist. The fourth part of the novel deals with the activities of the avaricious priest, Moro Trimmul. He is a Hindu priest who is without any faith and honour. He wants to exploit Tara for his amorous purposes. When Shah attacks Tooljapur, in the confusion of war, the priest carries off Tara. But the timely arrival of Fazil saves her from becoming a Suttee. It is on this note of the ultimate union of the lovers that the novel ends.

## I

The novel is full of Hindu and Muslim characters. The novelist has handled all the men as well as women characters in the novel very skilfully. Tara, the widowed daughter of Vyas Shastree, is in the centre of the romantic episodes of the novel. In the beginning of the novel itself there is the description of Tara :

There were many fair women of her sect in Tooljapoor, and they are always the most remarkable of their country-women, but none so fair as Tara, the daughter of Vyas Shastree.

(P-1)

Tara is a beautiful lady, dressed in a sari, or robe of all

Hindu females. It is of dark blue silk, striped with a fainter blue, and has a broad border of a light but rich pattern harmonizing with the colours of the garments which, consisting of one long piece only, is wound round her several times to form a skirt, then passed about her body and over her head on the left side. Below the garment is a closely fitting bodice of striped orange silk. She wears purple bangles in her wrist and a massive gold ring. Her complexion is very fair. She has the soft brown eyes, shaded with long eyelashes which rest on her cheek. Tara has a soft oval face, with small full lips and mouth, a thin straight nose with nostrils almost transparent. This description helps the reader to compare her with the mythological character 'Tara' of 'Pancha Kanyas'.

Tara is married at the age of six, according to the custom of her sect, to the son of the chief priest of the temple of Pundherpoor. He dies three years after the marriage because of fever. After the death of her husband, Tara devotes herself to the study of holy books, encouraged by her father. It was unusual in those days that Brahmin girls were taught to read or write, when Vyas Shastree did so without bothering for the social taboo. Because of this, Tara, though a widow, wears ordinary clothes and her head is not shaved. Tara is solely dependant on her father for her personality development. She also cares for the honour of her father. But when 'Gooroo' or spiritual prince, the 'Shunkar

Bhartee Swami' orders the Shastree that the matter of the ceremony, which makes Tara a renowned widow, should not be delayed. Meanwhile, Tara visits the temple of Toolja Bhowani, and tells her mother that there is an inclination in her that she is asked by the Goddess to devote herself as 'Moorlie' so that Tara belongs to the Goddess. Taylor describes the ceremony in great detail. Tara is quite excited as she nears the temple. The melody of the hymn and the clashing of the cymbals have added to the effect already produced in her mind by her dream. Suddenly she asks her mother to allow her to bathe in the sacred cistern. Her mother thinks that the spirit of the Holy Mother is with her daughter and she allows her to bathe. After the holy bath and prayer to the sun and to the goddess, her mother notices Tara's glistening eyes and glowing cheeks. Tara and her mother descend the steps quietly, while the music of the hymn and the clash of the deep-toned cymbals are resounded through the lower court. The Shastree and his companions are shocked to see Tara's excitement. She puts herself at the head of the procession, tosses her arms into the air and joins in the procession and the hymn they are singing. No one dares to stop or to touch her. The height of excitement or inspiration is in her eyes. Her sweet face lifted up with a 'Holy rapture', she seemed to 'fly' rather than 'walk'. Taylor describes the process of Tara's becoming the 'Moorlie' in great details. She says: "Mother, take me or leave me, but donot cast me away!"(p.21) Onlookers think that it is an

act of 'possession'. Tara moans saying : "Come, come! as thou wast in my dream. So come to Tara! Ah, yes, she comes to me! Yes, Holy Mother, I am with thee." (p.22) Then she sinks into silence. People around think that she is no more. After the prayer to Durga, she shows the sign of life. She tosses back the hair from her face and neck, and looks around herself wildly for a moment. When she sees her mother, she leans towards her, as she advances and hides her face in her 'garment'. Her father sprinkles the water of 'sacred Toolsee', he marks her gently on the forehead, sprinkling some on head, on which he places his hands as he says the incantation which denotes the presence of the divinity. Then he garlands her and smears the fragrant red powder of the morning sacrifice across her forehead. 'He bade her stand up.' The priest and worshippers shout "Jay Toolja!" "Victory to Toolja!" "Victory to the Holy Mother!" "Victory to her votary!" All of them think of taking her home in a procession. But the girl, rising modestly, tells them that the mother has comforted her and there is no need of a ceremony. But the priests do not allow her to go on foot. Tara is placed in an open litter. They 'deck her with flowers' and 'strew garlands over its canopy', the temple music band 'struck up a joyous marriage measure.' Moorlie is wedded to the God. The general conviction is that Tara has died her romantic normal life and becomes a Moorlie or a 'priestess' of the temple.

The avaricious Moro Trimmul's vicious purposes make

him tell his sister Radha, Vyas Shastree's second wife to gain Tara for himself. Her negative reply makes him angry. And he tells that such things are no sin, because she is a Brahmin, she is a widow and a Moorlie as free as other Moorlies so that she can entertain him. He waits for an appropriate time. One night, all villagers, including Moro Trimmul, are in the temple for entertainment. Tara is also in the highest spirits, she does not care for Moro Trimmul. Tara moves lightly and gracefully before the priests and sings in the sweet, thrilling voice, which 'rises high' above the rest of the solemn hymns sung by others. Everybody notice the triumphant looks and gestures of the seemingly inspired girl. She feels secure in the protection of her father, and even if the other girls, who request her to stay till the last of the 'moon's change'. Tara asks Gunga to come with her to find her father. Gunga willingly accompanies her by saying: "I saw him a moment ago. Come, we will get down the steps; I know the way up the mountain from below. Come!" (p.327) But Tara hesitates. Therefore she pulls Tara's arm and drags her and Moro Trimmul, finding the right opportunity in the confusion, seizes Tara from behind and abducts her. Tara's litter accompanied by a torch is seen by Fazil and Gopal Singh. Fazil comes forward and stops them. Tara cries: "Open the door! release me! release me! Let me go! Let me go! Ah, sirs, for your mother's honour, release me! (p. 333). She tells Fazil that she is not the wife of the man. She disengages herself from the litter and throws herself at Fazil's feet.

Again she requests him to save her. 'Disturbed' by Tara's beauty, he saves her. The young Khan gives Tara protection. Tara again and again requests Fazil to release her. She tells him that she is Vyas Shastree's daughter. He leaves Tara with Shere Khan and others for protection. He goes to Tara's parents. Finding none of her guardians, he returns to Tara and takes her to Sholapur to Afzool Khan's palace. Women from his zenana welcome her. Lurlee, Fazil's step-mother and Zyna, Fazil's sister receive Tara with dignity. They comfort the bereaved girl whose parents have died. Tara's beauty and her sad story impress the noble Lurlee. She tells her husband: "What if she be an infidel, she will make the better and true believer. Let her stay with us, O Khan! She shall be a daughter to me." (p.370) Tara remains as an honoured and welcome guest with her new protectors. The two girls, the Nawab's daughter and Tara, grow together. Now Tara feels she is safe. She is grateful to the Khans. When Fazil arrives, he releases the prisoner, Moro Trimmul. On his release Trimmul still discusses plans with Gunga as to what means could be employed to separate Tara from her new protectors, and carry her away into the wilds of his native province. His pursuit of the girl grows once again into a fierce and morbid passion, absorbing and deadening all other feelings of life. Tara's tales of the Hindu life, and of her home pleasures and occupation are told again and again by her, often with bitter tears and heard by sympathizing friends. Two different worlds are thus brought together. The grandeur of Mahomedan nobles

are new to Tara. They have the respect for her honour, and everyday her little cooking place is 'cleaned and arranged', with 'water brought by a Brahmin for her bath and drinking', which' no one else touched'. Sometimes Larlee and Zyna would look on while the little maiden dressed her simple meal, as she 'had often done at home'. They are amused, and are wondering at her dexterity. They procured the books she loved, and she reads those sacred texts, which even the priest admits, contains moral and virtuous doctrine. She 'translates' the beautiful 'Bhagwat Geeta' to them. She is always ready to serve ailing servants. She has the most tender heart, who even nursed Larlee and Zyna, who suffered first from the change of weather and exposure in the camp. Then Fazil falls ill too, and for several days could not ride. So she gives him her litter and rides 'a stout ambling palfrey' of the Khans. She can ride fast and fearlessly, and can manage the active horse with skill and grace. Once Moro Trimmul saw her riding with the escort of heavily- armed men. She is wrapped in shawls, wearing around and has one round her head like a turban, which covered her face all but her eyes. He has concealed his own face and saw her as she passed, but the fact that she is riding with so noble a company to attend on her, 'disquieted' him.

A new desire for life starts growing within Tara, and increases day and day. The old memories like the temple occupations, the preparation for daily duty are substituted by other feelings. She does not regret it. When Fazil

speaks to her, she trembles in fear, but slowly she loves him. She listens to what he says, but never replies. When he is ill, she takes the 'little soothing drinks' she has made but speaks, a word or so, perhaps, to tell him to be patient. Zyna often speaks of her brother, how precious she is to him, and how brave he is; how handsome he is, etc. Tara, too, thinks that she has never seen anyone like him before. When Fazil is absent, Tara and Zyna often sit and talk of him. Tara's poor heart flutters in happiness. She can not tell his sister what is on her lips, but she always feels like doing something for them. Fazil, being a very modest and upright man, never notices her love for him. Seeing her riding the horse, Shere khan tells Fazil: "She is a jewel of great price". (P.390) Fazil likes to listen such praise from friends. She often becomes a prominent actress in those unreal scences of his imagination. When Lurlee and Zyna persuade Tara to give up old faith and come to join them as the sister, as the daughter of the family, Tara pleads hard for not accepting their religion. But when she becomes helpless, and no where else to go, she succumbs. The predicament of a Hindu widowhood, living with strangers without any means of self-support, she thinks of ending her life. Hiding her burning face in Zyna's bosom, She cries. She asks for their forgiveness for not accepting their proposal to marry Fazil. "Only give me time! It is so sudden -so unlooked for ". Between sobs she adds:

I am his captive and his slave; not of your people,

lady, but a stranger, and an infidel, as the priest says; impure among my own sect, and of no account but for shame and dishonour. As such, I cannot come to a noble house. Ah, donot mock me ! (P.391)

Being a very compassionate girl Zyna tells Tara that she is pure and noble, she is their own Tara, whom 'Alla has sent' to them and whom they have received thankfully, for him whose heart no one as yet has touched. She persuades her to accept their invitation which Tara accepts at last. When Tara accompanies the family to go to visit the relatives, Trimmul snatches her saying : "nor father, nor mother; only thee, and only me and thou hast a long account of misery to pay me" (P.393) This time Tara is saved from the clutches of Trimmul by Govind Narayen, the principal envoy of the Rajah Shivaji, Brahmin of wealth and high position in the country, best known among the people under the familiar title of Baba Sahib (P.395). He takes Tara with him to Wye, as his daughter. On reaching Baba Sahib's house, his sister objects to her living with them and asks him to keep her in the house of Sukya Bye, Moro Trimmul's aunt. But Tara requests her not to give her to that lady for the reasons of Trimmul's behaviour.

When Fazil returns, his father tells him all about Tara. Fazil feels gratified that she is safe in an honourable family. Baba Sahib, the ambassador and his family, with Tara arrive at Pertabgurh, the day before Afzool Khan's assassination by the Rajah Shivaji. At wye, Tara traces her mother's family, the Durpeys. But they now have

moved to a place near Poona. Therefore, she may require several days to communicate to them, and a much longer period for them to come to Tara and take her away. Till then there is no other resource but to stay where she is, and endure. Baba sahib is kind to her and continually renews his offers of assistance and protection; but from his sister, Tara has to endure insults. Tara's presence in the family does not stay a secret. Her wearing silk garments and jewels and not shaving her head which is an 'infringement of caste discipline.' Therefore, the chief of the priests, Wittul Shastree begins his inquiry. Tara faces the queries boldly. Seeing Radha's gold ornaments and silk garments on Tara's person his expression changes. He takes a strong objection for her behaving as a normal woman. He also prohibits Baba Sahib's family to give her the shelter. Tara's appeal to him that she is pure and she has done nothing evil, yields no sympathy. In the meanwhile, Baba Sahib enters and interrupts. Shastree is very much hurt. Tara is ready for the test. She invokes Toolja to come and help:

Ye can watch me, too there. If she comes not  
then she hath abandoned me, and ye can kill me  
if you, please sirs; better ye did so, for I am  
indeed friendless (P.451)

According to her wish, she is taken to the temple of Toolja. She is permitted to approach the shrine and make her obeisance and offerings. When it is finished, she sits down and chants the morning hymn of the goddess in low and sweet

tones 'rocking herself to and fro' and falls on the floor unconscious. Gunga, deserting Trimmul, comes to the temple to find solace. Seeing Tara unconscious, she helps her to gain consciousness. She asks Tara to run away from there to save her life. But Tara replies strongly that she will never leave the Mother. Gunga, seeing Tara's determination, sits before the shrine. After some time, Tara declares her intentions of going suttee. She said it calmly and quietly to the priests and elders that she is an orphan and a widow, and she has no one left on earth to protect her. Instead of going to Moro Trimmul, she prefers death. Stretching her hand towards the shrine she says:

She calls me , and I come pure, and purified by fire. Now listen, all ye Brahmins. I am true and pure, and I am Suttee hence forth. When ye will and where ye will I am Suttee and on his head be curses, and the vengeance of Kalee, who forbids it. Let me die in the fire and I am happy ! what she puts into my mouth, I say to you truly. Let none forbid it (p.461)

The Shastree asks the priest to accept her as sacrifice. Because, 'the Mother has said it' from her own lips. Moro Trimmul arrives there and asks Tara to join him. Tara refuses forcefully. Tara is taken to Wye to perform the ceremony of Suttee. The Rajah Shivaji orders to do so. This news is delivered to Fazil by one of his servants. In

the meanwhile, Vyas Shastree, Anandi Bye and Radha, who are alive, also get the news of this ceremony. They also proceed to Wye. While they are crossing the sacred river Krishna, they see some men preparing the pile. Here is, Taylor's vivid description of the ceremony: Men are piling logs of wood into a square mass, and pouring oil on them; fixing tall poles at the sides and hanging garlands of flowers and wraths of leaves to them. Finally they take Tara to the pile. The pile is covered with fluttering penons and streamers -orange, white and crimson and thousands, of garlands, which the people hung or thrown upon it as votive offerings since the morning, and the litter is set down for Tara to alight. Tara looks at the pile; but there is that strange ecstasy, glowing in her eyes which appeared to have rendered her unconscious of its purport. There is smile on her face. Her father, mother and step-mother try to persuade her not to sit on the pile. But she refuses to listen.

As she stands there, the Brahmins worship her and pour libations before her and on her feet, touch her forehead with sacred colour, and put fresh garland around her neck. As the last part of the rite, she walks round the pile thrice, and ascends it. She has already removed her ornaments. A huge platform of logs, black with oil and grease that has been poured upon them strewd with camphor and frank-incense, which had been scattered lavishly by the people in their votive offerings, and smeared with red powder. A crude step is made for Tara to ascend and on the

summit some bright cloth is laid as a bed, where she may decline, upon which a small effigy of a man, wildly conceived and dressed has been placed her nuptial-bed in the spiritual sense of the sacrifice, on which through fire, she would be united to her husband. The whole ceremony is 'garish', 'hideous' and 'cruel'. Face to face with death so horrible, so imminent, the girl seemed to shiver and gasp suddenly, and sank down swooning. But before the pile is lit, Fazil arrives there and saves Tara from being burnt alive. No one from the crowd opposes him. Tara becomes totally a transformed person after her long illness. People of the Khan's family take good care of her and then she willingly becomes 'Ayesha Khanum' but remains Tara to Fazil (p.523)

Throughout the pages of this bulky novel, one witnesses Tara's process of change. In The Story of My Life Taylor expresses his view that "It is impossible for a writer, not a Hindoo, to describe the Brahmanical observances and caste customs with absolute correctness".<sup>4</sup> His remark shows his limitations in projecting the Hindoo characters like Tara or Anandi Bye or Radha.

## II

Anandi Bye, mother of Tara is a very kind and loving traditional, docile woman. She is the first wife of a polygamous, upper class Brahmin, Vyas shastree, She knows the social limitations she has as a wife of a high-priest,

even then, she goes out of the way to take a child-widow to public places like the temple of Toolja when such things were totally prohibited. Widows were allowed into such places only if they were with a shaved head or a Moorlie. However, she has no power to keep the daughter with her when calamities befall. She, like a devoted Hindu wife, follows her husband and keeps in hiding with them.

She is shown as a beautiful woman but does not have a son to carry the name of the family. Only Tara survives the three children she bears. Therefore, like an ideal wife she requests her husband to re-marry. Even after the marriage, she is content and does her daily routine like 'drawing figures in white and red chalk powder excellently'. She is an excellent cook too. She is a mature woman who follows her husband's footsteps. Literally, she goes where he goes -for paying respects or on pilgrimages to Benares and other holy places. On the whole, she is a pious, loving and good soul.

### III

In contrast to Anandi Bye, Radha, the second wife of Vyas Shastree, is a vivacious but a vicious woman. She is the root cause for Tara's misery. Her brother Moro Trimmul becomes the villain of the whole drama. She, now and then, is an assessor to his mean doings. She is voluptuous while smiling and pouts quite often displaying self-will and obstinacy. For example, when Tara needs her help to go home

from the temple at night, she flatly refuses. She represents a class of female villains -jealous, gossip-monging potential bitch goddess type available in modern literature. Helped by her cunning aunt Sukya Bye her aunt, she plans the derailment of Tara's future.

#### IV

Though Taylor said that he knew all the scenes and localities he described are accurate due to his visit to Beejapur <sup>5</sup>, his Muslim women characters do not seem to be as accurate as the Hindu women characters. Among the two ladies of Afzool Khan's family, Lurlee, the second wife of the Khan, is depicted as a noble lady. Among all other Muslim characters, she stands out as important as Anandi Bye in compassion and love towards Tara. She becomes, more or less, her foster mother. She takes care of Tara on her journey, when she is ill and throughout her stay with them. She not only nurses the girl, but also takes keen interest in her activities of cooking and singing, story telling. She is quite opposite of the Hindu widow, the Baba Sahib's sister who is so mean minded and foolish. The muslim noble woman is magnanimous.

#### V

Zyna, Fazil's sister is the young companion to Tara. She has the most wonderful temperament. She is always cheerful and loving. Never she makes Tara uncomfortable in

her company. When Tara is away to Wye in search of her relatives she grows very pale and remembers Tara and her stories often and sits and broods. Zyna is a witness to the romance of her brother Fazil, and Tara. She is the mediator, the god's angel.

Finally, when Tara is to be married according to the Muslim faith, Taylor makes Anandi bow before Lurlee saying "She is thy child now, lady, take a mother's thanks and gratitude for her honour and her life..." (p.517). For the first time in Anglo-Indian fiction, the cultural worlds of the Hindu and the Muslim, 'the actors' in this story, Taylor claims 'the same passions and affections exist....' <sup>6</sup>

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All the references to pages in the chapter are to Taylor's Tara : A Mahratta Tale (New Delhi : Asian Educational Services, 1986).
2. Udayon Misra, The Raj op.cit., pp. 65-112.
3. Bhupal Singh, A Survey op.cit., p. 48.
4. Meadows Taylor, The Story of My Life (London : 1920), p. 469.
5. Ibid., p. 358.
6. Henry Bruce's introduction to Taylor's The Story of My Life, p. xxi.